

A New Problem for Aesthetics

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Abstract

The essay introduces the problem of aesthetic unreliability, the variety of ways in which it is difficult to grasp our aesthetic experience and the consequent confusion and unreliability of what we take as our taste.

Key Words

taste, aesthetic experience, aesthetic judgment, aesthetic reliability

1. Introduction

Aestheticians have wandered increasingly from the common ground of aesthetic theory into the philosophies of particular arts, such as music, film, dance, or literature. The philosophies of the arts offer a refreshing role for philosophers. By focusing on particular arts, philosophers have been able to speak usefully to art historians, musicologists, and literary critics and answer questions in their disciplines: the nature of our comprehension of film narrative, pictorial perception, moral education in the novel, or composition versus performance-based standards in music, to name only a few. As an added bonus, rubbing elbows in one of the art worlds may also make for a less lonely existence for aestheticians. Perhaps, too, the shift from basic questions to particular arts reflects the belief that all is well with our conceptions of taste and aesthetic experience. The heavy lifting is behind us. Today the basic questions are the stuff of undergraduate surveys rather than advanced research. My view, however, is that aesthetics has not yet faced one the most troubling features of aesthetic life: the very difficulty of knowing our aesthetic experience and the consequent confusion and unreliability of what we take as our taste.

This problem—let’s call it *aesthetic unreliability*—returns us to the very foundations of aesthetics and raises questions about the authority of individuals’ assessments of their aesthetic experience and all that follows from those assessments. Aesthetic unreliability requires us to reconsider the individual as both connoisseur and consumer. It suggests alternative explanations for some of the more curious features of cultural life, namely, that our taste is often incoherent, the practice of criticism largely arbitrary, and creative practices something of a free-for-all. Aesthetic unreliability supports the view that our inner aesthetic lives are more anarchic, protean, and unknown than we have been willing to admit.

The stakes are high, at least by the standards of aesthetics: whatever we make of our aesthetic lives is typically held to depend in part on our ability to more or less accurately assess our experience of the art that we encounter. Theories of taste presuppose a notion of contemplation as transparent and unproblematic: we know the nature, degree and sources of our satisfactions as well as changes in them over time. Without this knowledge, our aesthetic lives would be no more than what Ted Cohen has called “a concatenation of atomistic expressions,” lacking continuity and coherence.¹ Our very ability to direct and enhance our aesthetic experience—quite simply, to have an aesthetic life—is thought to be dependent on the reliability or authenticity of aesthetic self-knowledge.

However, certain features of our aesthetic lives compel a skeptical view of the reliability of what we identify as our taste, aesthetic experience, or aesthetic judgment. By these I mean, broadly, the mental states or episodes that occur when attending to aesthetic objects like works of art, especially the affective quality of our responses and the secondary, synthetic process of reflecting on, recalling, comparing, and ordering these experiences. I submit that, often enough, we suppress or exaggerate our responses to the

¹ Ted Cohen, “On Consistency in One’s Personal Aesthetics,” in *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection*, ed. Jerrold Levinson (Cornell University Press, 1998), 106–

point of self-deception. We have difficulty in identifying what in an object causes our response to it. The instability of our feelings over time is such that we are unsure if our responses are caused by our mood, factors in our environment, or the object to which we are attending. The unreliability of aesthetic responses is, for aestheticians, the long unacknowledged Cartesian ball of wax, yet to be warmed in the palm.

Aestheticians have long assumed the authenticity of aesthetic experience while focusing instead on its objectivity. Since the establishment of the discipline of aesthetics in the eighteenth century, conflicts of taste between individuals have been among the discipline's most intractable and popular problems. The resolution of the problem has been thought to be essential to an adequate aesthetic theory. Some of the most commonly considered notions in philosophical aesthetics, for example, Hume's standard of taste and Kant's *sensus communis*, arose in part as answers to this problem. Similarly, the most familiar folk maxims concerning taste, such as "To each, his own" or "One man's treasure is another man's trash," are essentially rules of thumb for contending with conflicts of taste. By contrast, one familiar saying touching on aesthetic unreliability simply dismisses it: "I do not know anything about art but I know what I like."

It is easy to see why conflicts of taste have attracted more attention than aesthetic unreliability. Conflicts of taste are easily observed. The friction of cultural differences like race, class, and gender is manifest in them. In a back-handed way, conflicts of taste remind us that culture matters and, in the right measure, we relish this reminder. Disagreements over taste reach the heart of aesthetics: the objectivity of aesthetic judgments, the catholicity of aesthetic experience, and the very possibility of good and bad taste. Through such conflicts, we confront and learn to live with our differences.

Yet even as philosophers have wrung their hands about this conflict *between* selves, they

have remained oblivious of the confusion *within* selves.² Our personal aesthetic confusion is not so easily observed. We take our self-understanding of our aesthetic experience and taste as self-evident. However, the objectivity of judgments of taste is moot if we are unable to form them with much reliability. Aesthetic unreliability is a new problem for the discipline, requiring us to reconsider the very cognitive and affective bases of taste. In this essay, I want to make the case that we need to return to the question of taste, not as a point of interpersonal conflict, but instead as one of personal confusion. It is the difference between, on the one hand, determining the extent of the objectivity of aesthetic judgments and, on the other, the extent of their authenticity. Our problem is not so much the nature of *sensus communis* as the extent of *sensus ignarus*.

2. The Reliability of Self-Knowledge

Philosophers of mind have been reluctant to accord much credibility to anti-reliabilist positions.³ Arguments against aesthetic unreliability have emphasized: 1. a non-contingent relationship between consciousness and self-consciousness, that is, the impossibility of being unconscious of a conscious emotion or thought; 2. the assignment of difficulty in self-appraisal to the overall difficulty in understanding the world itself rather than to the process of self-appraisal; and 3. a shift in the grounds of authority from accuracy to deliberative or agential responsibility.

1. Focusing on the problem of affective self-knowledge, Christoph Jaeger observes that philosophers commonly accept that when subjects are in a state of mind, they strongly believe they are in that state of mind. It is in the nature of a mental state that, when we

² My first attempt at this problem was Kevin Melchionne, “On the Old Saw, ‘I Know Nothing About Art but I Know What I Like,’” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 68, No. 2, spring 2010), p. 131-141.

³ Among them are Richard Moran, *Authority and estrangement: an essay on self-knowledge* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); Tyler Burge, “Our entitlement to self knowledge,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 96 (1996), 91–116; John Heil, “Privileged access,” *Mind*, 97 (1988), 238–251; Fred Dretske, *Naturalizing the Mind* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1995); Sydney Shoemaker “Moore's

are in it, we know we are in it. This principle of self-intimation, as Jaeger calls it, is taken as “a requirement for minimally (epistemically) rational subjects.”⁴ However, Jaeger argues that it is internally inconsistent to admit first-person authority but reject the possibility of agnosticism about our own feelings.⁵ If we are necessarily taken as authorities about our feelings, then professions of ignorance about our feelings must also be admitted. With them, the possibility of affective ignorance is also admitted. Therefore, there is nothing logically impossible about aesthetic unreliability

2. It is sometimes argued that skepticism about self-knowledge is a false problem generated from a Cartesian theory of mind according to which objects are mistakenly held to appear to the mind’s eye as “inner objects,” Davidson’s famous “myth of the mental.”⁶ However, it is important to recognize that that we are speaking not so much about our beliefs about objects in the world as what Victoria McGeer calls our “cognitive and emotional situation.” What is at issue is, as she puts it, “an agent’s ability to use and understand the conceptual repertoire of folk psychology, particularly with regard to interpreting her experiences and, so, explaining and justifying her own reactions to, and behavior in, the world.”⁷

By contrast, reliabilism rests only on what Jaeger calls “positive affective introspection.” What is reliably registered is a simple valence or state of mind, that is to say, knowledge of whether we are happy, sad, bored or excited. One of the staunchest defenders of reliabilism, Sydney Shoemaker, clarifies the limits of the reliabilist position:

paradox and self-knowledge.” *Philosophical Studies*, 77 (1995), 211–228.

⁴ Christoph Jaeger, “Affective Ignorance,” *Erkenntnis*, March 2009, 4.

⁵ Jaeger, “Affective Ignorance,” 8.

⁶ Donald Davidson, “Knowing One’s Own Mind,” *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, 30 (1986): 441-58, here 453.

⁷ Victoria McGeer, “Is ‘Self-Knowledge’ An Empirical Problem? Renegotiating the Space of Philosophical Explanation,” *The Journal of Philosophy*, 93 (1996): 483-515, here 485.

The knowledge I have in mind is not, as you perhaps hoped, the difficult-to-get knowledge that arises from successfully following the Socratic injunction "Know thyself"; it is the humdrum kind of knowledge that is expressed in such remarks as "It itches," "I'm hungry," "I don't want to," and "I'm bored."⁸

To be sure, aesthetic responses often involve simple self-intimation. However, we typically expect a bit more of our aesthetic assessments. And, it is here that anti-reliabilism finds its footing. As Eric Schwitzgebel asks, "Does the apparent difficulty in going wrong in simple judgments of color and pain experiences in canonical conditions reflect the *general* security of our judgments about our ongoing stream of conscious experience, or are those cases exceptional, best cases?"⁹ Schwitzgebel suggests that the geography of reliabilism may consist only in familiar albeit scattered islands in wider seas of unreliability. Reliability is undermined not by "humdrum" mental states but rather by complex and ongoing consciousness. The difference between mere self-intimation of positive affective states and authentic self-knowledge is something like the difference between knowing one is unhappy and knowing the nature of that unhappiness and its causes: what does this unhappiness feel like right now? Why do I feel it? Was I happier in the past than I am now? As many a counselor will aver, mere positive affective intimation is rarely sufficient to contend with unhappiness. As with our emotional life, aesthetic life requires more of us than mere status reports. A degree of rumination is involved. For these experiences, we cannot dismiss skepticism about introspection (not to mention the empirical studies which support it) as a false problem.

3. Where philosophers have conceded introspective unreliability, they have been

⁸ Sydney Shoemaker, "Self-Knowledge and 'Inner Sense,'" *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 54 (1994), 2, 249-269, here 249.

⁹ Eric Schwitzgebel, "Self-Ignorance," forthcoming in Jee Loo Liu and John Perry, eds., *Consciousness and the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press). Version cited: www.faculty.ucr.edu/~eschwitz/SchwitzPapers/SelfUcs-101118.pdf, 5-3.

reluctant to accord it much significance. For Richard Moran, self-knowledge is authoritative because it is the result of the deliberative process. Although introspection may often be less than accurate and sometimes downright self-deceptive, it remains authoritative not because we always know our own thoughts best but because it is up to us to know it. As Moran puts it, it is “our business” to know: “It is not just the *report* that the person is author of, but also, in a central range of cases, the person can be seen as the author of the state of mind itself, in the sense of the being the person responsible for it.”¹⁰ The deliberative process makes us responsible for our self-ascriptions, even illusory ones. Fallibility has no bearing on authority: we are responsible for the results of our own deliberation.

However, Krista Lawlor has argued that even deliberation is not sufficient to secure authority. Lawlor argues that “one might be ready and able to deliberate about what one’s attitudes should be, and successfully deliberate oneself into a particular attitude, but one’s resulting self-ascription lacks authority nonetheless.”¹¹ For, as we will see, we often unconsciously abandon the results of deliberation in future action. And deliberation itself can undermine accurate self-ascription. Thus, our self-ascriptions built from deliberation lack authority because they do not play an authoritative role in will formation. It may well be “our business” to know our preferences but, when it comes to complex self-ascriptions like aesthetic preferences, what we claim to prefer has little relation to what we do.

As an alternative, Lawlor roots authority in agency, in what we end up doing. On this view, self-ascriptions may be considered reliable when they are confirmed by what we do. Lawlor is close to the consensus of social psychologists who, as we will now see, find self-ascription most reliable when it conforms to behavior. When it does not

¹⁰ Richard Moran, “The authority of self-consciousness,” *Philosophical Topics*, 26 (1999), 184.

¹¹ Krista Lawlor, “Elusive reasons: a problem for first-person authority.” *Philosophical Psychology*, 16 (2003), 4, 554.

conform to behavior, it is reasonable to doubt its authenticity.

3. The Paradox of Introspection

Psychological studies of consciousness have long been hampered by what Jonathan Schooler calls the “paradox of introspection,” namely that “experience is subjectively self-evident but empirically inscrutable.”¹² Despite the introspective sense of certainty, it has been difficult to empirically determine if introspective reports are accurate. Nevertheless, individuals typically have high confidence in their self-appraisals.

However, cognitive and social psychologists have slowly chipped away at what Timothy Wilson calls the *illusion of authenticity*.¹³ In *Strangers to Ourselves*, Wilson synthesizes a range of empirical research to present a general case against self-knowledge, reinforcing the findings of his seminal article on the issue from 1977.¹⁴ In recent years, a number of empirical protocols have enhanced the acceptability of empirical research on introspection.¹⁵ Methodologically, researchers must rely on the “triangulation” of introspective reports with physiological and behavioral evidence. In this spirit, they have provided a steady diet of studies that reinforce the plausibility of what Daniel Haybron calls *affective ignorance*¹⁶ or what John Lambie and Anthony Marcel call *emotion unawareness*¹⁷ or Eric Schwitzgebel *introspective fallibilism*.¹⁸ Even as they argue for

¹² Jonathan W. Schooler and Charles A. Schreiber, “Experience, Meta-consciousness, and the Paradox of Introspection,” *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 11 (2004), 7–8, 2.

¹³ Timothy D. Wilson, *Strangers to Ourselves: Discovering the Adaptive Unconscious* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

¹⁴ R. E. Nisbett and T. D. Wilson, “Telling more than we can know: verbal reports on mental processes.” *Psychological Review*, 8 (1977), 231–259.

¹⁵ For an account of these advances, see Schooler and Schreiber, “Experience, Meta-consciousness, and the Paradox of Introspection,” 17–39; and Anthony I. Jack and Andreas Roepstorff, “Why Trust the Subject?” *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 10 (2003), 9–10, v–xx.

¹⁶ Daniel M. Haybron, “Do We Know How Happy We Are?: On Some Limits of Affective Introspection and Recall,” *NOUS*, 41 (2007), 394–428.

¹⁷ J. A. Lambie and A. J. Marcel, “Consciousness and the Varieties of Emotion Experience: A Theoretical Framework,” *Psychological Review* 109 (2002), 219–259.

the use of introspection under rigorous methodological conditions, A.I. Jack and Andreas Roepstorff acknowledge the discontinuities between consciousness and introspection.

They write that “patterns of behavior, neural processes, and experience exist as distinct facets of the mental.”¹⁹ Jonathan Schooler has argued that the process of introspectively representing mental content invites the possibility of error or distortion.²⁰ For Schooler, such errors are more than glitches in research programs; they are part and parcel of everyday life, including, by implication, aesthetic life.²¹

Schooler’s balanced approach seeks the strengths and weaknesses of introspection under different conditions. The main problem with introspection for Schooler is that when we try to characterize an experience, we risk distorting it. Schooler discusses the conditions where introspection proves most vulnerable, and he identifies distortions in the weighting of parts of experience (the peak/end effect), recollection with verbalization (verbal overshadowing), and hedonic appraisal as three situations where introspection is weakest.

4. Peak/End Effect

One of the most familiar forms of introspective illusion is the peak/end effect. Our knowledge of prior experiences is often distorted by biases of recollection. Schooler writes that introspective reports “fail to fully reflect what was actually experienced

See also A. J. Marcel, ‘Slippage in the unity of consciousness,’ in *Experimental and Theoretical Studies of Consciousness*, ed. G.R. Block and J. Marsh (Chichester: Wiley, 1993).

¹⁸ Eric Schwitzgebel, “The Unreliability of Naive Introspection,” *Philosophical Review*, 117 (2008), 2, 245-273.

¹⁹ Jack and Roepstorff, “Why Trust the Subject?” viii. See also Jack and Roepstorff, “The ‘measurement problem’ for experience: Damaging flaw or intriguing puzzle?” *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 6 (2002), 372–4. There is a response from Schooler, “Establishing a legitimate relationship with introspection: Response to Jack and Roepstorff,” *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 6 (2002), 372–3. Schooler and Schreiber have a list of protocol in “Experience, Meta-consciousness, and the Paradox of Introspection,” 22.

²⁰ Jonathan W. Schooler, “Re-representing consciousness: Dissociations between consciousness and meta-consciousness,” *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 6 (2002), 339–44.

²¹ Schooler and Schreiber, “Experience, Meta-consciousness, and the Paradox of Introspection,” 22.

moment-by-moment (even when the episode is brief and the introspection occurs immediately after the experience ends).”²² In work exploring recollections of annoying noises and induced pain, hedonic appraisals rarely capture the overall experience of an episode. Instead, as Schooler puts it, “individuals’ retrospective evaluations overemphasize the pleasure or discomfort at the episode’s most extreme moment and at its ending, the peak and the end. Other moments have little effect on global hedonic assessments.”²³ Taste inevitably involves reflection and recollection of prior experience. As we move to each successive work of art, we produce comparisons that are fueled by memory and introspection, recollections of work and experiences, prior measurements. The peak/end effect suggests that there are ways in which retrospective, comparative assessments of works of art, crucial to taste formation, are distorted.

5. Verbal overshadowing

Schooler acknowledges that recently recollected visual imagery can be quite accurate. However, it is less accurate when accompanied by a verbal overlay. In a widely replicated study, subjects viewed pictures of faces.²⁴ Later, they were asked to recall the faces, with one group verbally describing them in detail. Researchers found that when

²² Schooler and Schreiber, “Experience, Meta-consciousness, and the Paradox of Introspection,” 29.

²³ Schooler and Schreiber, “Experience, Meta-consciousness, and the Paradox of Introspection,” 29. See also B. L. Fredrickson and D. Kahneman, “Duration neglect in retrospective evaluations of affective episodes,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 65 (1993), 45–55; D. A. Redelmeier and D. Kahneman, “Patients’ memories of painful medical treatments: Real-time and retrospective evaluations of two minimally invasive procedures,” *Pain*, 66 (1996), 3–8. D. Ariely, “Combining experiences over time: The effects of duration, intensity changes and on-line measurements on retrospective pain evaluations,” *Journal of Behavioral Decision-Making*, 11 (1998), 19–45; C. A. Schreiber and D. Kahneman, “Determinants of the remembered utility of aversive sounds,” *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 129 (2000), 27–42.; D. Ariely and G. Loewenstein, “When does duration matter in judgment and decision making?” *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 129 (2000), 508–23.

²⁴ J. W. Schooler and T. Y. Engstler-Schooler, “Verbal overshadowing of visual memories: Some things are better left unsaid,” *Cognitive Psychology*, 17 (1990), 36–71.

subjects are asked to provide verbal descriptions, they are much more likely to misremember. The cross-over between the verbal and the visual seems to create the cognitive difficulty. The very process of translating non-verbal introspection into words is disruptive. In attempting to verbally recall features of an object, our memory of other aspects is interfered with. The verbal overlay tends to result in an over-emphasis of some features and the simplification of others. Schooler speculates that verbalization “breaks apart” the image in ways that are difficult to later reassemble: “cognitive operations engaged in during verbalization dampen the activation of brain regions associated with critical non-verbal operations.”²⁵

6. Hedonic Self-Appraisal

Estimations of our satisfactions are essential to the self-understanding of taste. Relying on methodological triangulation, researchers can cross-check self-appraisals of preferences and pleasures with behavior. When our appraisals correspond with our behavior, researchers have reason to trust their reliability and grant them authority. If we report liking something and move on to buy it or use it in a way that optimizes satisfaction, our report may be considered reliable. Here, it is the combination of activities that matters. Hedonic self-appraisals become doubtful when they do not correlate with behavior.

Schooler finds that appraisals are “often closely calibrated with external events, related behaviours, and physiological responses.”²⁶ However, when subjects are asked to reflect on experience, reliability decreases. In an experiment involving assessments of jam, Wilson and Schooler compared preferences, asking one group for an explanation for their

²⁵ J. W. Schooler, “Verbalization produces a transfer inappropriate processing shift,” *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, 16 (2002), 989–997. For an overview of research, C. A. Meissner, “Applied aspects of the instructional bias effect in verbal overshadowing,” *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, 16 (2002), 911–28.

²⁶ Schooler and Schreiber, “Experience, Meta-consciousness, and the Paradox of Introspection,” p. 28.

preference.²⁷ Preferences for both groups matched the preferences of experts. But, when asked for reasons for their preferences, the explainers changed their preferences with greater frequency. Their new preferences diverged further from expert opinion than their initial responses. In a study with still greater resemblance to a conventional aesthetic situation, subjects were exposed to art posters and asked for preferences, again having one group also provide reasons for their preferences. Subjects were allowed to select and take home the poster that they preferred.²⁸ Individuals who were asked for reasons for preferences were less likely later to hang their poster on their walls at home than those who were not asked to analyze their feelings. The findings suggest that, when asked for reasons, our reports of our preferences are more likely to vacillate, depart from expert opinion, and be abandoned later. In all, preferences accompanied by reasons are less likely to be authentic. We choose our jam, wine, or poster in accordance with one train of thought; then, with another, we eat, drink, and decorate.

Similar findings run throughout the literature on repression, where subjects regularly adhere to self-ascriptions running counter to observable behavior.²⁹ These studies identify “top-down influences,” among them conceptual or normative frameworks that limit our capacity to acknowledge our real responses. Top-down influences define our experience independently of what experimental observers take as our real responses. Taste is especially vulnerable to top-down influence.

²⁷ T.D. Wilson and J.W. Schooler, “Thinking too much: Introspection can reduce the quality of preferences and decisions,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 60 (1991), 181–192.

²⁸ T.D. Wilson, D. J. Lisle, J. W. Schooler, S.D. Hodges, K.J. Klaaren, and S. J. LaFleur, “Introspecting reasons can reduce post-choice satisfaction,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 19 (1993), 331–339. For a similar study using wine, see Joseph M. Melcher and Jonathan W. Schooler, “The misremembrance of wines past: Verbal and perceptual expertise differentially mediate verbal overshadowing of taste memory,” *Journal of Memory and Language*, 35 (1996), 231–245.

²⁹ For instance, Anthony G. Greenwald, “Self-Knowledge and Self-Deception: Further Consideration,” in *The Mythomanias: The Nature of Deception and Self-Deception*, Ed. Michael S. Myslobodsky (Erlbaum, 1997), 51–71. See also Lambie and Marcel, “Consciousness and the Varieties of Emotion Experience.”

Now, these studies may strike some readers as too simplistic to warrant application to our engagement with art. Works of art, it may be argued, give rise to far more complex responses than do jams or even wines. It might even be argued that viewing fine art posters in an experimental setting has little to do with our real encounters with fine art. Yet assuming the greater complexity of real life aesthetic situations scarcely allows us to increase confidence in our responses. Real works of art introduce complex art historical, cultural, intentional, and interpretive contexts, requiring us to appraise our responses under a variety of rubrics. The difficulties of hedonic appraisal only increase in real life aesthetic situations.

7. Reasons for Preferences

Deliberation and discourse do not in fact generate more reliable self-appraisals. The phenomena of peak/end effect, verbal overshadowing, and hedonic misappraisal suggest that in situations where aesthetic experience is accompanied by debate and discussion, the reliability of our knowledge of the experience decreases, calling into question the very discourse that is generated by the work of art. For this reason, critical discourse may be less reliable as a guide to our experience than we have supposed.

These findings run counter to some of the most fundamental convictions of aestheticians and other arts professionals. Through contemplation, deliberation, and discourse, we are expected to discern what in a given object causes our response. In aesthetics no less than other philosophical disciplines, we honor the roles played by contemplation, reflection, and debate in our assessments. Opinions are considered stronger for having survived scrutiny. Revision is a healthy component of the search for truth. Criticism is thought to enhance our experience of art. Judgments are held to be authoritative to the extent that they are the product of deliberation.

Artists make things that inspire feelings of beauty or satisfaction. Appreciating art is

thought to require not just liking the right things; it is to know—or at least, attempt to know—what makes them right. When I ask myself why I like the Cézanne or why I find the Cézanne beautiful, I am not asking for an argument. I am asking for an explanation for a mental state, an aesthetic experience. In principle, it is the work, not the reason, that causes the experience. I do not like Cézanne because his use of color happens to be a good reason for liking a painting. Rather, Cézanne’s use of color explains *why* I like his paintings, that is, why I have the feeling of pleasure or satisfaction when I look at the Cézanne.

But, is this something I can know with reliability? The theory of taste is faced with the daunting task of explaining why commonplace expressions like “I like Cézanne because of his use of color” or “Cézanne’s *Madame Cézanne in a Red Armchair* is beautiful because of the color” can be reliable statements. Now, the statement, “I like *Madame Cézanne in a Red Armchair* because of the *blue* armchair” is obviously false. Yet, an accurate color ascription to the armchair does not necessarily make the statement true. It is possible that I appeal to a prominent feature of the object such as the red armchair only because of its prominence. But do I know that this feature of the object is also the cause of my pleasure? Consider the art historical theory about Cézanne, namely, that his special place in our pantheon rests on his innovative use of color. I am acquainted with this theory and speculate that the use of color must have a certain aesthetic force, a certain impact on a viewer like me. It is possible that, from this theory and not from any aesthetic rumination, I infer that my satisfaction with the Cézanne stems from his use of color. In this light, art history and art theory are nothing more than very specialized kinds of folk psychology. What makes these folk psychologies persuasive? We lack any significant empirical ground for judging the adequacy of these theories for aesthetic experience. To the extent that they are sound, mastery of them is far from widespread. In all, it is far more difficult to attribute my satisfaction with the Cézanne to the red armchair than our traditions of criticism and education let on.

Rumination produces its own discoveries.³⁰ Those discoveries are not necessarily descriptive of mental states. When asked for reasons, we are more likely to change our mind than when unasked. Often, reasons themselves have their more or less appealing qualities. We sometimes shift about in our preferences as we seek those that best match the most attractive reasons. Higher order deliberations are especially vulnerable to distortion of the weights given to competing reasons.³¹ As advertisers have long known, the search for status through taste can be helped along by distinctive albeit arbitrary reasons.³² Nor must we be motivated by social climbing when we misattribute our experience. Given the difficulties of self-attribution, especially the distracting role of what Nisbett and Wilson call “noninfluential stimuli,” *whatever* comes to mind when we look for reasons has a chance to serve as a reason.³³ As Krista Lawlor writes, “a thought that comes to mind in the course of what one understands to be a search for reasons is taken to be a reason, simply because it occurs in the context of a search for reasons.”³⁴ In these ways, the search for reasons distorts our understanding of our prior experience. The more complicated the reason-giving process, the more likely it is to generate confusion and error.

³⁰ M. G. Millar and A. Tesser, “The effects of affective–cognitive consistency and thought on the attitude–behavior relation,” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 25 (1989), 189–202; T.D. Wilson, J. A. Bybee, D. S. Dunn, D. B. Hyman, and J. A. Rotonda, “Effects of analyzing reasons on attitude behavior consistency. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 47 (1984), 5–16; T. D. Wilson, D. Kraft and D. S. Dunn, “The disruptive effects of explaining attitudes: the moderating effect of knowledge about the attitude object,” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 25 (1989), 379–400; T. D. Wilson and S. Hodges, “Effects of analyzing reasons on attitude change: the moderating role of attitude accessibility,” *Social Cognition*, 11 (1994), 353–366.

³¹ Ap Dijksterhuis, “Think Different: The Merits of Unconscious Thought in Preference Development and Decision Making,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 87 (2004), 5, 586–598 and J. A. Bargh and M. J. Ferguson, “Beyond behaviorism: on the automaticity of higher mental processes,” *Psychological Bulletin*, 126 (2000), 925–945.

³² Itamar Simonson and Stephen W. Nowlis, “The Role of Explanations and Need for Uniqueness in Consumer Decision Making: Unconventional Choices Based on Reasons,” *Journal of Consumer Research*, 27 (2000), 49–68.

³³ Nisbett and Wilson “Telling more than we can know.”

³⁴ Lawlor “Elusive reasons,” 558.

8. Reason-Shopping and the Art Worlds

If aesthetic experience is in fact unreliable, then it is not surprising that descriptions can be easily mistaken, confused, and replaced. Reason-shopping may account for some part of the intellectualism in the more avant-gard corners of the art world, such as art schools, niche publications, and alternative venues. The pretentiousness of some of the art encountered in these milieus may be due to an overemphasis on the critical activity that accompanies and frames the work. Much contemporary creativity, at least in its most avant-garde manifestations, is no more than a search for interesting reasons. For, reasons have their own beauty, which is easily confused with the works themselves. At times, what art world insiders are unwittingly experiencing are the reasons rather than the works themselves. If only to impart to their vetting process a sense of rigor and purpose, insiders are more likely than casual art-goers to form their taste around the reasons rather than the works themselves. With reason-consumption replacing genuine aesthetic experience, insiders end up with conceptually exotic but experientially thin works of art. When outsiders later encounter the very same work of art and are dumbfounded by its extreme austerity or perversity, what they miss is that admirers are not so much consuming this austerity or perversity as the reasons that are attached to it. It is at this point that a misguided “art education” enters to feed reasons to the outsiders, consolidating the negative feedback loop which is today’s contemporary art world.

9. Implications for Art Institutions

Nearly all of modern art education presses upon us the crucial difference between merely liking great artists and knowing what makes these artists great, that is, what makes them have their effect on us. Certain habits of discourse—reviews, theory, crit sessions, docent tours, and now blogging—are thought to offer us special opportunities to have deeper experiences and, by implication, better taste. Art historians, critics, curators, and the artists themselves are eager to provide us with reasons for our experience. Entire institutions—museums, schools, publications—are built upon the production of reasons.

However, empirical research on self-appraisal suggests that the institutions and the discursive habits they favor may not really support the growth and refinement of aesthetic experience or at least not in the ways we think. Our cultural institutions may be simply the reification of our illusions about attribution, working more in the manner of a placebo effect than as efficacious practice. By encouraging us to pay *some* kind of attention, criticism and education accidentally lead us often enough to pay a rewarding kind of attention.

If introspection is unreliable, accounts of the effects that works of art have on us may be less useful than ordinarily assumed. Admittedly, this is a far reaching conclusion, but it may capture something of what is wrong with today's art institutions. Speculatively, a certain widely observed cultural demoralization, a stand-off between the so-called philistines and snobs, may be exacerbated more by the discursive habits of insiders than by the stubborn ignorance of outsiders.

Next Steps for Aesthetics

Reading in philosophical aesthetics, one is left with the impression that our aesthetic lives are made up of tranquil satisfactions, with the occasional avant-garde head-scratcher thrown in for good measure. We contemplate, reflect, and debate the aesthetic qualities of works of art, aided by well-ordered art institutions and insightful art critics. And, happily, our taste, good or bad, is thus formed. From academic aesthetics, one would not be able to glean that our aesthetic experience may be at times marked by boredom, ambivalence, and confusion. On closer inspection, we do not have the kind of aesthetic life long assumed by philosophers. Taste is far more anarchic, protean, ambivalent, underdetermined, and confused than philosophers have allowed. It is marked by pretending, exaggerating, vacillating, conforming, wishful thinking, and pure invention. We often lack coherence among judgments and continuity between what we experience and what we take as our taste. Often, it is more like Cohen's "concatenation of atomistic

expressions.” Subjects have a contingent relationship to their self-appraisals, including those involving aesthetic experience. Yet the theory of taste has little to say about this side of our aesthetic lives. It is as if the concept of virtue had developed in moral theory without any consideration of vice, or truth in epistemology without any conception of bias.

If this view of aesthetic experience is correct, what are its implications for the theory of taste? A better theory of taste may concede that our taste is probably far more disconnected from our real moment-to-moment aesthetic experience than we have assumed. To the extent that aesthetic deliberation is successful, our attributions may be chalked up to a variety of behavioral and cognitive processes, in addition to or instead of the contemplating, beholding, or attending emphasized by conventional models of aesthetic experience. For instance, blind trial-and-error, unconscious incubation, and inference from bodily sensation may play influential roles. Inferences from theory (both folk and academic theory) probably play a considerable role in attribution, leaving us heavily reliant on the quality of these theories, which is not a promising prospect.

In order to understand taste, we need to see that it plays a restrictive role in our aesthetic lives rather than just an enabling one. Often taste is commissive; we adjust our self-appraisals in order to fit our taste, inhibiting our capacity to grasp what McGeer calls our “emotional and cognitive situation.”³⁵ A commissive notion of taste explains how taste may be thought of as authoritative, even when it is “top-down” and disconnected from experience. Over time, our accounts of our experience end up as “true” because we make those attributions work in the ongoing elaboration of our taste. We create for ourselves the experiences which live up to the taste we want to have. In tailoring our responses to our taste, we engage in a form of self-creation through taste.³⁶ Yet there are surely limits to the docility of experience before taste. After all, our aesthetic lives are built around

³⁵ McGeer, “Is ‘Self-Knowledge’ An Empirical Problem?” 485.

³⁶ For instance, Luc Bovens, “Sour Grapes and Character Planning,” *Journal of*

experience. Without experience, it would be difficult to imagine what an aesthetic life would be.³⁷

Whereas we can imagine a purely moral or cognitive being lacking experience, we can not imagine such an aesthetic being. The aesthetic self has a fundamentally different relationship to experience. It remains to be seen just where the point of equilibrium between commissive taste and mindful experience rests. Wherever it is, we can call this point *well-formed taste*. Well-formed taste pertains to the basis of taste in experience, the extent to which and ways in which taste must be based in aesthetic experience: entirely or not at all or somewhere in between.

The job for aestheticians is to determine what counts as well-formed taste under the more complicated description of aesthetic experience advanced here. How do we distinguish authentic and inauthentic aesthetic judgment? Can my taste be well-formed when it runs counter to my experience? How much or what kind of variance is permitted? How does taste really happen? What is aesthetic life really like?

With these questions, aesthetics has never been more valuable to the various art worlds. However, the role for aestheticians may lie less in lending philosophical weight to the questions of particular disciplines than in bringing to these disciplines a genuine knowledge of what is known about how human beings respond to works of art. To play that role, aestheticians will have to return to the basic questions of aesthetics.

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Philosophy, 84 (1992), 2, 57-78.

³⁷ For instance, Robert Hopkins, "How to Form Aesthetic Belief: Interpreting the Acquaintance Principle," *Postgraduate Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 3, No. 3, December 2006.