

Art, Understanding, and Mystery

Robbie Kubala

Department of Philosophy, The University of Texas at Austin

Abstract: Apparent orthodoxy holds that artistic understanding is finally valuable. Artistic understanding—grasping, as such, the features of an artwork that make it aesthetically or artistically good or bad—is a species of understanding, which is widely taken to be finally valuable. The objection from mystery, by contrast, holds that a lack of artistic understanding is valuable. I distinguish and critically assess two versions of this objection. The first holds that a lack of artistic understanding is finally valuable, because it preserves the pleasure of an artwork’s incomprehensibility; the second holds that a lack of artistic understanding is conditionally valuable, as the enabling condition of a finally valuable relationship with an artwork. I defend orthodoxy by arguing that both versions of the objection fail and that we have no general reason against gaining artistic understanding.

It’s generally good to understand. Making sense of the world, our thought and talk about it, and how to act as persons within it—those aims are shared by philosophers, scientists, historians, and everyday inquirers alike. Understanding is often thought to be not just instrumentally good, furthering other valuable aims, but finally good, or good for its own sake. Some claim that understanding, like pleasure or friendship or knowledge, belongs on the objective list of final goods or values.¹ A related line of argument holds that understanding is an achievement, something accomplished by the excellent exercise of one’s agential capacities, and achievements are finally valuable.²

Not surprisingly, then, much recent discussion of our understanding of works of art has been committed to the claim that artistic understanding is valuable.³ There are a variety of phenomena we might pick out with the term ‘artistic understanding’, including the skills or know-how that are distinctively possessed by the creative artist, but my focus will be understanding completed works of art. Many use ‘aesthetic understanding’ to refer

¹ Those who explicitly claim that (at least some variety of) understanding is finally valuable include Pritchard (2010), Carter & Gordon (2014), and Kelp (2014).

² This second line of argument has been used to argue that understanding is *more* valuable than knowledge or truth, or is a better candidate for the fundamental bearer of epistemic value than knowledge or truth (Pritchard 2009).

³ Those who make this claim more or less explicitly include Budd (1995), Hills (2017; 2022), Martínez Marín (2020), Nguyen (2020), and Page (2022). Those whose discussion seems implicitly to accept it include Carroll (2016), Gorodeisky & Marcus (2018), Hopkins (2017), Irvin (2007), Sibley (1965), and almost everyone in the debate about aesthetic testimony.

to this phenomenon, but I will use the term ‘artistic understanding’ because the focus of these discussions has tended to be works of art, rather than natural objects or non-art artifacts.⁴

Artistic understanding can certainly be instrumentally valuable: it might enable one to show off at artworld parties, or do well on art history exams, and so on. But as a species of understanding, artistic understanding would inherit the final value of understanding in general. Moreover, it seems as though artistic understanding is at least one of the aims of appreciation, and one good way of explaining the rationality of an aim is to appeal to the final value of what is aimed at. In light of these *prima facie* plausible claims, call the view that artistic understanding is finally valuable ‘apparent orthodoxy’.

Against apparent orthodoxy, a contrary strand of thinking suggests the claim that a *lack* of artistic understanding is valuable, or even the stronger claim that artistic understanding is *disvaluable*. This line of thinking is especially common among artists themselves. William Wordsworth, in his 1798 poem “The Tables Turned,” famously writes, “We murder to dissect,” a quotation that is often invoked, in artistic contexts, to suggest the claim that in attempting to understand an artwork, we metaphorically deprive it of life, of some of the value it otherwise had, and therefore that we lose out on the chance to appreciate that value. The British surrealist painter Paul Nash writes in his autobiography that there are artworks “whose relationship of parts creates a mystery, an enchantment, which cannot be analyzed” (1949: 35). Since context makes clear that Nash is talking about the *best* works of art, those of highest artistic value, this suggests the claim that not only is artistic understanding impossible, at least in some cases, but that our lacking understanding is part of an appropriate response to that value. Bob Dylan, in *The Philosophy of Modern Song*, writes, “Like any other piece of art, songs are not seeking to be understood. ... Whether it’s *Dogs Playing Poker* or *Mona Lisa*’s smile, you gain nothing from understanding it” (2022: 298-9); this suggests the claim that artistic understanding lacks any positive value.⁵

One might reasonably be suspicious that this is all just self-interested bluster. Maybe these artists are engaged in a kind of self-protective defense that is meant to ward

⁴ Although I want to remain officially neutral, here, on the relation between aesthetic value and artistic value (see, e.g., Lopes 2011; Huddleston 2012; Hanson 2013; Stecker 2019), I follow others in the literature on aesthetic understanding (e.g., Irvin 2007; Hills 2017; Page 2022) in using the terms ‘aesthetic value’ and ‘artistic value’ interchangeably.

⁵ Notice that the apparent orthodoxy could endorse Dylan’s first sentence: perhaps artworks do not *seek* to be understood, though there is value in understanding them. I will be arguing that even if artworks do not demand understanding, we have no general reason against gaining it.

off negative criticism by insulating their work from any attempt at analysis. That suspicion would be of a piece with the general skepticism that philosophers of art often adopt toward the testimony of artists about their own practices. But it isn't only artists who say things like this. The art historian James Elkins, in his book *Pictures and Tears: A History of People Who Have Cried in Front of Paintings*, writes that he experiences his art-historical understanding as a loss, because it is "slowly corroding [his] ability to address paintings with full emotions and an open heart" (2001: 107); this suggests the stronger claim that artistic understanding is disvaluable. However these claims should be interpreted—and I will return to Elkins and Dylan, at least—their overall suggestion is clear: when it comes to the arts, not understanding is preferable to understanding. Call this strand of thinking 'the objection from mystery'. One of my goals is simply to better understand this objection and what is most plausible in it.

My main goal, however, is to defend apparent orthodoxy against the objection from mystery. I distinguish two versions of the objection, where each can itself be spelled out in various ways. Not understanding an artwork may be *finally* valuable, because not understanding preserves the pleasure of an object's apparent mystery or incomprehensibility, and pleasure is finally valuable. Alternatively, a lack of understanding may be *conditionally* valuable, in that not understanding an artwork may be an enabling condition of a finally valuable relationship with it. This view, which is associated with the work of Alexander Nehamas (2007), holds that to fully understand an artwork would thereby be to lose interest in it and hence to damage and even terminate the relationship. I will argue that neither of these objections ultimately poses a threat to the apparent orthodoxy.

One might immediately worry that, as stated, there is not yet any interesting tension or conflict between the claim that artistic understanding is finally valuable and the claim that a lack of artistic understanding is finally or conditionally valuable. Let me then say a bit more to motivate the conflict. I will discuss the notion of understanding in more detail in the next section, but we can establish at least three desiderata for setting up the debate here.

First, it will be important that artistic understanding is a *species* of understanding, and not something belonging to another kind. Otherwise there might be no conflict, at least not without another way of establishing that artistic understanding is finally valuable.

Second, it is important that it is the same *feature* of understanding whose presence or absence is claimed to be valuable. One natural way of resolving the conflict would be to index the value and disvalue of artistic understanding to distinct features. Just as a cake

can be valuable because of its taste and disvaluable because of its high caloric content, so, the thought goes, might artistic understanding be valuable in virtue of one feature and disvaluable in virtue of a distinct feature. So we will need to identify a single feature of artistic understanding whose value is contested.

Third, a different way of resolving the conflict would be to index the final value and disvalue of artistic understanding to distinct *contexts*. In some contexts, one value might be more important than another value, because the first value *outweighs* the other. The value of artistic understanding gained by going to a museum might lose out, in a certain context, to the value of visiting a friend in the hospital. It would not be a very deep conflict if one value simply outweighed the other, in the sense of giving rise to stronger or weightier reasons, in some contexts. But the first version of the objection from mystery can be read as claiming that the value of not understanding *systematically* outweighs the value of artistic understanding, thereby establishing a deeper conflict. On this version of the objection, understanding may be finally valuable in general, but artistic understanding is not.

In other contexts, one value might not be outweighed but rather *defeated*, such that it is not, in that context, a value at all. Although pleasure is in general finally valuable, the pleasure a sadist takes in some cruel act might have, in that context, no value at all. Although understanding is in general finally valuable, the understanding a group of evil scientists achieves of how deprivation of parental care affects childhood development might have, in that context, no value at all. The second version of the objection from mystery can be read as claiming that the value of artistic understanding is no value at all, because it is *systematically* defeated by the value of not understanding.

On both versions of the objection, we have, in general, stronger reason *not* to gain artistic understanding than to gain it. I will argue that the objection from mystery has not succeeded in showing that not understanding an artwork has a value that either systematically outweighs or defeats the value of understanding it. Just as we do not always have most reason to pursue pleasure, even though pleasure is a final value, we do not always have most reason to gain understanding. But on the uncontroversial assumption that we have no general reason *not* to gain what is of final value, we therefore have no general reason against gaining artistic understanding.

Although my aim is to defend the value of artistic understanding, I will not give a full account of the nature of that value. But minimally, the value of artistic understanding consists in grasping something of the structure of the world. As a final value, the value of understanding beckons us to respond wherever understanding is there to be had, and the understanding we can have of artworks is no exception.

1. The Apparent Orthodoxy

There are many good questions about the nature of understanding in general. For our purposes, we can adopt a broadly theory-neutral gloss. Understanding is a gradable psychological state of grasping something—e.g., an object, that something is the case, how to do something, why some proposition is true—in such a way that it makes sense to you.⁶ Understanding is typically thought to be more epistemically valuable than other positive epistemic statuses, such as true belief, justified true belief, or knowledge. Many take understanding to be a distinct state from knowledge (e.g., Kvanvig 2003; Pritchard 2010), but even those who take understanding to be a kind of knowledge tend to hold that understanding is distinct from discrete propositional knowledge in that it consists in some more systematic, comprehensive, or well-connected body of knowledge (e.g., Kelp 2021).

Artistic understanding is understanding of an artwork. It is distinct from the kind of understanding, if any, that an artwork can afford us of the world outside the work. At issue is not what an artwork can help us to understand about the world—the topic of the debate concerning ‘cognitivism’ about the arts—but what we can come to understand about an artwork.

There is a further distinction to be made between understanding an artwork in the sense of *interpreting* it—grasping its artistic content or meaning—and the sense of grasping what *makes* it aesthetically or artistically good or bad.⁷ When an artwork has a meaning, understanding its meaning and understanding its value will be states with overlapping content, because we cannot grasp that artwork’s aesthetic value without grasping (enough of) its meaning: facts about the artwork’s meaning will typically be among its good-making (or bad-making) features. Arguably, however, not every artwork has content or a

⁶ I adapt this gloss from the longer list of ten features that John Bengson takes to constitute understanding’s ‘profile’ (2017: 18-22). I also follow Bengson in thinking that lexicology is not decisive: we should not type understanding in terms of, e.g., understanding ‘why’ vs. understanding ‘how’ vs. understanding ‘that’ (2017: 48). It’s plausible that ‘understanding why an artwork is good’, ‘understanding how its lower-level features give rise to aesthetic value’, and ‘understanding that an artwork is valuable in virtue of certain of its lower-level features’ all pick out the same phenomenon.

⁷ Alison Hills offers an account of aesthetic understanding as understanding “why a particular work of art has aesthetic (or artistic) value, or not,” which she distinguishes from “understanding a work of art itself” (2017: 159). Context suggests that she means something like ‘interpretation’ by the latter. So while her account of understanding is *propositionalist*—the object of our understanding is a proposition about a work’s value—it is open to the defender of an *objectualist* account, on which the object of artistic understanding is an artwork itself, to hold that such understanding obtains (wholly or in part) in virtue of attitudes toward propositions such as those that Hills discusses.

meaning—consider works of absolute music—so I take the proper object of artistic understanding to be an artwork’s value.⁸

What is it to understand a work’s value? To understand a work’s value is to grasp, as such, the features of an artwork that make it aesthetically or artistically good or bad. (I will drop the ‘or artistically’ qualifier, and focus only on artworks with some positive degree of value, from here on.) This requires grasping the artwork’s aesthetic value properties, its relevant non-aesthetic properties (which will often include historical, contextual, and other relational properties), and the relation between the two sets of properties. That relation is akin to what Frank Sibley (1965) calls ‘total specific dependence’. While aesthetic value properties are in general dependent on, and determined by, relevant non-aesthetic properties, in understanding the value of particular works we are interested in the specific way in which some work’s relevant non-aesthetic properties give it its aesthetic value. Whereas Sibley’s relation concerns “the particular aesthetic character of something” (1965: 138), artistic understanding concerns the particular aesthetic value of something, which may be distinct from, though likely in part determined by, that thing’s aesthetic character. Note that this account can capture the fact that artistic understanding is gradable: we often attain greater artistic understanding by identifying *more* of the properties that stand in this dependence relation as such.

What is the nature of the grasp in which artistic understanding consists? Here I do not offer a full account; developing a non-metaphorical analysis of the grasp in which understanding consists is one of the main tasks for the philosophy of understanding in general. I do take the grasp to be cognitive as opposed to noncognitive: artistic understanding does not consist merely in having a feeling or displaying a behavioral profile (e.g., smiling, sighing, crying) in response to a work of art, but in some kind of cognitive state, whether theoretical, practical, or neither.

One important choice-point for cognitivist accounts concerns explanation. Even those who deny that understanding is factive tend to characterize artistic understanding in terms of the ‘making’ relation; thus Nehamas writes, “To find something beautiful is inseparable from the need to understand what makes it so” (2007: 131). This ‘making’ or ‘in virtue of’ relation, which holds between a set of features of a work and its aesthetic value features, is closely connected with explanation: some just take this relation to be an explanatory relation (e.g., Rosen 2010; Litland 2015), whereas others take it to be distinct

⁸ Peter Kivy (1990) denies that pure instrumental music has any representational content, but he does not deny that there is such a thing as musical understanding. The assumption that artistic understanding concerns a work’s value, and not necessarily its content, is also friendly to formalists (e.g., Bell 1914; Beardsley 1958; Zangwill 2001).

from but nonetheless to ‘back’ or ‘support’ explanation (e.g., Audi 2012; Schaffer 2016). I myself would want to distinguish artistic understanding and explanation, but for the purposes of assessing the objection of mystery, it will be helpful to consider an explanation-centric account of artistic understanding, which is more demanding. If such an account can be defended, that may provide inductive evidence that less committal cognitivist accounts can be, too.

Alison Hills (2017; 2022) has defended one such explanation-centric cognitive account, and I will take her view as representative of orthodoxy without endorsing it myself.⁹ Her theory is that the grasp that artistic understanding consists in is ‘cognitive control’: an intellectual know-how, concerning the relationship between an aesthetic value proposition and its explanation, that an appreciator can deploy in a variety of settings (2017: 161). Examples of aesthetic value propositions include ‘Taylor Swift’s rerecorded version of *1989* is better than the original’ or ‘last night’s gamelan performance was just okay’. One could *know* such propositions without understanding them; this is easiest to see if such knowledge could be gained through testimony. But understanding requires something further. For Hills, it is a grasp of the reasons *why* the proposition is true. To use artistic understanding is to grasp the explanatory reasons why the artwork is good or bad, and to base your evaluation of the artwork on those explanatory reasons (2022: 29). Thus Hills’ account satisfies our first desideratum: as a species of understanding-why, artistic understanding is indeed a species of understanding.

One initial objection to this kind of explanation-centric cognitivist view is that artistic understanding is impossible. You might think that artistic understanding is impossible if you hold that it is impossible to articulate what makes an artwork valuable, and you think that explanation is necessarily articulate. Hills claims that this objection fails. Since artistic understanding is gradable, then even a very minimal explanation of why some artwork is good—to use Hills’ example, “it gives us a new way of seeing” (2017: 168)—could be sufficient for some positive degree of artistic understanding. While, again,

⁹ Other cognitivist accounts, which do not take explanation to be a necessary part of artistic understanding, are given by Sherri Irvin (2007), who takes artistic understanding to be centered around a cluster of cognitive abilities relating to an artwork’s aesthetically relevant qualities; by Noël Carroll (2016), who endorses a cognitivist view of artistic appreciation as sizing-up; and by Jeremy Page (2022), for whom artistic understanding includes the capacity to form and communicate an appreciative interpretation.

I think it is preferable to distinguish artistic understanding from explanation, it seems to me that Hills' reply here is plausible.¹⁰

What makes artistic understanding valuable, on this kind of cognitivist account? Hills claims that it is *instrumentally* valuable because it guarantees, as knowledge-that or knowledge-why alone does not, that one has the know-how to answer new questions about the work. A teacher who understands why *To the Lighthouse* is an extraordinary work of fiction will be in a position not merely to assert true propositions about its value, but to provide explanations of its value, in their own words, that help to answer their students' questions.

On Hills' view, artistic understanding is also *finally* valuable. This is so, in the first instance, because understanding mirrors the world, and cognitive states that mirror the world are finally valuable. Like knowledge, understanding requires that the contents of one's beliefs mirror the world by being true; knowledge and understanding are both factive. But because understanding also captures the structure of dependence between aesthetic value features and lower-level features, it mirrors the world in its form as well as in its content. Indeed, a state with more understanding is *ceteris paribus* a more finally valuable state.

Hills also seems to suggest a second way in which artistic understanding is finally valuable. Pleasure is finally valuable, there is "a distinctive pleasure in coming to understand why a work of art is valuable," and this pleasure "is not properly separable from the understanding. ... [T]he two are part of a valuable complex whole" (2017: 173).¹¹ On Hills' view, then, it looks as though both cognitive mirroring and pleasure are sources of the final value of artistic understanding. This opens the door to a version of the objection from mystery, as I explain in the following section.

So far I have been trying to strengthen the case for seeing the apparent orthodoxy as, indeed, orthodox. We are now in a position to consider the objection from mystery.

¹⁰ Hills (2017: 168) has a second response, which is that artistic understanding can be *tacit* rather than explicit, and, if tacit, then not even articulable. I do not think that dividing understanding into tacit and explicit species is the right move for an explanation-centric view of artistic understanding—it would fit more naturally with a view of artistic understanding as practical know-how—and it is noteworthy that this claim does not appear in Hills (2022).

¹¹ Hills may be thinking of this complex whole as a Moorean organic unity. Moore (1903) himself holds that pleasure can be finally valuable, and that the fitting enjoyment of beauty is an organic unity whose value is greater than the value of its parts: the cognition of beautiful qualities and an appropriate emotion toward the beautiful qualities so cognized.

2. The Objection from Mystery: Final Value

The first version of the objection holds that not understanding an artwork is finally valuable, though some clarification is necessary concerning what counts as not understanding. The objector need not claim that not *interpreting* an artwork is finally valuable. An appreciator plausibly needs to have interpreted a work, to some extent, in order to experience the work as mysterious or incomprehensible in the first place, and this degree of interpretation may also constitute or result in some non-zero degree of understanding of the work's value. Rather, the debate concerns whether an appreciator has reason to gain *further* understanding.

The most plausible reading of the objection holds that not (further) understanding an artwork is finally valuable because it preserves the finally valuable pleasure or satisfaction of an object's apparent mystery or incomprehensibility. An illustration of this claim comes from the novelist and translator Lydia Davis, in a short essay on Joan Mitchell's painting *Les Bluets* (The cornflowers). Davis writes, "I became willing to allow aspects of the painting to remain mysterious, and I became willing to allow aspects of other problems to remain unsolved as well, and it was this new tolerance for, and then satisfaction in, the unexplained and unsolved that marked a change in me" (1996: 72).¹²

This passage looks like an instance of the claim that a distinct value—the final value of a certain kind of satisfaction—at least sometimes *outweighs*, though does not defeat, the final value of understanding. Artistic understanding retains its general value, but, according to this version of the objection, the final value of the pleasure of not understanding is at least sometimes greater than the final value of artistic understanding, such that we have reason against gaining further artistic understanding. There are two possibilities here: the pleasure in question might be one *associated* with not understanding or, more strongly, it might be a pleasure taken directly *in* not understanding. Davis' language suggests the latter, stronger reading, which I discuss first.

Officially, the defender of artistic understanding can be somewhat concessive here. Davis has given no reason to think that the value of the pleasure in question *systematically* outweighs the value of understanding; for all she has said, the Mitchell painting may be a one-off case. And the defender of artistic understanding, though they need not deny that something's being mysterious can be a source of satisfaction, may well insist on a fuller explanation of why we should take satisfaction in our lack of understanding as such. Still,

¹² This passage is discussed in Francey Russell's unpublished paper "The Opacity of Aesthetic Judgment" (n.d.), from which I have learned much but which deserves fuller discussion elsewhere, particularly in its claim that a non-privative, positive experience of opacity—a pleasure taken *in* not understanding—is partially constitutive of aesthetic judgment itself.

two things can be said that may enable the defender of orthodoxy to handle other such cases.

First, perhaps the phenomenon Davis describes may actually be an instance of understanding. She writes, “after a time I did not feel the need for complete answers, because I saw that part of the force of the painting was that it continued to elude explanation” (1996: 72). This is not the phenomenon of understanding that there is *nothing* to understand, as when some topic of inquiry turns out to be unreal or illusory (imagine the pleasure of the former theologian turned atheist).¹³ Rather, this is the phenomenon of understanding that the work itself eludes interpretation, and that this is one of its good-making features. On this reading, Davis *gains* further artistic understanding when she comes to believe what she does about the force of the painting. A second, and not incompatible, possibility is that the satisfaction in the unexplained and unsolved is actually satisfaction in anticipating gaining further understanding. This pleasure is one of *anticipating* something of value, akin to that of contemplating an uneaten cake. Neither of these possibilities amounts to satisfaction in a lack of understanding as such, and so neither holds that the value of such a satisfaction outweighs the final value of gaining further artistic understanding, let alone that it does so systematically.

Hills herself addresses what I take to be the weaker version of this objection, based not on a pleasure taken directly *in* not understanding, but rather a pleasure *associated* with not understanding. Given that artistic understanding is cognitive, the worry is that it might come into conflict with the noncognitive pleasure we can feel in response to artworks. Hills writes, “trying to get a better cognitive grasp of the value of a work of art undermine[s] the immediate, unforced, and spontaneous pleasure that one takes in it” (2017: 173). The claim is not that the noncognitive pleasure is one we take *in* not understanding, but rather that an *absence* of further understanding can enable a distinct pleasure. Notice, to return to our two remaining desiderata, that this makes clear that it is the same feature of artistic understanding, which Hills calls cognitive control, that is both asserted and denied to be finally valuable, or that is asserted to be less finally valuable than its absence. And, unlike with Davis’ claims, the conflict Hills describes looks to be systematic and not one-off, thereby meeting our third and final desideratum.

¹³ Consider the wonderful quotation from Edward St Aubyn’s novel *A Clue to the Exit*: “Passing the window of Hatchards bookshop, I saw the latest cluster of books to emerge from the great consciousness debate: *Emotional Intelligence*, *The Feeling Brain*, *The Heart’s Reasons*. I felt the giddy relief of knowing that I wasn’t going to read any of them” (2000: 196). This is the pleasure of terminating a laborious inquiry in the belief that it will be fruitless.

Hills' own response to this objection is somewhat unsatisfying, because she simply concedes its premise, claiming that both cognitive and noncognitive responses are facets of appreciation that can sometimes compete: "appreciation in one dimension can detract from appreciation in another" (2017: 174). But we might not yet be convinced by this detraction claim. In support, Hills claims that it is "familiar ... that the close reading of a novel or poem that you love can actually decrease your enjoyment of it" (2017: 173). But we need to ask why. If it's simply that close reading can be difficult, then this would not be a very deep objection, since it might be that the rewards of gaining understanding are greater than the pains of pursuing understanding (as they are with much intellectual work).¹⁴ If it's rather that a work that we initially judged to be aesthetically good turns out, on further investigation, not to be, then again this should not overly trouble the defender of artistic understanding, since they can insist that the initial enjoyment was not merited by the work—not an appropriate response to its value—in the first place.¹⁵

But perhaps there is more to be said in defense of the detraction claim. I quoted James Elkins, who writes that he experiences his art-historical understanding as a loss, because it is "slowly corroding [his] ability to address paintings with full emotions and an open heart" (2001: 107). Not understanding how a painting works, or its art-historical context, or the comparison class of similar paintings, is thought to enable a 'fuller' emotional response, which is more valuable than the apparently etiolated response of the jaded art historian. So perhaps the capacities or skills involved systematically *interfere* with one another. It's not just that we have limited resources and must make decisions about whether to appreciate in a cognitive or noncognitive mode, but that cultivating the abilities necessary for the former actually undermines our exercise of those abilities necessary for the latter.

Indeed, we can strengthen this objection by recalling Bob Dylan's claim that art is "not seeking to be understood" (2022: 298). The stronger objection is that some artworks not only are not seeking to be understood, but demand *not* to be understood. This is the

¹⁴ I am assuming that the proponent of the objection from mystery is not a general value hedonist, claiming that pleasure is the *only* final value. A hedonist who holds, on such grounds, that we have reason against gaining understanding just when it stops being pleasurable to do so would also be committed to holding that we have identical reason against pursuing, say, athletic or scientific achievements. But then there would be nothing very interesting about the artistic case. See Bradford (2015: Ch. 4) for a defense of the non-hedonic final value of achievement.

¹⁵ Is a state of understanding a more aesthetically valuable work a more valuable state? Arguably, yes: understanding a Matisse is more valuable than understanding a Kinkadee. Is that in virtue of the work's greater aesthetic value, or in virtue of one of its determinants (e.g., its complexity)? Arguably, it's the former, since even very simple works can have great aesthetic value.

kind of claim that could justify a principled exception to the final value of understanding in general: in contrast with many other phenomena, artworks demand a lack of understanding.

This strikes me as the most promising version of the final value objection. In reply, we need to distinguish between appreciation and understanding. Suppose that what artworks primarily demand of us is fitting appreciation. I have made no claims about the nature of appreciation, but it is plausible that what counts as fitting appreciation will vary with the (type of) artwork in question: appreciating absolute music calls for responses that will be distinct, at least in part, from those responses that are called for by appreciating political theater. And so it is possible that some artworks demand purely noncognitive responses. In such cases, the defender of the final value of artistic understanding need not flout the demands of the artwork. They can insist that any attempt to understand the work's value must be subsequent to fitting appreciation; indeed, if the work's capacity to afford a valuable experience when correctly appreciated is part of its aesthetic value, and we best, or even only, apprehend that capacity by tokening the valuable experience ourselves, then fitting appreciation will be required for full artistic understanding. But, the reply goes, once the work has been appreciated as it demands, then the agent is permitted to go beyond what is required for appreciation in order to gain greater understanding of the work's value.

At this point, the objector can repeat a version of the detraction claim: developing the abilities necessary to understand a work's value can detract from the abilities necessary to respond in the immediate, spontaneous, noncognitive way that artworks sometimes demand. How are we to assess the detraction claim? It looks like an empirical claim about some agents' contingent psychological makeup and so may ultimately need to be defended on empirical grounds. And I have a hard time, from the armchair, coming up with a plausible hypothesis about how this interference would take place. But notice that if there were even *one* normally constituted agent for whom the interference claim was not true—one agent (call them 'Happy') who is capable both of attaining greater cognitive understanding and continuing to enjoy full noncognitive engagement with works of art—and if that agent could be *emulated* by others, then this objection could not give us a general reason not to gain artistic understanding, because agents could try to be like Happy. And, in fact, it seems that some agents are already like this: they have a high degree of understanding of various artworks' value, and they continue to respond to those and other artworks in whatever noncognitive ways are appropriate.

Much of this section has tried to engage seriously with the motivations behind the objection from mystery, in order to show why the apparent orthodoxy need not be

troubled. Yet there is a more flat-footed response available. Even if we concede the detractor claim, we could endorse the view that artistic understanding is an achievement, one that possesses a final value that is independent of, and *greater* than, the value of whatever pleasure is taken in or associated with coming to understand. That would give us a different way of defending the value of artistic understanding, one that insists that its achievement-value always outweighs its pleasure-value. Particularly when we consider, not the moment of coming to understand, but the successive period during which we continue to be in a state of understanding, it seems plausible that the pleasure of coming to understand will fade while the value of the achievement, and the ongoing state of understanding, remains undiminished.

3. The Objection from Mystery: Conditional Value

A second version of the objection from mystery claims, not that a lack of some artistic understanding is finally valuable, but that a lack of artistic understanding is the condition of a finally valuable relationship with a work of art. One proponent of this objection is Alexander Nehamas, whose argument is, in slogan form, “The art we love is art we don’t yet fully understand” (2007: 76). Nehamas argues, first, that there is an analytic connection between finding something beautiful and loving it; second, that to find something beautiful (and, thereby, to love it) is inseparable from the need to understand what makes it beautiful; and third, that to reach full understanding of a work of art would be to cease loving it (and, thereby, to cease finding it beautiful).¹⁶

On Nehamas’ view, then, attaining greater understanding of a work of art can, at least past a certain threshold or degree of understanding, become disvaluable. In a context containing too great a degree of artistic understanding, the value is *defeated*, because to attain that degree of artistic understanding is to cease to love an artwork, and so in that context artistic understanding loses the value that it had. This line of argument, if successful, would establish that artistic understanding, at least past a certain threshold, is disvaluable. As Malcolm Budd puts it in his reconstruction of Nehamas’ argument, “surely, if complete understanding entails the loss of love and happiness, the rational thing to do is to resist the supposedly imperative urge to understand ever more completely what one loves” (2011: 84).

So let’s look at the argument. Nehamas’ first premise may be too strong, but we don’t need to accept his analytic connection to agree that one kind of valuable

¹⁶ I follow Malcolm Budd (2011), who raises many trenchant objections that I do not consider here, in my reconstruction of Nehamas’ line of argument.

relationship with a work of art takes the form that he imagines; his vivid description of the role Manet's *Olympia* plays in his life is a possibility proof of the value of such a loving relationship with a work of art. His second premise is also open to challenge, though again I think we can grant that for many cases of finding something beautiful, if not all, we are motivated to gain a deeper understanding of it.

But why should we believe the third premise? Nehamas writes, "Interpretation [i.e., the pursuit of understanding] ends either when we can find no further account, although one is required, or when we reach full understanding, which we do when our interest, rather than what we are interested in, is ... exhausted" (2007: 124). The 'requirement' in the first disjunct refers to the second premise: it's the felt imperative to understand an object that we find beautiful, an imperative that, per the first premise, our love of an object partly consists in. The idea is that when we love an artwork, our desire to understand it takes on the feeling of necessity, requirement, or obligation. In such a situation, 'interpretation' would end only because we can in fact attain no further degree of understanding, due to our appreciative limitations, though we would continue to desire such an understanding. So this kind of case poses no challenge to the value of artistic understanding.

It is the second disjunct that might spell trouble. But Nehamas appears to suggest that full understanding is not actually the state of fully understanding an artwork, but rather the grasp of an artwork that we have at the moment when we lose interest in it (and later). He confirms this in a later interview, saying, "A thing is 'fully understood' only when I no longer want to learn more about it. Understanding is exhausted not when the object [is] but when *I* am exhausted" (Kubala 2012: 7).¹⁷ But this seems to misdescribe a cognitive phenomenon in terms of a desiderative one: losing the desire to understand an object is not a way of understanding it. So Nehamas has not established a *constitutive* connection between attaining a certain degree of understanding an artwork and ending a valuable relationship with it.

Maybe, though, there's a causal connection here. What causally explains our losing interest in an artwork we once loved? It might have nothing at all to do with our degree of understanding: perhaps our attention is captured elsewhere, or our values change, or we simply move on. Unless Nehamas can establish that the very process of gaining understanding tends to *cause* us to lose interest, such that artistic understanding is always,

¹⁷ Nehamas also claims, "Full understanding is logically impossible. It would mean, I think, to know all a thing's properties and their interrelations—but the notion of 'all a thing's properties' is ill-defined" (Kubala 2012: 7).

in that way, self-defeating, then his argument cannot be used against the value of artistic understanding. Moreover, if full understanding is not defined in terms of degrees of grasp of a work, then Nehamas cannot claim that an incremental increase in understanding an object *probabilifies* our eventually losing interest in that object.

A second, slightly different way of formulating the conditional version of the objection from mystery draws on unpublished work by Daniela Dover (n.d.). Dover does not herself endorse the objection from mystery, but her work can be used to assess it. She identifies a phenomenon that she calls ‘erotic curiosity’: a distinctive form of curiosity that can be understood only through its relationship with love. Unlike ordinary curiosity (about, say, who committed the crime, or who the next prime minister will be), erotic curiosity does not have a determinate question as its content, and does not aim at a discrete bit of propositional knowledge. One of Dover’s main examples of this phenomenon is our erotic curiosity about artworks that we’re drawn to.

Like Nehamas, Dover makes a connection between ending an inquiry into understanding an object and losing interest in it: “One thing that could decisively indicate that the desire that prompted your inquiries into [something] has been satisfied would be to become terminally bored with” it (n.d.: 13). In this, the bad case, our boredom would decisively indicate the loss of a valuable relationship with an artwork, or at least a valuable activity of inquiry into it. In the good case, however, she says, “curiosity is self-replenishing: the process of inquiry deepens and reinforces curiosity rather than exhausting or satisfying it” (n.d.: 14). Dover echoes the objection from mystery in holding that not fully understanding an artwork is a condition of a valuable relationship with it. But she nicely brings out that under the right conditions—being in a state of erotic curiosity—there is no danger that attaining greater understanding will make it more likely that one loses interest in an artwork. Rather, the state will itself motivate inquiry into new questions, and the sense of mystery can be preserved even as we gain a higher degree of artistic understanding.

Just as we saw with Nehamas, it’s only the bad case, where we lose interest or become terminally bored, that could pose a threat to orthodoxy about the value of artistic understanding. We can distinguish two possibilities. One is that our interest in, or erotic curiosity about, some artwork is not sufficiently strong; in this case, however, there is not even a *prima facie* objection to the value of artistic understanding, since the ground for the disvalue of the bad case is a fact about the appreciator’s motivational state, not a fact about their degree of understanding. The other possibility is that the artwork itself is not sufficiently rich; in this case, it is not that understanding the object is disvaluable, but that there is simply very little understanding (and therefore value) to be had. Even if there is

some loss in discovering that a work has less value than we initially judged it to have, it might be better for one's understanding to be exhausted and to move on to more worthwhile artworks.

Suppose, contrary to what Nehamas says, that full artistic understanding were both logically possible and practically attainable. Even if he were right in holding that we have reason against gaining full understanding, this would not establish that we have any general reason against gaining any degree of artistic understanding *less* than that of full understanding. The claim that a lack of full artistic understanding is conditionally valuable is compatible with holding that any degree of artistic understanding less than full *is* finally valuable. And it may be that attaining full artistic understanding is not possible: perhaps it is not logically impossible, as Nehamas claims, but practically impossible for finite inquirers, given the fact that an artwork's good-making features can vary with later developments in art history (see, e.g., Jones 1969: 131). The topic of full understanding, and full artistic understanding in particular, deserves more attention. But even if the impossibility, for us, of full artistic understanding is in some respect lamentable, the fact that valuable artworks can always sustain further inquiry into their value is surely also to be celebrated.

4. Conclusion

I have argued that the conditional value version of the objection from mystery has not established a constitutive, causal, or probabilistic connection between attaining a greater degree of understanding of an artwork and losing interest in, becoming bored with, or otherwise ceasing to love it, such that one would thereby lose a finally valuable relationship with the artwork. And the final value version of the objection from mystery has not established that not understanding an artwork has a value that generally outweighs the value of understanding it. There may be other reasons to think that the value of understanding is outweighed or defeated in the artistic case, such that we have a general reason against gaining artistic understanding, but the objection from mystery is not one of them.

To return to one of the artists with whom I began: Wordsworth's famous line—"We murder to dissect"—is often taken to suggest that we should not pursue certain kinds of understanding. But the wider context of the poem makes clear that the problem is that we too often seek it in the wrong place. "Enough of Science and of Art," the poet writes; "Let Nature be your teacher." Believing that our pursuit of understanding has been in some way misguided in no way impugns the value of understanding when properly pursued.

Acknowledgments

Thanks to audiences at Auburn University; the American Society for Aesthetics Annual Meeting, where Jonathan Gilmore gave excellent comments; the British Society of Aesthetics Annual Conference; and the University of British Columbia, where an earlier version of this paper was delivered as the Mary Mothersill Lecture in Aesthetics. Special thanks to Rachel Achs, Tom Adajian, John Bengson, Andrew Cooper, Greg Currie, Jonathan Gingerich, Keren Gorodeisky, Louise Hanson, Max Hayward, Kathleen Higgins, Alex King, Kyle Mahowald, Eliot Michaelson, Jeremy Page, Antonia Peacocke, Al Prescott-Couch, Francey Russell, Karl Schafer, Rob Simpson, Toby Tricks, Kenny Walden, Nick Wiltsher, and two anonymous referees for this journal.

References

- Audi, Paul (2012). Grounding: Toward a Theory of the ‘In-Virtue-Of’ Relation. *Journal of Philosophy*, 109(12), 685–711.
- Beardsley, Monroe C. (1958). *Aesthetics*. Hackett.
- Bell, Clive (1914). *Art*. Capricorn Books.
- Bengson, John (2017). The Unity of Understanding. In Stephen R. Grimm (Ed.), *Making Sense of the World: New Essays on the Philosophy of Understanding* (14–53). Oxford University Press.
- Bradford, Gwen (2015). *Achievement*. Oxford University Press.
- Budd, Malcom (1995). *Values of Art: Pictures, Poetry, and Music*. Penguin.
- Budd, Malcolm (2011). The Love of Art: More than a Promise of Happiness. *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 51(1), 81–88.
- Carroll, Noël (2016). Art Appreciation. *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 50(4), 1–14.
- Carter, J. Adam and Emma C. Gordon (2014). Objectual Understanding and the Value Problem. *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 51(1): 1–13.
- Davis, Lydia (1996). Joan Mitchell: *Les Bluets* (The Cornflowers) 1973. *Artforum*, January 1996, 72.
- Dover, Daniela (n.d.). Love’s Curiosity. Manuscript on file with the author.
- Dylan, Bob (2022). *The Philosophy of Modern Song*. Simon and Schuster.
- Elkins, James (2001). *Pictures and Tears: A History of People Who Have Cried in Front of Paintings*. Routledge.
- Gorodeisky, Keren and Eric Marcus (2018). Aesthetic Rationality. *Journal of Philosophy*, 115(3), 113–140.
- Hanson, Louise (2013). The Reality of (Non-Aesthetic) Artistic Value. *Philosophical Quarterly*, 63(252), 492–508.

- Hills, Alison (2017). Aesthetic Understanding. In Stephen R. Grimm (Ed.), *Making Sense of the World: New Essays on the Philosophy of Understanding* (159–176). Oxford University Press.
- Hills, Alison (2022). Aesthetic Testimony, Understanding, and Virtue. *Noûs*, 56(1), 21–39.
- Hopkins, Robert (2017). Imaginative Understanding, Affective Profiles, and the Expression of Emotion in Art. *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 75(4), 363–374.
- Huddleston, Andrew (2012). In Defense of Artistic Value. *Philosophical Quarterly*, 62(249), 705–714.
- Irvin, Sherri (2007). Forgery and the Corruption of Aesthetic Understanding. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 37(2): 283–304.
- Jones, Peter (1969). Understanding a Work of Art. *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 9(2), 128–144.
- Kelp, Christoph (2014). Knowledge, Understanding, and Virtue. In Abrol Fairweather (Ed.), *Virtue Epistemology Naturalized: Bridges Between Virtue Epistemology and Philosophy of Science* (347–360). Springer International Publishing.
- Kelp, Christoph (2021). Inquiry, Knowledge, and Understanding. *Synthese*, 198(Suppl 7), S1583–1593.
- Kivy, Peter (1990). *Music Alone: Philosophical Reflections on the Purely Musical Experience*. Cornell University Press.
- Kubala, Robbie (2012). Beauty, Interpretation, and the Everyday: An Interview with Alexander Nehamas. *Postgraduate Journal of Aesthetics*, 9(2), 1–13.
- Kvanvig, Jonathan (2003). *The Value of Knowledge and the Pursuit of Understanding*. Cambridge University Press.
- Litland, Jon Erling (2015). Grounding, Explanation, and the Limit of Internality. *The Philosophical Review*, 124(4), 481–532.
- Lopes, Dominic McIver (2011). The Myth of (Non-Aesthetic) Artistic Value. *Philosophical Quarterly*, 61(244), 518–536.
- Martínez Marín, Irene (2020). Non-Standard Emotions and Aesthetic Understanding. *Estetika*, 13(2), 135–149.
- Moore, G. E. (1903). *Principia Ethica*. Cambridge University Press.
- Nash, Paul (1949). *Outline, An Autobiography: And Other Writings*. Faber & Faber.
- Nehamas, Alexander (2007). *Only a Promise of Happiness: The Place of Beauty in a World of Art*. Princeton University Press.
- Nguyen, C. Thi (2020). Autonomy and Aesthetic Engagement. *Mind*, 129(516), 1127–1156.
- Page, Jeremy (2022). Aesthetic Understanding. *Estetika*, 15(1), 48–68.

- Pritchard, Duncan (2009). Knowledge, Understanding and Epistemic Value. *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement*, 64, 19–43.
- Pritchard, Duncan (2010). Knowledge and Understanding. In Duncan Pritchard, Alan Millar, and Adrian Haddock, *The Nature and Value of Knowledge: Three Investigations* (3–88). Oxford University Press.
- Rosen, Gideon (2010). Metaphysical Dependence: Grounding and Reduction. In Bob Hale and Aviv Hoffman (Eds.), *Modality: Metaphysics, Logic, and Epistemology* (109–136). Oxford University Press.
- Russell, Francey (n.d.). The Opacity of Aesthetic Judgment. Manuscript on file with the author.
- Schaffer, Jonathan (2016). Grounding in the Image of Causation. *Philosophical Studies*, 173(1), 49–100.
- Sibley, Frank (1965). Aesthetic and Nonaesthetic. *The Philosophical Review*, 74(2), 135–159.
- St Aubyn, Edward (2000). *A Clue to the Exit*. Chatto & Windus.
- Stecker, Robert (2019). *Intersections of Value: Art, Nature, and the Everyday*. Oxford University Press.
- Zangwill, Nick (2001). *The Metaphysics of Beauty*. Cornell University Press.