## AESTHETIC VALUE: WHY PLEASURE COUNTS

1. An object has aesthetic value (henceforth: *a*-value) because a certain sort of cognitive engagement with it is beneficial. This grounding in mental activity explains why *a*-valuable objects are so diverse. The Himalayas are descriptively as different as can be from Pythagoras’s proof. Yet both are *a*-valuable. The commonality rests in our mental attitudes to them.

What do the mental attitudes that ground *a*-value share? In my view, a certain kind of pleasure. Until relatively recently, this approach was thought to be validated by intuition and self-examination. Most philosophers felt they could leave it at that. This is unsatisfactory: aesthetic hedonism needs support and elaboration. I will try to bridge the gap.

2. An inanimate object, *o*,has value for a subject, *s*, when *s*’s relationship (R) to *o* brings her a benefit (B). In the case of *a*-value, R is aesthetic engagement. My view is that B is pleasure.

The ontology of *a*-value turns on how B accrues to *s*.

*Anti-objectivists* say that B depends on ~~the~~ *s*’smental constitution. Had she been differently constituted, R would not have yielded B. So, they relativize *a*-value to *s*: things have *a*-value for one person but not for another.

*Objectivists* hold that *a*-value is independent of *s*’s mental constitution. If *s* engages with *o* in the right way, B is there for the taking. An object’s *a*-value is its mind-independent aptness to yield B.

Both sides have a point. Objectivists are surely correct to say that there are right and wrong ways aesthetically to engage with any given object. Pythagoras’s proof would not afford you an aesthetic benefit if you did not appreciate the transparency of the construction. But this would be *your* shortcoming, not the proof’s. On the other hand, anti-objectivists are right to say that *a*-value rests on the receptivity of audiences. Someone who doesn’t care for geometry might understand the proof perfectly and yet be indifferent to its beauty. Surely, it lacks *a*-value for a person of this (lack of) sensibility.

Pleasure threads this needle. It helps account for both the need for “right” attitudes and the role of sensibility.

3. Before I discuss pleasure, a word about sensibility. Positively valued aesthetic engagement is self-sustaining in virtue of its affective and emotional resonance (*rasa*).When I listen to music I like, my affective state makes it both easy and desirable to continue. But human beings vary in their affective sensibility. Some eminent theorists of European music love Wagner, others don’t; some mathematics PhDs thrill to elegance in number theory but not in geometry; well-traveled outdoors people differ in whether they prefer snow-capped mountains or verdant forests. Nobody is “wrong” in such cases. The objectivist needs to be careful here. Wrong ways to cognitively engage with objects can lead to misplaced affective benefits. But there is no such thing as *the one* right sensibility.

4. I have a specific kind of pleasure in mind—*facilitating pleasure*. (Matthen 2017 gives details.) It is a positively valenced (and hence beneficial) experience of an activity performed in a certain way, which (a) renders that activity self-sustaining, and (b) reinforces the subject’s propensity to perform that activity in that way. Think of taking a walk for exercise. You discover that a certain way of doing this is enjoyable—a certain route, a certain gait, certain clothing, etc. Walk this way, and walking becomes self-sustaining through pleasure, independently of its value as exercise. Moreover, reinforcement learning makes you more likely to take a walk this way in future. Pleasure of this sort shapes behaviour. It motivates you to do certain things and influences how you do them.

Facilitating pleasure is not merely pleasure-as-sensation (though it could be that too). It is pleasure that plays a certain role—sustaining and reinforcing the activity it accompanies.

*Aesthetic pleasure* is the facilitating pleasure of cognitive engagement with an object. If I contemplate Pythagoras’s construction in a way that makes the equal areas evident to the eye, then if I have a certain sensibility, I will experience a positively affective response that sustains savouring the proof longer than is necessary for comprehension. This kind of affectively—one could even say *emotionally*—resonant and hence self-sustaining cognitive engagement is the essence of aesthetic experience. This pleasure is a benefit for me, a reason to linger self-contained in contemplating the proof. (Note for scholars: the self-sustenance of aesthetic pleasure does the same work here as Kant’s disinterestedness.)

The self-reinforcing pleasure nexus is particularly relevant in art. Artists aim to evoke from their audiences an affective response that motivates them to engage with their works. They can achieve this result only if the mode of attentive consumption for which they construct the work matches how the audience engages with it. Usually, the artist achieves this result by exploiting culturally well-established modes of cognitive engagement, though she may also change things up in the expectation that an audience will follow. She tacitly assumes that her audience can and will engage with her creation in a way that is affectively positive and thus self-sustaining.

5. *Thesis* The aesthetic value of an object is its capacity to support self-sustaining cognitive engagement with itself, by means of facilitating pleasure, by a person of a certain sensibility, who attends to it in the right way.

An object’s *a*-value is the pleasure-benefit it can generate. This a matter of objective fact. But pleasure depends on affective sensibility. It is subject-relative in this way.

6. Two brief concluding remarks.

(i) On my account, *a*-value is not a distinctive kind of value. Rather, it is the unconditional value of a distinctive kind of mental activity.

(ii) The account of *a*-value I have summarized does not support value comparisons. One way to supplement it would be to ask whether optimally correct cognitive engagement with some objects (e.g., “high” literature) is more self-sustaining and emotionally resonant than with others (e.g., pop fiction).

**REFERENCE**

Matthen, Mohan (2017). “The Pleasure of Art,” *Australasian Philosophical Review* 1/1: 6–28.