# NEW PROSPECTS FOR AESTHETIC HEDONISM

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*Aesthetic anti-objectivism* is the view that the aesthetic value of a work of art derives from the responses it elicits from its intended audience.

In Section I of this chapter, I defend this position. I argue that because culture plays a role in determining aesthetic merit, intrinsically similar objects can have different aesthetic value relative to audiences with different cultural backgrounds. So, the aesthetic value of a work does not supervene on its intrinsic natural properties.

Now, one can ask: what role does culture play? I’ll show that it helps shape the consumer’s actual engagement with an artwork, rather than by *prescribing* rules of engagement, and thus determining the “right” response to an artwork in a particular cultural context. In other words, culture shapes response, and response determines value.

In Section II, I attempt to explain how culture determines aesthetic response. Specifically, I develop a novel account of aesthetic pleasure, in which it motivates and reinforces the cognitively complex activity of mentally engaging with an artwork. Aesthetic pleasure is not an inert consequence of engaging with an art-object on this account; rather, it creates a self-reinforcing feedback loop that facilitates mental engagement with an object. Allied to this account of pleasure is a notion of *pleasure learning*, which can be embedded in culture. This shows how aesthetic response can vary across cultures in ways relevant to the anti-objectivism of Section I.

In Section III, I draw these threads together in a *specific form* of anti-objectivism—aesthetic *hedonism*. This is the ideathat the aesthetic value of an artwork depends on the *aesthetic pleasure* it is capable of eliciting from an audience that shares the artist’s cultural background. I claim that the artist’s aim is to create opportunities for self-reinforcing engagement of the sort described in Section II. Her success in doing so is a measure of the instrumental value of her work relative to her purpose. Aesthetic value is a merely instrumental good in this way.

## I. Aesthetic Anti-Objectivism

The primary reason to embrace aesthetic anti-objectivism is that no other view adequately accounts for the cultural specificity of art and artistic excellence.

Consider an extreme alternative. G. E. Moore [1903: 201] reduced beauty to goodness; something is beautiful, he said, if it is intrinsically *good* to contemplate it admiringly. Moore [1922] also thought that intrinsic goodness and other “non-natural” properties supervene on “natural” properties. Since the work of art is an essential part of the act of contemplating it, it follows that its aesthetic value is a consequence of its natural (i.e., material) characteristics, independently of culture.

The difficulty for Moore is that aesthetic merit varies as cultures vary.[[1]](#footnote-1) Chinese opera is assessed differently than hip hop. A hip-hop artist like Drake would not be an ornament on a classic Beijing stage. His songs would be decried by that tradition. In my view, there is no universally applicable right or wrong about such an attitude. Cultural variation cannot be denied, and it hardly ever is. “We write symphonies,” Donald Trump proclaimed, attempting to articulate why European culture surpasses those of “the South and the East.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Hardly anybody agrees with him.

*Universal Convergence: An Objectivist Gloss on Subjective Response*

Cultural universalism was in vogue in eighteenth century Europe. Hume tried to defend it while still acknowledging inter-subjective variation. He says that our immediate reaction to a work of art is merely a *feeling* or sentiment that cannot be evaluated as right or wrong. However, since we employ standards in our aesthetic judgement, it would be wrong to rest there, he thinks. To account for the seeming objectivity of these standards, Hume observes that inter-subjective differences tend to disappear with increasing exposure. This convergence explains the basis for critical aesthetic judgements. In effect, Hume relies on a psychological version of Moore’s supervenience thesis: though there is no right or wrong about it, people across cultures tend to converge on similar reactions to physically similar works of art.

Hume recognized that people of different cultures have different aesthetic preferences. “We are apt to call ‘barbarous’ anything that departs widely from our own taste and viewpoint; but we soon find that others will condemn us in the same way” (“On the Standard of Taste” in Green and Grose [1874-75], vol 3). This is a promising beginning, but he soon subsumes such disagreements to those that exist *within* a culture. People who prefer Ogilby to Milton are thought to be “absurd and ridiculous,” he says. Cultural variation is the same; here too, there are differences of judgement that cannot be sustained in the long run. “The coarsest daubing contains a certain lustre of colours and exactness of imitation, which are so far beauties, and would affect the mind of a peasant or Indian with the highest admiration.” Presumably he thinks it would be “absurd and ridiculous” to prize Asian art over paintings by Raphael. Peasants and Indians will come to the same conclusion with greater experience, he implies. If they do not, there is something deviant about them, much as there is something deviant about the jaundiced person who sees everything tinged with yellow. It is not that anything is really yellow (or not) or really aesthetic (or not); it is just that the judgements of normal people converge.

Kant seems to have started from a similar place as Hume, though he went in a somewhat different direction. His idea was that when I feel that something is beautiful, I assume that you not only will agree, but *should* do so, given the sensibility I take you to share qua human.An aesthetic judgement is “a subjective necessity, which is represented as objective under the presupposition of a common sense” (*Critique of the Power of Judgement*, §22, 239; tr. Guyer and Matthews [2000]).

Here’s the point. Both Hume and Kant apply these views in a way that casts doubt on the possibility that aesthetic judgements might be cross-culturally variable. Hume writes: “You will never convince a man, who is not accustomed to Italian music, and has not an ear to follow its intricacies, that a Scotch tune is not preferable” (quoted by Gracyk [2016]). Kant’s “common sense”is somewhat less pernicious—he says that it is a “presupposition,” not fact—but it assumes that when you make an aesthetic judgement, you automatically denigrate the conflicting judgements of all others.

I shall argue that cross-cultural variability cannot be dissolved in this way. I agree that Milton is superior to Ogilby; intra-cultural comparisons are indeed possible. But I *don’t* agree with facile cross-cultural comparisons. Refined sentiment on either side fails to reveal whether Ella Fitzgerald is better than Asha Bhosle. Ella elicits less pleasure from devotees of Bollywood film music; Asha less from jazz aficionados. Neither of these facts demonstrates the superiority of one over another.

*Culture*

Let me begin with a very simple point. Aesthetic value does not supervene on physical characteristics.

Think of the New York minimalist, Robert Ryman’s oeuvre of dominantly white paintings. In common with other abstract expressionists, Ryman wants to challenge the intertwining of painting and depiction; works in this tradition are meant to be objects with autonomous value, not intermediaries between a viewer and a reality beyond. Writing in *The New Yorker* (21-28 December 2015), Peter Schjeldahl (2015) describes Ryman’s works as “different paint mediums, applied dead smooth or textured by brushstrokes, on canvas, board, paper, aluminum, and other surfaces.” Since many of these are simply areas of white, Schjeldahl says that “the main—or, really, only—event is an emphasis on the way a work is attached to a wall: by bolts, staples, brackets, or flanges.”

Here’s my point. Ryman’s work could be duplicated by a random process. Figure 1 is a photograph of a wall that my dog, Lucy, scratches while she sleeps. Compare it to a representative painting by Ryman: http://tinyurl.com/guhgbd8. Granted, Ryman’s work is more complex and more interesting than Lucy’s. However, given the visual similarities, any process of perceptual adaptation that increases my appreciation of the Ryman should also increase my appreciation of Lucy’s wall (and of my photograph). So, can my dog’s scratches be evaluated in the same framework as Ryman? And what about my photograph? Does it too evoke a Ryman-sensitized response from the observer educated in abstract expressionism?

---Figure 1 about here---

Figure 1: Mohan Matthen: Picture of a wall scratched by Lucy, a Newfoundland dog. (July 2017)

Schjeldahl provides some context for an answer to this provocative question:

To qualify as hip [in New York around 1960], you registered fine distinctions—between a photograph of Marilyn Monroe and Andy Warhol’s silkscreen of a photograph of her, say, or between Carl Andre’s stack of bricks on a gallery floor and a stack of bricks anywhere else. Skeptical attitudes, averse to mimesis and metaphor, put a withering pressure on painting, including even the simplest abstraction. Barely passing muster were the evenly pencilled grids of Agnes Martin, the broody monochromes of Brice Marden, and Ryman’s taciturn brushstrokes. What you saw, while not a lot, stayed seen.

The point that I take from this is that Ryman’s work is art because the way you think of it is influenced by the “fine distinctions” of his movement: in particular, the emphasis on colour, form, texture, and emotion through paint that Warhol rejected, and by his and other abstract painters’ rejection of pictorial representation. There may not be much of a difference to *see* between Figure 1 and Figure 2; but the difference is significant.

Lucy’s wall falls on the wrong side of these fine distinctions. It is not art because it would be wrong to evaluate it in any such context as that provided by an aversion to “mimesis and metaphor.” Perceptual adaptation by repeated exposure (which is an important part of Hume’s mechanism) can influence the intensity of my response to Ryman and other abstract expressionists, but only by simultaneously influencing my appreciation of Lucy’s wall. Adaptation is, by itself, insensitive to such questions as: Does Lucy’s wall reject pictorial representation? This shows why the artistic merit of Ryman’s paintings cannot be assessed by perception alone, however attentively and sensitively it may be used. It follows that their merit does arise solely from their intrinsic physical qualities, since the physical characteristics that are relevant in paintings are those that are visible.

*Conclusion 1* Art objects cannot be assessed in the same way as naturally occurring or accidentally produced objects. So, aesthetic merit does not supervene on intrinsic physical characteristics.

*Culturally Generated Attractors*

Conclusion 1 prepares us for a more general point. Artworks have certain *primary attractors*, as I call them (Matthen 2015)—intrinsic or representational qualities that appeal to a naïve consumer. Visual art has colour, form, pattern, and pictorial representation; music has beat, melody, harmony, and cadence; dance has rhythm and grace of movement. Some scientists focus on these primary attractors in their attempts to understand art. Psychologists (Zeki 1999, Ramachandran and Hirstein 1999, Schloss and Palmer 2011, Palmer, Schloss, and Sammartino 2013) often focus on them as sources of “liking” and other aesthetic reactions. Some ask how musical harmony and the resolution of disharmony affects listeners. Along these lines, Steven Pinker [1997: 524) provocatively says that art is a “pleasure technology” that gives the brain “megadoses of agreeable stimuli” without the health risks of narcotics, opiates, and stimulants. To a novice, much of the pleasure of art arises directly from the primary attractors.

Clearly, art’s value goes beyond the primary attractors. When a knowledgeable person looks at a Ryman, her engagement is informed by Schjeldahl’s “fine distinctions.” These are not concerned just with the intrinsic qualities that a work of art could share with natural objects; they are tied up with the artist’s act of production. They include not only its meaning in the cultural context, but also the fineness of its execution, its composition, and so on. Let’s call these the *secondary attractors* of art. The word “secondary” is not meant to imply that they have secondary importance, but rather to imply that they often consist in manipulating the primary attractors. The value of a work of art typically derives from its secondary attractors, not its primary ones. We love Mozart’s melodies, but he is a great artist because of how he uses them and arranges them.

---Figure 2 about here---

Figure 2: The Badia Fiesolana

I won’t discuss the primary and secondary attractors any further here (but see Matthen 2015). There are two important points to make in the present context.

The first is that art forms use the primary attractors in distinctive ways. I’d like to illustrate this point by quoting a display of Eurocentric myopia by the late great E. H. Gombrich (1979):

In the history of Western Art the aesthetic ideal of restraint is inextricably interwoven with the classical tradition. The confidence with which we speak of ‘barbaric splendour’ betrays our deep-seated conviction that non-barbarians have other standards of excellence. A deliberate rejection of ornamental profusion has always been a sign of classical influence.

Gombrich evidently takes “restraint” to be a universal virtue. Praising the classical simplicity of the Badia Fiesolana (Fig 2), a mid-fifteenth century chapel in San Domenico, Tuscany, he inserts this rather tart comment: “To my knowledge no contemporary member of the culture has criticized an Indian temple, a Moorish Palace, a Gothic cathedral or a Spanish Baroque Church as ‘over-ornate’.” Gombrich seems to imply that classicism *discovered*, rather than *dictated*,this aesthetic virtue, though it remained unknown to Indians, Moors, and medieval Europeans. Earlier, G. E. Moore (1903) is more or less explicit about this. “The distinctively *aesthetic* temperament” prefers classicism to romanticism, he says ([1903],216, his emphasis).

To anybody who respects the autonomy of cultures, something has gone seriously wrong here. True, classicism prefers plain white walls enclosing expensive ornamentation (in this case, the altar on the back wall: http://tinyurl.com/n3maj2x). I certainly don’t mean to question the appeal of these qualities within this context. But the fact that they are underwhelming to a resident of a Moorish palace does not show that the latter was numbed by “barbaric splendour.” All that it shows is that different cultures use the primary attractors in different ways. The appreciation of Moorish splendour demands just as much cultural immersion as that of classical simplicity.

My second point is that in most art forms, the primary attractors are constrained by technique. Recall how Schjeldahl describes Ryman: “different paint mediums, applied dead smooth or textured by brushstrokes, on canvas, board, paper, aluminum, and other surfaces.” Brushstrokes and media signify different things in abstract expressionism and in, say, seventeenth century Holland. In Holland, they were a part of the technique; in abstract painting, they subserve the anti-pictorial agenda. The observer who is not aware of these “secondary attractors” will miss the point. So, we have to explain the role of culture in the appreciation of art in ways that differentiate it from appreciation of objects taken intrinsically.

*Conclusion 2* Art has value relative to the culture in which it was generated.

*Direct and Indirect Appreciation*

Despite the obvious temptations, the Humean program could, if it wished, stop its ears against the sirens of Eurocentrism. It is possible to think of an artwork as possessing value only against the background of culture. Formally, we could say that aesthetic merit is not a monadic property of an object *O*, but rather a relational property of *O* together with its cultural background.Thus, the Alhambra has merit only relative to 13th century Moorish Mediterranean norms, while the Badia Fiesolana is valuable relative to the norms of Medici Florence. On this proposal, the problem with Gombrich’s evaluation is that it evaluates the Alhambra relative to an inappropriate set of norms. These norms are relational but objective, in much the same way that this sentence is grammatical relative to English, but gibberish relative to Sanskrit.

This defence of objectivism does not stand up. Moore believed that the aesthetic response arose from a cognition of aesthetic merit. But he rightly did not think that such cognition sufficed: “aesthetic appreciation”is valuable not merely for “a bare cognition of what is beautiful in the object, *but also some kind of feeling or emotion*” (1903, 189; my emphasis). This tells us something about the role of culture; an artwork’s merit rests on the feelings that it arouses in its intended audience. It is not just a matter of exemplifying certain cultural dictates. The aesthetic rests on culture emotionally, and hence differently than language rests on culturally variable rules of grammar.

As an example, consider Haruo Shirane’s (1987) revelation that forms of reference to people varies by court rank in the Lady Murasaki’s *Tale of Genji*. He writes:

The heroes of the *Genji* belong . . . to the upper rank . . . Many of the women, by contrast are of the middle or lower rank . . . The reader’s awareness of these social distinctions is heightened by the fact that the characters are referred to not by name but by their bureaucratic rank and position, and sometime, in the case of high-ranking women, by their residences. [Middle ranking women are known by names of natural objects such as flowers; for example ‘Murasaki,’ the appellation of both the author and a main character, means lavender.] . . . Only at the height of the love scenes, when the question of social status is momentarily forgotten, are the honorifics eliminated and the official titles replaced by the anonymous but intimate *otoko* (man) and *onna* or *onnagimi* (woman). (51-52; parenthetical remark inserted.)

As my colleague, Atsuko Sakaki, points out (in personal communication) “That’s in fact usually the only implication that they had an affair—no other explicit detail is given.” For it is only in this context, that she identifies the characters by something other than their relations to society or environment.

Murasaki uses this device to target very precisely a certain kind of response in a reader of a certain kind. Imagine that reader being swept along by the narrative, when suddenly she is brought up short by the narrator’s sudden switch to a form of designation that she had not been using outside that context. The *narrator* (not the character) suddenly treats the lordas just a man. This is, firstly, erotic, but it also makes the reader aware of a second theme in the amorous encounter—the question of status—and this deepens her engagement with it. If she is reflective, she realizes how the author has achieved this.

It would be difficult for *us* to respond to this in the way we assume Murasaki’s readers did. We don’t normally clothe high personages in their titles alone; we wouldn’t take ‘man’ or ‘woman’ without further embellishment to signal an erotic encounter.[[3]](#footnote-3) Consequently, this device doesn’t affect us the same way as it did Murasaki’s readers. We can see *that* she is deploying a certain device; we can admire the delicacy of her depiction. But can we in the same direct and unaffected way be moved by both the erotic and the social implications of the unadorned ‘man’ and ‘woman’? [[4]](#footnote-4)

One way to appreciate this distinction is by examining the effect of fallibility. Suppose we found ancient commentaries who suggested that Murasaki’s contemporaries had found her device contrived and clumsy. Even if we were right about the intended meaning of the device, this would undermine our judgement of its merit. By contrast, imagine finding that recent studies of social psychology contradict certain psychological assumptions of a contemporary author such as Arundhati Roy (for example, about incest being a psychological refuge in times of great stress). This would *not* undermine her effect on us as readers. (And it doesn’t.) *Cognizing* an author’s aesthetic merit depends on figuring out her effect on the audience she was writing for; *feeling* the aesthetic power of an artwork does not depend in the same way on factual assumptions. This puts pressure on the objectivist; it’s not a descriptive attribute of the work-in-cultural-context that determines its value, but rather its capacity to elicit an affectively tinged response from its intended audience.[[5]](#footnote-5)

*Conclusion 3* Since the same work elicits different affective responses from people of different cultures, the emotional component of appraisal is not objective.

*Why We Should be Aesthetic Anti-Objectivists*

We can now attempt a general argument for anti-objectivism regarding value. It is a variant of what J. L. Mackie (1977), talking about moral values, called the “argument from queerness”: “If there were objective values, then they would be entities or qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe” (38). For merely knowing such a quality would tell somebody “to pursue it” (40). How could an objective situation “have a demand for such-and-such action somehow built into it?” (40).

My motivation for aesthetic anti-objectivism is a version of this argument from queerness. To account for aesthetic appreciation non-subjectively, one would have to posit mind-independent qualities of objects such that merely to know these qualities would dictate that one must *enjoy* the objects. How can a mind-independent quality have this normative force? [[6]](#footnote-6)

Here’s Mackie’s argument adapted to aesthetics:

1. It is very hard to understand how a mind-independent quality could dictate an attitude of affective appraisal.

2. It is doubly difficult when one adds that similar objects dictate different attitudes of affective appraisal in different cultures.

It is easy to see how aesthetic anti-objectivism approaches these difficulties. The affective response that grounds aesthetic evaluation is not *normatively* dictated by a mind-independent quality; it is rather a natural effect of such a quality. Such effects would not occur if the audience’s mind were not constituted a certain way. This throws a certain light on the cultural dependence of response. The role of culture is to make the mind responsive to certain qualities of an artwork. Creative artists make use of their audience’s culturally shaped mental dispositions to evoke an emotional response. The quality of their work derives from their success in so doing.

*Conclusion 4* Culture determines appraisal by shaping the mental, and in particular affective, receptivity of the audience.

## II. Aesthetic Pleasure

When I am reading a great novel, a psychological state arises in me that deepens my engagement and motivates me to continue. This psychological state is a component of a self-reinforcing feedback loop: it results from my activity and reinforces it. This is the state I identify *functionally* as aesthetic pleasure.

Other kinds of pleasure are reactive and passive. Suppose you have been carrying a heavy load for a long distance, and finally you get to put it down. A gust of pleasure welcomes the end of effort. This kind of pleasure is not an efficient cause of action: the event that gave rise to it ends as the pleasure begins. As I have described it above, aesthetic pleasure is not merely reactive in this way. It *motivates* the activity of engaging with an artwork as an efficient cause, and, as I shall argue, facilitates it and makes it more fluent and successful.

In this section, I outline the distinctive characteristics of aesthetic pleasure. A more detailed account can be found in Matthen [2017].

*Facilitating Pleasure*

Here’s another example of pleasure that (by contrast with the reactive pleasure of putting a heavy load down) is an efficient cause. You are thirsty and you drink a glass of cool, pure water. You eagerly gulp it down, savouring every drop. The pleasure you get from drinking the water motivates you to continue. For reasons I’ll now outline, I call this *facilitating pleasure*.

Drinking a complex, patterned activity that can be adjusted and corrected in accordance with sensory feedback (Miller [1982]). You have to feed liquid into your mouth at the right rate; your mouth must be poised to receive and retain the liquid; your mouth, pharynx, and oesophagus must push it down with precisely timed and coordinated muscular contractions; your epiglottis must simultaneously be shut off to prevent water being taken into the lungs. All of these movements are repeated rhythmically; if any is slightly misexecuted—if you take in too much and gag, or too little and swallow air—corrective action is needed. The brain’s autonomic control of this coordinated action requires sensory feedback and fine adjustment. Control and coordination demand processing resources in the brain. Additional evidence is that speed and fluency of ingestion slows with age (Tracy et al 1989).

Though drinking water seems easy, it is easily disrupted. It is not easy to gulp a glass of water when you are full; drinking gets slower with old age. The same is true if the water is viscous, brackish, or unpleasant to taste or smell. And drinking is not smooth when other circumstances take priority—for example, if you are in danger, or are emotionally too aroused or too depressed, or are concentrating on something else. It is easiest when the circumstances and the water itself give pleasure, and when you are hale and healthy enough to execute it smoothly..

Taken together, these points suggest that pleasure taken in an on-going complex activity like drinking releases the brain’s smooth execution of that same activity; facilitating pleasure closes a reinforcing feedback loop. My use of the term ‘pleasure’ is somewhat broad. Some complex activities may be released when sensory feedback is merely not negative; others may be triggered when the feedback is unambiguously positive. Similarly, the activation may be conscious or not conscious.[[7]](#footnote-7) I will elide these variations; my concern is functional. I’ll count them all as pleasure of this kind. Thus:

*Facilitating pleasure* (or *f-pleasure*) is sensory-affective feedback from a complex activity that motivates that activity and activates pre-assembled routines that enable its smooth execution.

I will argue that aesthetic pleasure is a variety of f-pleasure. Reading a book is a *cognitively* complex activity: aesthetic pleasure motivates and facilitates it; displeasure disrupts it.

Notice once again how f-pleasure is different from the purely reactive pleasures mentioned before. A desperately thirsty person will get pleasure from having relieved her thirst with impure water, but the actual act of drinking such water is unpleasant and may even have to be forced. This person enjoys a retrospective form of pleasure at the end of the act, but the act itself is not aided by pleasure. By contrast, we all get pleasure from the act of drinking cool pure water even when we are not desperately thirsty. In short, the pleasure of *savouring* is different from the pleasure of thirst being relieved. The former concurrently aids and motivates consumption; the latter retrospectively welcomes the relief it brings.

*F-Pleasure and Fluency*

Many psychologists have noticed connections between pleasure and fluent action; however, they commonly suggest that pleasure *results from* of the smooth coordination of the activity, instead of the other way around. For example, Reber et. al. [2004] propose that aesthetic pleasure arises from “fluency” of processing:

high fluency may elicit positive affect because it is associated with progress toward successful recognition of the stimulus, error-free processing, or the availability of appropriate knowledge structures to interpret the stimulus . . . High fluency may also feel good because it signals that an external stimulus is familiar, and thus unlikely to be harmful.

Though I cannot argue for this in detail here, I contend that the causal arrow runs the other way. Drinking water is intrinsically difficult. It can be fluently executed only when a pre-packaged routine is engaged. The pleasure of drinking water releases the (autonomic) coordinating routine and thus causes fluency. Reber et al assume that a pleasurable activity is intrinsically easy—it is pleasurable because it is associated with “availability” and “familiarity.” This does not explain why it is easily disrupted by displeasure—as an illustration, think of the famous example of somebody being asked to drink (their own) spit—it’s not easy. An easy activity should be *less* prone to disruption. These activities are not intrinsically easy; they seem so only when pleasure aids their fluent performance. This helps show how pleasure contributes to fluency rather than the reverse.

*Pleasure Learning*

We have been examining the facilitating role that pleasure plays when you undertake a complex activity. But there is another role that pleasure plays. If you perform an action in a particular way and it gives you more pleasure than performing it some other way, then you are more likely, in the future, to perform itin the pleasurable way. Over time, you find ways to engage with objects in ways that afford you a higher level of pleasure.

Take a very simple activity that can be performed in different ways. Maybe you meet with your friend, and there are many subjects you can discuss. You try them out as your mood takes you. It turns out that discussing sports with him gives you a lot of pleasure. You are more likely to discuss sports in the future. On the other hand, you bring up some political issue, and the result is pretty unpleasant. It becomes less likely that you will initiate this kind of discussion on the next occasion. If you continue in this manner, your encounters will ultimately maximize pleasure.

I’ll call this random or *Darwinian* learning. The principle is the same as that of natural selection. A range of variants is randomly generated. The fitter, or more pleasurable, are reinforced proportionately. Average fitness and pleasure per encounter rise. If there is only a finite number of alternatives, the fittest or most pleasurable will ultimately dominate and the rest will be diminished to near elimination.

*Instructed* pleasure learning is a variant of Darwinian learning. The difference here is that in place of random generation of variants, an outside party, or instructor, suggests new ways of conducting an activity, with the intention of increasing the pupil’s enjoyment. Exercise classes are sometimes like this; art appreciation classes usually are. The rest of the procedure stays the same. You increase or decrease the frequency of a particular mode of execution depending on the pleasure you get from it.[[8]](#footnote-8)

*Aesthetic Pleasure*

Now consider the specific activity of mentally engaging with an object. Reading a novel or poem requires attention, comprehension, and retention, and as a result, it is cognitively complex. Your enjoyment of this activity—the pleasure you take in reading it—facilitates what you are doing. You *want* to keep reading, and this in itself helps you continue. Additional to this, and no less important, the pleasure leads you smoothly from one narrative moment to the next, sharpens your appreciation of the prose, enables you to overlook the competing demands of hunger and tiredness. When you undertake the activity in what might be called an educated way, it becomes enjoyable and subjectively easier even though it is in fact cognitively complex and difficult. The pleasure generated by reading it in certain ways—e.g., ways that take context into account and flow with the prosody of the writer—help you more than that generated by reading it in other ways. This is not merely *reactive* pleasure; it is not merely a sensation that arises as a consequence of some occurrence; it is not idle. It is pleasure that motivates and aids your engagement with the novel. (For more on the importance of this, see the subsection entitled ‘Levinson’s Challenge’ below.)

Contrast the experience of reading the Income Tax Act of Canada in preparation for a meeting. You are not an expert and each sentence poses difficulties of comprehension. You are frustrated and bored. It’s all you can do to hang on; everything distracts you. This is the analogue of gagging and sputtering when foul water is all you have to quench your thirst. When you read something boring or you drink a foul-tasting liquid for a specific purpose, you are motivated to do what you need to do. But if the activity is displeasurable, it takes an effort of will to persist, and in any case, the ingestion is not smoothly executed.

My proposal amounts to this: aesthetic pleasure is the facilitating pleasure of mentally engaging with an object. The form of mental engagement can be purely perceptual (looking at a sunset), completely intellectual (reading a book), or partly each (listening to music or looking at art). In each case, the pleasure of mentally engaging with the object in question releases a mental routine that eases, facilitates and motivates the mental engagement and thus reinforces it.

*Aesthetic Pleasure and Culture Learning*

I proposed earlier that f-pleasure releases the smooth execution of an activity. As the example of drinking water showed, this is sometimes because it releases an autonomic routine. Such routines may also be pleasure learned—ways of doing things that become automatic because they bring greater pleasure and ease than alternatives. In the case of aesthetic pleasure, these routines are culturally acquired; I’ll call this form of pleasure learning *culture learning*. I mentioned the primary and secondary attractors of art: primary attractors are “naturally” appealing to the naïve consumer and form the building blocks of art; secondary attractors emerge from the complex construction of an artwork from elements that include the primary attractors.

Culture can influence pleasure learning with regard to both kinds of attractors. A person who grew up in traditional Chinese society is (in a manner that answers to Hume’s description of exposure) familiar with the melodic and metrical tropes of Chinese opera. Somebody who grew up in the West will find these strange and unappealing, at least at first. These are the primary attractors; they constitute the characteristic sound and look of that art form. A sophisticated consumer will also relish the way the plot, costumes, set are constructed, the subtlety of depiction, the beauty and virtuosity of the singing, and so on. This will generally require a more tutored immersion in the culture.

Broadly speaking, a culture provides its members a range of possibilities for aesthetic enjoyment. There are things others have enjoyed, and these are made available to naïve consumers along with possibilities of learning to enjoy by exposure and by instruction. There are also things that lie beyond the horizon, things that are known to members of other cultures, but not to members of this one. Lastly, there are possibilities for creation. An artist attempts to create things that will be enjoyed by people who have a certain aesthetic pleasure profile. These creations may often be “original” or norm-violating. But they are still hold different potentials for enjoyment for members of different cultures. It is said that the first performance of Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring* provoked a riot when it was first performed. Nonetheless, it soon caught on among people accustomed to certain kinds of European music. Most likely, it would never have been appreciated in the cultural landscape that prevailed in India or Indonesia—at least, not in the same way.

There may be certain things you have to *know* in order to appreciate certain forms of art. Going back to the example of Ryman, you have to know the anti-pictorial impulse of a certain group of artists, and you also have to have a certain kind of affective attitude with regard to this impulse. Imagine a culture where there is no pictorial art—only abstract decorative art. Regardless of what members of such a culture know about Ryman’s aims, his art could not elicit the same affective response from them. Their response will be through mental processes quite different from those with which New Yorkers of the sixties approached his work.

Of course, none of this is to suggest the absence of cultural universals. Perhaps, there are themes or tropes in West African sculpture that immediately appeal to people who grew up in nineteenth century Paris in exactly the same way as they appeal to the people for whom these sculptures were created. But it would be surprising if there were no local differences—no aspects of the art to which uninstructed Parisians were blind.

Finally, there is an affective and moral background. Shakespeare’s contemporaries likely rejoiced in the denouement of *Merchant of Venice*. But Stephen Greenblatt captures our revulsion today when he writes:

How are you supposed to view the Jewish daughter who robs her father and bestows the money on her fortune-hunting Christian suitor? Do you join in the raucous laughter of the Christians who mock and spit on the Jew? Or do you secretly condone Shylock’s vindictive, malignant rage? Where are you, at the end of the harrowing scene in the courtroom, when Portia asks the man she has outmaneuvered and ruined whether he agrees to the terms she has dictated, terms that include the provision that he immediately become a Christian? “Art thou contented, Jew?” she prods. “What dost thou say?” And what do you think the Jew actually feels when he answers, “I am content”? (*The New Yorker* July 10 &17th, 2017)

The answer is clear. For most of us, the play has lost something of its aesthetic value.

These examples illustrate how exposure or knowledge or moral belief can affect how you engage with a work of art. To enjoy Shakespeare as his Christian contemporaries did, you have to enjoy, at least a little bit, the cruel mockery directed at a usurious Jew who gets his come-uppance by meekly accepting the defection of his daughter, the loss of his property, and his own forced conversion. If you are of this frame of mind, you relish the lines you read; the effort of understanding their meaning, forming in your mind the lilt of the metre, and delighting in the marvellous word-play all contribute to that enjoyment. If you are not this kind of person, and you are worried about Shakespeare’s attitude, the words bother you; as Greenblatt says, “you feel uneasy.” You are less motivated to continue to read; you are more distracted from the poetic qualities of the play.

## III. Aesthetic Hedonism

With this account of aesthetic pleasure and culture learning in hand, I now come to the specific form of anti-objectivism that I will defend—*hedonism*. In my view, the *aesthetic merit* of a work of art derives from (a) the *aesthetic pleasure* that (b) it is *capable* of giving to a consumer who (c) shares the cultural background of the creator’s target audience, and has (d) *culture learned* optimally to enjoy works that are targeted at this audience. Note the four salient components of the view marked above: pleasure, capacity, culture, and learning.

This thesis is based on an important, and doubtless controversial, assumption, namely that creators of art make objects so that they may mentally engage audiences who, they assume, have a specific cultural background, which typically they share. An object made for a purpose is good *for that purpose*, but not necessarily absolutely,if it effectively fulfils that purpose. Accordingly, the objects that artists create are *good as* artworks if they are apt mentally to engage the audience effectively.[[9]](#footnote-9) The aesthetic value of an artwork is not to be thought of as a part of its moral value, or value as such. The aesthetic pleasure it elicits is not a source of aesthetic value for the reason that it is good-as-such—aesthetic value is goodness for a purpose, good for getting the audience to mentally engage with it. This shows why an accidental product, such as the wall scratched by my dog, has no aesthetic merit. It may activate certain culturally learned pleasure propensities; however, it is not an artefact and it is not good *as* that.

It is important at the outset to distinguish the hedonism I espouse from an expressivist position like Hume’s. According to Hume, aesthetic evaluation is a sentiment that lacks truth value. Hedonism maintains, by contrast, that evaluation is *factual*;it derives from a work’s capacity to elicit aesthetic pleasure from its intended audience. Hedonism shares with Humean expressivism the conviction that aesthetic value is not an intrinsic material property of an artwork. But its positive thrust is in a different direction.

*Anti-objectivism: Some Ramifications*

The following points illustrate how my position works.

1. Let us say that I am utterly absorbed by a novel. This is a response brought about by what I call aesthetic pleasure. As I have said, this is a kind of pleasure that motivates and psychologically enables me to undertake the cognitively demanding task of reading the book.

2. The novel has certain characteristics that evoke my response. These characteristics may cause others to respond the same way if they share my psychological propensities and culturally formed background attitudes. The author intended this. The novel has aesthetic value inasmuch as it has the capacity to evoke an attitude that motivates and enables my engagement with it and that of people like me in relevant ways. Whether the novel has the capacity to elicit pleasure has a factual basis. But the value of the novel depends on the respondents’ state of mind.

3. Aesthetic value cannot be reduced to absolute value, contrary to Moore [1903]; the two are connected very indirectly at best. If someone did not enjoy the novel, they would not on that score be deficient, morally or cognitively. Nor do the *other* goods that come from my enjoyment contribute to aesthetic value. The novel may improve me morally and educationally, but this is an absolute good, but not, in itself, an aesthetic one.

4. James Shelley (2010) dubs “empiricist” any “view that an object has whatever aesthetic value it has because of the value of the experience that it affords.” My view is partially empiricist in his sense: an object’s aesthetic value does depend on its capacity to elicit a certain kind of experience, but it does *not* (in my view) depend on the moral value of this experience.

However, my view evades Shelley’s critique of “empiricism.” He thinks, to simplify, that if an artwork has value because of the experience it creates, then anything else that creates experience of the same value (for example, a drug) must have the same value. This criticism assumes (as Shelley acknowledges) that the experience is separable from the work from which it arises. On my account, it is inseparable. I make aesthetic pleasure both the consequence of mental engagement with an aesthetic object *and a cause* of continued engagement. What I say is that aesthetic pleasure arises from mental engagement and then loops back to motivate and reinforce that same mental engagement. The feedback loop cannot be created by a drug without simultaneously involving the aesthetic object.[[10]](#footnote-10)

*Levinson’s Challenge*

In a justly celebrated piece, Jerrold Levinson [1992, 295] writes:

The idea that the value of an art work is closely related to the pleasure a perceiver derives from it has surely too much initial plausibility, and is of too long standing, to be wholly without basis.

Levinson goes on to make some stipulations that must be satisfied if this idea is to be sustained. For example, he writes that the pleasure in question cannot be understood as a mere sensation, but is more like “enjoyment, actively achieved.” Some of these stipulations, including the one just mentioned, are easy for my account of aesthetic pleasure to accommodate, and I will not dwell on them.

Let me, however, mention two that I accept only in a qualified way. Levinson [*ibid*, 295]says that “the pleasure involved, if it is to be a gauge of artistic value, must be of the right *kind*, must arise in the right manner, and must be appropriately directed.” What he means by this is, first, that the pleasure must be disinterested, or “disengaged from purely personal concerns,” [299] and appropriate to the work’s historical context. I agree with these concerns. I’ll return to the first in a moment; the second is suggested by my stipulation that the pleasure evoked by a work must be consonant with goals and the cultural assumptions of the creator. (However much it adds to my pleasure, it doesn’t count that Jane Austen’s heroine reminds me of my aunt and thus gives me pleasure.) But some (including Shelley [2010]) insist that a normative “rightness” is involved here: it should be normatively right for the work to elicit pleasure, they think. I have rejected this on the grounds of Mackie’s “argument from queerness,” which points out the oddity of assuming that a purely descriptive feature can command appreciation.

There is another powerful point that Levinson [1992, 301] makes:

Experience of or engagement with a work of art may be intrinsically worth while for a variety of other reasons: because one’s cognitive faculties are notably exercised or engaged . . . In many cases the art work may deliver these goods in the absence of anything one could comfortably call pleasure, and sometimes even by way of what is in fact displeasure or discomfort of a sort . . .

The difference between Levinson and myself is significant on this point. I agree that Goya’s *Execution of May 3rd* (one of the works he mentions in this context) brings out feelings of horror, outrage, and grief, none of which can be called pleasant. But of course, this does not mean that it doesn’t also elicit the kind of pleasure that I have described—the facilitating pleasure that draws one into the painting, scrutinizing its fine details in the light of what one knows of the Dos de Mayo 1808 uprising in Madrid and of Goya’s other works.[[11]](#footnote-11) Now, it could be that this psychological complex is not “comfortably called pleasure.” That’s as it may be: I am motivated to classify it as such in light of the psychological role it plays in facilitating a cognitively complex activity of engaging with the painting, made all the more difficult by the negative emotions it commands.

There is a larger issue here. Suppose that I learn in other ways about the horrors of the 2nd of May—as indeed Goya himself did—and am moved to similar morally relevant feelings. Suppose I spent time poring over the historical records and was thus moved. Clearly, there is nothing *aesthetic* about that experience. Why?

*The Disinterestedness of Aesthetic Pleasure*

My proposal is that the pleasure that arises from mentally engaging with an artwork is *aesthetic* when it facilitates this mental engagement and thereby reinforces the activity. Pleasure is *not* aesthetic when it arises from associated activities distinct from this mental engagement. Consider a devout person who experiences a sense of devotional ecstasy gazing at a Chola Nataraja. Does this experience count as (part of) aesthetic pleasure? My answer is: Yes, if it focuses this person’s attention on the form and details of the bronze (not just Shiva); no if it takes his mind away from it. [[12]](#footnote-12)

This is my rendition of Kant’s idea that aesthetic pleasure must be “disinterested” [Matthen 2017]. My proposal is *not* that aesthetic pleasure must be, as Levinson suggests, “disengaged from purely personal concerns.” I am proposing, rather, that if it is to be counted as aesthetic, the pleasure of gazing at something must reinforce gazing at it (and not some other activity). A sense of outrage regarding Napoleonic atrocities can arise from looking at Goya’s painting, and at the same time be part of what reinforces one’s attention to the details of Goya’s painting; the purely personal concern of whether one should buy a Chola bronze for one’s personal collection can reinforce one’s attention to that object. The important thing is not why someone takes up mental engagement with an object but that the psychological attitude that arises from engaging with it should reinforce mental engagement with the object (regardless of whether it reinforces other mental attitudes, whether lofty, such as devotional ecstasy or historical indignation, or low, like investor shrewdness).

Here’s a deflationary remark to conclude. Philosophers like Moore and Levinson take aesthetic value too seriously. They think that it is absolute. Levinson ([1992], 306, note 19) writes that art is valuable for cognitive insight even where such insight can be detached from the work that occasions it. He adds that for this value to be aesthetic “there must always be **in addition** appreciation of the *manner* in which a work embodies that insight” (bolding mine, italicizing his). I disagree with this. Absolute value is never a detachable component of aesthetic value.

A work of art is a self-centred creation: “Attend to me,” it says. And it does its best to ease your compliance, complex and difficult as it may be. Sometimes, absolute goods result from its success. But those absolute goods are not to be confused with artistic or aesthetic value.[[13]](#footnote-13)

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Figure 1



Figure 2



1. Of course, Moore’s target was beauty; mine is artistic merit. There is a difference; neither is necessary for the other. However, Moore ([1903],195) says: “the world would be improved if we could substitute for the best works of representative art *real* objects equally beautiful.” Aside from the obviously false Platonic assumption that representations must be less beautiful than their models, this overlooks sources of artistic value other than beauty. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Warsaw, July 6th, 2017. http://tinyurl.com/y8pkc3vs. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Imagine a 21st century story in which a character is referred to only as ‘the Prime Minister,’ except once, when she is alone with her male bodyguard, and then: “The woman and man slipped into the Cabinet Room.” End of chapter. Perhaps a skilled writer could create erotic tension and social commentary this way, but the nexus would be different and, most likely, distracting. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. There are, of course, universal attractors in all art. My point is that the whole package usually cannot be separated from the appeal of the local attractors. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This is a point at which I diverge from Bullot and Reber (2013), who rely on a more cognitivist approach in which aesthetic appreciation is grounded in being “sensitive to certain historical facts.” Their description of such “sensitivity” is purely cognitive. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Keren Gorodeisky [unpublished] proposes that pleasure is an experience that “discloses” aesthetic value, much in the way that sense perception discloses sensory qualities in the world. According to her, aesthetic value exists independently of this disclosure, but is, nonetheless, shaped by human interests and sensibilities. In my view, her proposal requires a thoroughly Wittgensteinian/Austinian conception of perception that doesn’t make a sharp distinction between sense perception and discursive evaluation. As such, it is open to interpretation about how the discursive part operates and how it can be regarded as merely “disclosing.” This discussion needs to be informed by Mackie’s argument. How can a mind-independent *value* be perceived? Do values have causal power relative to perception? And how is this kind of perception culturally variable? [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. In Matthen [2017] I insist that aesthetic pleasure should be conscious. I don’t think this was wrong, but I don’t want to insist on it here. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The distinction between Darwinian and instructed pleasure learning parallels that made by Goldstone, Landy, and Brunel [2011] between ‘blind flailing,’ in which variants are tried out at random, and ‘myopic flailing,’ where they are generated in accordance with instruction. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Bullot and Reber [2013] make a similar assumption. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. On the other hand, suppose that I hallucinate reading *Crime and Punishment*, with all the attendant cognitive and affective attitudes. I would say that this is a valuable aesthetic experience, just like actually reading the work. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See Gorodeisky (unpublished) on this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. My view converges here with that of Emily Brady ([1998], 106) who insists that ‘some very individual and personal features of the subject are compatible with a disinterested standpoint.’ Brady decries hedonism because she takes it to be an “amenity value,” (*ibid* 97), and pleasure to be a wholly passive occurrence detachable from that which gives rise to it. This is, of course, not my conception. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. I am enormously in debt to Keren Goredeisky, Jennifer McMahon, and Aaron Meskin, and to audiences in Leeds and Adelaide. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)