

# Art as a Shelter from Science

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*In our life with science, we trust experts; we form judgments by inference from past evidence. We conduct ourselves very differently in the aesthetic domain. We avoid deferring to aesthetic experts. We form our judgments through direct perception of particulars, rather than through inference. Why the difference? I suggest that we avoid aesthetic testimony and aesthetic inference, not because they're unusable, but because we have adopted social norms to avoid them. Aesthetic appreciation turns out to be something like a game. We have laid down certain rules and restrictions in order to shape a kind of activity we cherish. And aesthetic properties turn out to be a kind of social construct. Much like the goal of a game, they are constituted in part by our obedience to certain rules. The norms of aesthetic life are different from those of science, because our purposes are different. We engage in science to get the right answers; we engage in aesthetic appreciation to be engaged in the activity of the sensuous perception of particulars. Our aesthetic practices are a constructed shelter from science, which restores to us a small domain where we may once again engage, for our own selves, in the sensuous perception of particulars.*

We conduct ourselves differently in our aesthetic lives. With science, we rely on experts. We trust doctors, engineers, and scientists. We acquire much of our knowledge through expert testimony. I trust my doctor about what pills to take; I trust mechanics about whether this plane is safe. We also trust others for many of our ordinary, day-to-day beliefs. I believe that there was a major storm in Minnesota because the newspaper told me so; I believe that my kid is sick because my spouse just texted me about it.

But things are quite different in our aesthetic lives. We don't defer to aesthetic experts in the same way. It seems wrong to acquire your aesthetic judgments by deferring to an art critic about which paintings are elegant, boring, or profoundly soul-shaking. Our aesthetic lives seem much more independent. We may take recommendations about movie to see or let somebody point out a particular detail in a painting. But when it comes to pronouncing our aesthetic judgments – that this Ozu film is achingly bittersweet, or that this Elizabeth Bishop poem has a deliciously ambiguous level of irony – we are each supposed to judge for ourselves.

The methodologies for inquiry, too, are quite distinctive in aesthetics. Compare it with science. Science looks for reliable patterns, for regularities in the structure of the world. Science tries to generalize from past evidence to make future predictions. But we seem to avoid such methods in aesthetic appreciation. We don't usually seek reliable patterns to ground conclusive generalizations. We may, again, employ inference from past evidence to figure out what novel to read or which restaurant to try, but we don't use such inference to issue aesthetic judgments of those novel and restaurants. Instead, we seem to be trying to judge each aesthetic object on its own terms.

Where does this difference come from? The tightly structured and highly collective nature of scientific work seems to arise from our desire to actually get things right. We use experts and inferential reasoning in science in order to cope with the vast, sprawling nature of world. Our separate minds just aren't large enough to do it on our own. So scientists create a vast store of publicly accessible data, and then use this collective database to make accurate predictions. This methodology requires a radical degree of trust.<sup>1</sup> Scientific conclusions are based on long chains of reasoning, which cross different specialties. Engineers rely on chemists, who in turn rely upon statisticians and molecular physicists, and on and on. And much of this involves trusting others beyond one's ability to verify. A typical doctor cannot vet, for themselves, all the chemistry, statistics, and biological research on which they rely. The social practice of science is oriented towards epistemic efficiency, which drives us towards epistemic dependence. Scientific conclusions are network conclusions.

And because we need to interlink the various fields, we need ways of exporting information from one specialized field to another. Medical and biological research gets summed up into diagnostic decision procedures for doctors. Decades of fine-grained statistical work by statisticians gets packaged up into a usable set of formulas for scientists and engineers in other fields. And the export procedure usually involves creating general principles. Physicists run experiments and create principles with law-like form — like the law of gravity — which get exported and used by other branches of science and engineering.<sup>2</sup>

Here's another way to put it: Science often *categorizes* objects, and then applies *principles* based on that categorization in order to leverage the power of past observation. This permits us to aggregate past observations and formulate general

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<sup>1</sup> The literature on trust and epistemic efforts is long and rich. Highlights include Baier (1986), Jones (2012), and Hawley (2014). I have offered an overview of the field, and my own take, in Nguyen (2023).

<sup>2</sup> For a classic starting point on expert deference in the sciences, see Hardwig (1985). My own understanding has been deeply influenced by Millgram (2015), and his characterization of "hyperspecialization" as the dominant feature of contemporary epistemic life. Millgram's account emphasizes the need for creating portable, exportable procedures to cross disciplines — and the dangers of exporting. For my discussion of Millgram on the relationship between different fields of hyperspecialized experts, see Nguyen (2018). The emphasis on the public database is from Strevens (2020).

principles. When my illness has been categorized as pneumonia, a doctor can make a recommendation. That recommendation is based on inference from past research data, collected from other instances which have been categorized as pneumonia. Science achieves epistemic efficiency through a collective effort of data-gathering, which itself requires a process of abstraction and generalization.<sup>3</sup>

But in our aesthetic life, we seem committed to a method of conversation and a method of practice that is antithetical to the efficiencies of science. According to many observers of aesthetic life, we seem to think it somehow improper to get to aesthetic judgments in certain ways. We are not supposed to take an expert's word for it about aesthetic matters. Again: we may take experts suggestions about what to try or what to look at, but we don't simply adopt their judgments as final. You are not supposed to conclude that Wu Tang Clan's *Enter the Wu Tang (36 Chambers)* is the wondrous high-point of the nineties rap just based on my say-so — no matter how much you trust me. And we are not supposed to get our aesthetic judgments via inference. I am supposed to conclude that the Emily Dickinson's poem "The Spider Holds a Silver Ball" is a strange, thorny masterwork only if I have actually read that particular poem. I am not supposed to so conclude by inferring from past evidence — like that the hundreds of other Dickinson poems I have read were strange and thorny masterworks. I may suspect it likely, based on inference, but I refrain from more conclusive declarations. But science permits something stronger: we can use inference to come to more full-throated conclusions. It seems intuitive, for at least some of us, that our aesthetic inquiries should not follow a strictly scientific approach.

Suppose that these intuitions are right and reflect something really distinctive about aesthetic life. What might explain this profound asymmetry between aesthetic life and the other parts of life? Perhaps it is a metaphysical matter. Perhaps aesthetic properties are essentially different kinds of things from scientific properties. We might think, for example, that aesthetic properties were essentially subjective properties — that your saying "It's beautiful" is an expression of your felt response of beauty. Under such a theory, it would be improper to make the aesthetic claim without having felt the phenomena for yourself. Or perhaps it is an epistemic matter. Perhaps real aesthetic experts are too hard for us to reliably identify; perhaps the true aesthetic rules are beyond our ability to grasp.<sup>4</sup>

I wish to propose an alternate explanation. We need not think that aesthetic properties are metaphysically or epistemically peculiar in a way that makes them essentially unknowable via testimony or inference. We might be perfectly justified, epistemically speaking, in coming to know that something was beautiful through

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<sup>3</sup> I draw my picture here significantly from Strevens (2020), which I will discuss in more detail shortly.

<sup>4</sup> This conversation here is long and twisty. Some inroads include Sibley (1959), Mothersill (1984), Hopkins (2001, 2011), Budd (2003), Todd (2004), Meskin (2004), Cavendon-Taylor (2017), and Lord (2019). This is only the beginning of a bibliography, for a more complete discussion please see Nguyen (2017, 2019a).

testimony or predicting what would be awesome action movies with some advanced machine-learning network. A scientific approach could, in fact, get us accurate aesthetic judgments. And, in some aesthetic contexts, we actually do take a scientific approach – like when we follow a “perfect” recipe, guaranteed to succeed. I claim, not that the scientific approach cannot work in aesthetics, but that *we have good reason to sometimes avoid it*. We avoid it because our *purpose* in aesthetic appreciation is different from our purpose in scientific life. We do not engage in aesthetic appreciation to get to the correct answer as efficiently as possible. We want, instead, to be *engaged in the activity of perceiving and judging for ourselves*. Scientific activity is performed for the outcome: reliable judgments about the world. Aesthetic activity is performed for the sake of our engagement in the *process of judging*, rather than for the outcome of getting the right judgments.

The practice of aesthetic appreciation turns out to be something like a game. We set up certain rules that shape a practice, not because it is the most efficient way to get to the truth, but because following those rules shapes a valuable activity of engagement. The way we conduct our aesthetic lives turns out to be a local and contingent affair — a social artifact. That constructed social practice is valuable because it supports a particularly cherished mode of activity: one of highly autonomous and self-directed perception and engagement. And the practice of aesthetic appreciation may be even more precious to us of late, because our life with science diminishes our intellectual autonomy.

Science gives us the most efficient pathway to true beliefs, but there is a price. Given the vast sprawl of the sciences, we who believe in science must surrender a significant portion of our intellectual autonomy and cognitive independence. We must not look for ourselves, but instead trust the science. We must trust experts. We must trust principles far outside our understanding, based on vast data-sets far beyond our grasp. We must subsume our own particular sensuous perceptions to the abstract epistemic outputs of the scientific engine. Aesthetic appreciation is a constructed practice in which we can forego such epistemic dependence, so that we may restore to ourselves, in a limited venue, the joys that the scientific life has stripped from us: the joys of being soaked in sensuous particulars, and of seeing, feeling, and thinking for ourselves.

### **Why avoid inferences in aesthetic judgment?**

We have seen two features of our aesthetic practice that seem particularly distinctive from scientific practice. They are that:

1. We seem to avoid forming aesthetic judgments from *aesthetic testimony*.
2. We seem to avoid forming aesthetic judgments using *aesthetic inference*.

In previous work, I have analyzed our avoidance of aesthetic testimony. Others have claimed that aesthetic properties are, by their nature, unknowable through testimony. I argued otherwise. It is, in fact, entirely possible to arrive at accurate aesthetic judgments through deference to expert testimony. Rather, we sometimes choose to avoid using testimony. This avoidance, I suggested, is part of a constructed social practice – one which is designed to support the valuable *process* of aesthetic engagement. We avoid testimony because we want to look, interpret, feel, and judge for ourselves (Nguyen, 2019a). My goal here is to first extend my analysis to aesthetic inferences, and then to suggest a bigger picture.

Let's begin with aesthetic inference. Many of us seem to share the same intuition: that it is wrong to arrive at our aesthetic judgments through inference. Suppose you are at a museum exhibition and see forty late Monet waterlily paintings. They are all moody and deeply full of some intense, strange, vibrating melancholy. Somebody asks you about the forty-first painting in the exhibition — *Reflections of Clouds on the Water-Lily Pond* — which you have not yet seen. You reply: "It's fantastic! *Reflections* is so melancholic and moody, so deeply felt." Something seems off here. Your judgment arises, not from a direct experience of that particular painting, but via an inference from past experience. Inference may give me a reason to suspect the next painting is fantastic, to go and look for myself, but I am not supposed to conclude, with full force, that the next painting is fantastic without direct experience. Making conclusive judgments through inference seems entirely legitimate in empirical and scientific judgment, but seems quite strange in this appreciative context. (Note that this is a different phenomenon from our avoidance of aesthetic testimony. In the Monet case, I am not deferring to another's testimony; I am making an inference based on my own past observations. What seems strange here is my use of inference, not my use of testimony.<sup>5</sup>)

Why might we avoid inferential reasoning in aesthetics? According to Frank Sibley (1959), it is because aesthetic judgments are based on direct perceptions. We don't infer that something is blue, we simply see it as blue. Similarly, we don't infer that something is graceful, elegant, or funny — we simply perceive those qualities directly.

Sibley's position is usually taken to be the classic statement of *non-inferentialism* about aesthetic judgment. As Sibley puts it, there are no non-aesthetic features that serve as regular conditions for applying an aesthetic concept (1959, 424).<sup>6</sup> There

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<sup>5</sup> These ideas are from Hopkins (2011).

<sup>6</sup> Sibley's text is also taken as a starting point for a discussion about the acquaintance principle — that is, the principle that aesthetic judgments can only proceed from direct perception. The acquaintance principle and non-inferentialism are related, but ultimately distinctive principles. I do not have the space to fully explore the complexities here, but a brief note for anybody familiar with the acquaintance principle literature: it is possible to satisfy the acquaintance principle (under its standard formulations) and be using inferences simultaneously. For instance, I directly experience a painting, I see its non-aesthetic qualities (it is bright blue) and then I make judgments about its aesthetic properties and overall aesthetic success based on inference via a general principle. ("All

are no rules that tell you, for example, that paintings with more than 60% straight lines are harmonious and uplifting. Instead, aesthetic judgment seems to proceed from *direct aesthetic perception*. We seem to immediately perceive aesthetic properties like grace, elegance, clumsiness, or funniness. But aesthetic perception is not like ordinary, say, color perception. Aesthetic perception, in Sibley's (1959) classic formulation, demands taste and trained judgment. It takes experience with jazz and developed sensitivity to hear the deliciously thorny texture of a Thelonious Monk solo.

As Dorsch puts it, Sibley's account depends on distinguishing *lower-level* non-aesthetic properties from *higher level* aesthetic properties. Lower-level properties are things such as, say, perceiving that this straight line intersects with that curve, and that the straight line is dark red. Higher-level properties are things like grace, elegance, funniness, or clumsiness. Perceiving lower-level properties doesn't require sensitivity or special discernment, but perceiving higher level aesthetic properties does. Non-inferentialism holds that there are no rules of inference that let us deduce, from the existence of certain lower-level non-aesthetic properties, the existence of certain higher-level aesthetic properties (Dorsch 2013, 663-5). There is no usable rule that, say, a rapper putting all their rhymes on the downbeat will result in a juicy flow.

Mary Mothersill (1984) notes that we don't find such rules of aesthetic inference in our own phenomenology of aesthetic judgment. It doesn't feel to us like we are consciously reasoning our way to aesthetic properties, via the application of rules of inference to non-aesthetic properties. To us, it feels like we grasp the presence of aesthetic properties directly. We just see the hysterical awkwardness of Adam Sandler's performance, or hear the gut-satisfying punch of Cardi B's flow. And this observation is backed up, says Mothersill, by the long history of art theorists trying to find such rules of inference and failing. (Let me also add to Mothersill's observations: I think we would also be *disappointed* if we did find such rules of inference.)

But this solution creates a significant puzzle. Elsewhere in cognitive life, non-inferential judgments don't admit of rational support. There's nothing I can really say, in an ordinary circumstance, to back up my judgment that this wall is blue.<sup>7</sup> I just see that it is blue immediately. That seems to be the end of the line, as far as justifications of this particular claim go. I might be able to give you reasons why I can trust my vision in general, and you might be able to give me reasons why I should doubt it. But suppose we both agree that my perceptual faculties work. There is little more I can say to back up my claim of blueness, and little you can

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bright blue paintings are cheerful, therefore this is cheerful.") See Hopkins (2011) and Nguyen (2019a) for a more complete discussion.

<sup>7</sup> I may back up my judgment that it is blue via somebody's else's testimony, but then that testimony itself is the non-inferential judgment that does not admit of support.

say to change my mind. Perceptually derived non-inferential judgments do not admit of much discussion.

But in aesthetic conversation, we back up our judgments all the time. And often we change each other's minds by offering new considerations. You think the new *Dune* is terrible; I think it's fantastic. I ask why. You talk about the weakness of the character portrayals. I talk about Denis Villeneuve's incredible use of visual scale; I point to moments in the film when subtle manipulations of framing and sequencing create a sense of the enormity of the desert and the sandworms. Perhaps I change your mind, perhaps you change mine. But we are engaged in an act of supporting our aesthetic judgment by producing supporting reasons — and those reasons can change our judgments.

Once again, there is a deep tension between two aspects of our aesthetic practice. Fabian Dorsch (2013) frames it this way: on the one hand, aesthetic judgment seems direct and non-inferential. On the other, we engage in the practice of critical support. We exchange reasons about our aesthetic judgments — challenging each other, backing up our judgments with support, changing our minds. And we expect our aesthetic experts — our art critics, for example — to be able to back up their judgments, to point to the features in the artwork that make it elegant, or horrifyingly clumsy. And if they cannot, we lose respect in them (661). Dorsch calls this the *puzzle of critical support*: that non-inferentialism about aesthetic judgment seems to conflict with our practice of critical support. If our aesthetic judgments were truly non-inferential, how could we find reasons to support them? And why would we expect critics to have reasons ready-at-hand? But if we can deploy such reasons in backing up our aesthetic judgments, why can't we use them to *arrive* at our aesthetic judgments?

### **Explaining critical support**

Another way to put the puzzle: the use of reasons in aesthetic judgment is strangely unidirectional. We seem to be unable to use reasons to proceed *forwards*, starting with the knowledge of non-aesthetic lower-level properties and arriving, via an inferential judgment, at higher-level aesthetic properties. But we do seem to be able to access such reasons when proceeding *backwards*, starting with judgments about the existence of higher-level aesthetic properties, and then looking for the lower-level properties that would explain or support our higher-level judgments. We all agree that *Jackass Forever* is full of unexpected, novel humiliations of its actors. You can't infer from the fact that *Jackass Forever* is full of unexpected, novel humiliation that it is hilarious. But when asked why you found *Jackass Forever* hilarious, you can explain that the humiliation is not just rote (like so many of *Jackass'* dull imitators), but unexpected and novel.

Aesthetic reasoning seems to be a curiously one-way street. What could possibly explain this unidirectionality? Sibley's own strategy is to distinguish between *epistemic* reasons and *explanatory* reasons (1959, 431-5; the terminology of epistemic and explanatory is from Dorsch 2013, 671). Sibley (1965) claims that these sorts of gestures at non-aesthetic lower-level arguments are a peculiar kind of reason. The sorts of reasons we use in aesthetic life — the gestures at non-aesthetic lower-level properties — cannot do the work of *justifying* a judgment, but they can do the work of explaining that judgment by highlighting metaphysical causes and connections.

Sibley's answer here can seem rather ad-hoc and is widely regarded as unsatisfying. Why would the features that could explain not also justify?8 Dorsch offers the following criticism: Sibley's account is one where we are trying to satisfy our curiosity by looking for metaphysical cases and connections. But Sibley cannot explain where our curiosity stops. If we are just interested in metaphysical causes, we should be interested in how lower-level perceivable non-aesthetic properties support higher-level aesthetic properties. But we should also be interested in how even lower-level sub-perceptual properties support mid-lower-level perceivable properties. We should not only be interested in why a certain non-aesthetic quality of line shape and color creates a grim mood, but also how those colors and shapes are supported by the molecular structure of the paint. But in aesthetic life, we are not. Our curiosity stops at the bottom boundary of the perceivable. Sibley's account doesn't have the resources to explain this stopping point, says Dorsch (676-81).

Dorsch's proposal is that we should ditch non-inferentialism. We should be *inferentialists* about aesthetic judgment. We should accept that our aesthetic judgments proceed as inferences from non-aesthetic lower-level properties to higher-level aesthetic properties. What, then, explains the apparent phenomena of non-inferentialism? It is simply, says Dorsch, that when we are experts, our inferences are so ingrained and quick that they disappear from our experience. A chess master simply *sees* that a certain move is bad, but that apparently direct perception is based on years of training and experience. That apparently direct perception is best understood as emerging from a very fast, subconscious set of inferences. We know this because we can ask the chess-master to unpack their inferences, which they can do — just as the expert art critic can unpack their lightning-quick inferential judgments. The chess master's judgment is still *justified* by a set of inferences, whether or not they are automatic (665).9

But Dorsch's solution is also unsatisfying. The inferential nature of chess judgments are clearly two-way streets. The chess master may simply *see* them, but the

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8 For two recent discussions, see Dorsch (2013) and Lord (2019).

9 Errol Lord (2019) offers an account along similar lines, and I believe my criticisms of Dorsch also apply to Lord. I do not discuss Lord here only because of space limitations.



chess novice can still painfully infer their way to those same judgments. And notice, too, that the chess inferences are mostly uncontroversial. The chess master can unpack their direct perception and make their inferences explicit. And if their analysis is good, then every competent chess player will follow along and agree. But that's not how it goes in aesthetic life. The art novice cannot slowly puzzle their way to the art critic's quick judgments; the art critic cannot unpack their reasons and easily convince everybody.

I do not take this brief presentation to present a decisive case against Dorsch. But I hope it at least open the door a crack, and raises a worry — at least, enough for us to be curious about alternative solutions to the puzzle of critical support. Sibley's and Dorsch's discussions share a framing presumption: that the debate between inferentialism and non-inferentialism will be resolved by looking at the *natural metaphysical* features of aesthetic properties. Sibley sends us looking for a causal connection between a non-aesthetic lower-level property and a higher-level property which could retrospectively explain, but never prospectively justify. Thus we arrive at the key question: what kind of natural relationship could there be, between lower-level and higher-level properties, that could result in such a one-way street? But I'm not sure this is the right question to ask. I suggest that we look someplace other than the relationships between natural properties to explain that one-way street. I suggest that our avoidance of inferences arises, instead, from a social norm.

### **The engagement account of aesthetic value**

Let me now return – and further refine – an account I've begun to develop elsewhere: the *engagement account* of aesthetic value (Nguyen 2019a, forthcoming). According to the engagement account, the value in aesthetic life lies in the *process* of our engagement with aesthetic qualities and not in any outcome. Furthermore, this activity of engagement can be refined and enriched by fine-tuning its regulating social norms. In this way, aesthetic appreciation is something like a game, and its norms something like game rules.

Games are designed activities. As Bernard Suits put it, in games, we voluntarily take on unnecessary obstacles to make possible the activity of struggling against them. In a game, we take the inefficient path. In a marathon, there is a local goal: getting to the finish line. Then we add constraints: you can only get there by running along a particular path. You can't call a cab or take a shortcut. Our willingness to be inefficient in this way reveals that we are not straightforwardly interested in getting the end-goal for its own sake. Rather, we are interested in achieving that end-goal via some particular, constrained path. We add rules to shape an activity – to refine it. Games are *constructed struggles*, and we often engage in them because

we value the struggle itself.<sup>10</sup>

Suits' analysis reveals the complex motivational states possible in play. As I have argued elsewhere, there are two very different motivational states possible for game-players: achievement play and striving play (Nguyen 2019b, 2020). In achievement play, a player tries to win because they genuinely care about winning. But in striving play, a player acquires a temporary interest in winning for the sake of *engagement in the struggle*. In striving play, we adopt an end, and constraints on how we are to achieve that end, in order to shape a valuable activity of pursuing that end.<sup>11</sup>

Striving play involves a motivational inversion. In normal practical life, the end justifies the means. But in striving play, the means justify the end. In striving play, we adopt a goal and some rules, but not because we independently value that goal. We pursue the goal in order to be engaged in some valuable activity of pursuit. I try to get to the top of the cliff, not because I care about being up there, but because adopting that goal absorbs me in a fascinating activity of delicate movement and precision balancing.

I suggest that the practice of aesthetic appreciation is a game-like striving activity. We appreciators acquire a local goal: getting the correct judgments about artworks. We adopt some constraints on our pursuit of that goal, like: no aesthetic testimony. And, just as with striving games, we justify those goals and constraints in terms of the quality of the activity they shape. In a marathon, we accept the constraint "no cars or bicycles" to be involved in the activity of running. In aesthetic appreciation, we adopt the constraint "don't use testimony" in order to be involved in the activity of perceiving, interpreting, and engaging with the artwork for ourselves.

Our avoidance of aesthetic deference is due to something like a game rule. We could get correct judgments by deferring to expert testimony, but we avoid doing so. The best explanation of that avoidance is that the purpose of the activity is not to have correct judgments. After all, if we just cared about having the right answers, we should just defer to an art expert. Rather, we take on that goal, and that constraint, because they inspire a particular kind of detail-oriented, careful perception. The mistake of the art appreciator who simply defers to an expert is, then, akin to the mistake of a person who buys a puzzle game and then immediately looks up all the answers online. They may have achieved the local goal, but they have missed the larger purpose (Nguyen 2019a).

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<sup>10</sup> Suits (2014). For my analysis of Suits, and my extensions of his account of games as constructed struggles, see Nguyen (2019b, 2020).

<sup>11</sup> Some complications: striving play and achievement play are motivational states, and different players can play the same game for different reasons. An achievement player and a striving player can face off across a chess board. And players can partake of both motivations to varying degrees — I can be part achievement, part striving players — and even change motivations during a game. I offer a much fuller argument for the possibility of striving play, and its motivational structure, in (Nguyen 2020, 27-73).

The engagement account can now offer a similar explanation for our avoidance of aesthetic inference. Again: our avoidance doesn't arise from natural features of aesthetic properties. We could engage in justified inferential reasoning from lower-level non-aesthetic properties to higher-level aesthetic ones. But we avoid such reasoning because it is a norm of our aesthetic practice not to do so. And we do not hold this norm because it tracks natural metaphysical features of aesthetic properties. Rather, the norm is part of a contingent social practice — a rule in the game. One-way streets are hard to explain as natural phenomena, but easy to explain as the product of social norms.

And the justification of the norm is pragmatic. We hold the norm because it helps to structure a practice. It gives a specific shape to an activity we find valuable. We adopt a rule forbidding the use of aesthetic inferences precisely to avoid a scientific approach to aesthetic judgment. We do so because our purpose in aesthetic life is not to get the right answers as quickly as possible, but to be engaged in the process of perception, cognition, and interpretation — by individuals, of individuals. We do not want to collectively arrive at general abstractions about nature, but to soak ourselves in the activity of individual engagement with particular things.

The engagement account can also explain some key asymmetries in our obedience to these rules. First, notice that we do not avoid aesthetic testimony in every context. We are perfectly comfortable with art historians relying on the testimony of other art historians to establish the provenance of an artistic technique, or a school educational board deferring to literary experts on what novels should be part of the required curriculum. A strictly metaphysical or epistemic account of testimony avoidance does not seem to have the resources to explain these asymmetries. If aesthetic properties could never pass through testimony — or if we could never find an aesthetic expert — then we could make no sense of the behavior of art historians and school curriculum developers.<sup>12</sup> But the engagement account can explain the context sensitivity of the “no testimony” rule quite tidily: Art history, art curation, and educational design are not striving activities. Historians are actually interested in getting their facts right; curators are actually interested in presenting the most valuable artworks. So they take the most efficient pathway. The activity of art appreciation grapples with the same aesthetic properties as the historian or the curator, but does so under different rules, because art appreciation has a different purpose. We engage in art history to know about art, but we engage in art appreciation to be soaked in the process of our own engagement with the art. The historian's activity is more outcome-oriented, the appreciator's more process-oriented.

There are also asymmetries in our obedience to the no-inferences rule. We, in

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<sup>12</sup> I offer a more detailed discussion of these asymmetries in Nguyen (2017, 2019a)

fact, make use of aesthetic inferences all the time. Dan Cavendon-Taylor (2017) points out that creative artists constantly make aesthetic decisions based on inferences from past experiences. A jazz improviser has very good reason to play this note there, a cook to add this dash of Sichuan peppercorn there. They judge that adding *this* non-aesthetic property will lead to *that* aesthetic property, based on past experiences.<sup>13</sup> If we had a metaphysical picture of non-inferentialism, this asymmetry would be deeply puzzling. Why can *artists* engage in aesthetic inferences, but not *appreciators*? After all, they're all thinking about the same aesthetic properties. If a cook can legitimately infer from past experience that a dish with this balance of Sichuan peppercorns and fermented chilies will be good without having tasted the result beforehand, why can't a culinary appreciator follow the same inferential pathway to form a conclusion about the dish without tasting it? If the no-inference constraint arose from the metaphysics of aesthetic properties, we should expect it to hold in all interactions with those properties, whether they be with appreciators or creators.

But the engagement account offers a neat explanation of this asymmetry. The restriction on aesthetic inferences is a feature local to a particular social practice, constructed for a particular reason. Consider marathons. The *no taxis* rule is not a natural feature of the metaphysics of movement, but a constraint which structures the activity of *running a marathon*. But notice that the constraint doesn't apply to the people organizing the marathon; it only applies to the people running in it. A marathon's organizers are perfectly free to take taxis, bicycles, and shortcuts while setting up the marathon. Similarly, the activity of *aesthetic appreciation* is constructed by adding constraints, like the no-testimony constraint and the no-inferences constraint. But the activity of *artistic creation* need not obey such constraints. And we can add to Cavendon-Taylor's observation, that artists breach the no-inference rule, a parallel observation: artists also regularly breach the no-testimony rule. Consider, for example, an actor who does something just *so* because they trust their director's instructions, without understanding for themselves how it will all work out in the end.<sup>14</sup>

### **Aesthetic properties as social constructs**

Here's another way to put the point: aesthetic properties, as we approach them

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<sup>13</sup> The inferential nature of artistic creation is particularly clear in what we might call the more committing arts. The necessity of inference is less obvious with those arts that permit easy editing. With writing, with oil painting, we can often try out a new detail, see how it looks, and take it back. In those cases, one might think that inferences are unnecessary, because we can simply perceive for ourselves. But in live jazz improvisation, in cooking, we can't take it back so easily, we must commit. Those make clearer the necessity of decisive inferential judgments in artistic creation.

<sup>14</sup> See Nguyen (2021b) for a discussion of the trust that classical performers have for their conductor, and actors for their director.

in the context of aesthetic appreciation, turn out to be a certain kind of social construct. They are quite similar, in this respect, to game goals, which are brought into being by a contingent set of rules.

It will be helpful here to dig deeper into the metaphysics of games. In every game, there is what Suits calls a *pre-lusory goal*. This is the goal of the game, described without reference to any restrictions or constraints. The pre-lusory goal of basketball is to get the ball through the hoop; the pre-lusory goal of a marathon is to arrive at a particular place. Then, says Suits, there are the *constitutive rules* of the game, which add restrictions to how you may pursue the goal. In basketball, you cannot use ladders, and you must dribble while moving. In a marathon, you cannot use vehicles, and you must follow the prescribed route. Then there is the *lusory goal*: achieving the pre-lusory goal while obeying the constitutive rules of the game.

The pre-lusory goal of basketball is *passing the ball through the net*. The lusory goal of basketball is *making a basket*. Crucially, it only counts as making a basket if you did it while following the constitutive rules of basketball. If you use a stepladder, you may have succeeded in passing the ball through the net, but you will have failed at making a basket. The true goals of a game — the lusory goals — are constituted, in part, by these constraints. A pre-lusory goal is often describable without reference to any social conventions; it can be a natural state of affairs. “Being at this point in space” is describable without any reference to the rules of a marathon. But a lusory goal is only describable with reference to a set of rules. A lusory goal is always a social construct.

The metaphysics here reveals something crucial about the value of the activity. Suppose I think basketball looks awesome on TV. I go to the basketball court at night with a stepladder and proudly pass the ball through the hoop all night long. Obviously, this is silly. I have failed to understand the value relationship between the goal and the constitutive rules. What’s valuable is achieving the more complex, constraint-constituted, socially constructed end — and not the simpler, natural one.

I propose that there are two closely allied versions of aesthetic properties, which roughly track Suits’ pre-lusory and lusory goals. There’s no established terminology for them, but let me call them the ur-properties and the appreciative properties. Ur-beauty is the quality, specified without reference to any restrictions on grasping it. Appreciative beauty is ur-beauty grasped while following certain restrictions, like the no-testimony rule and the no-inference rule. The historian can learn about ur-beauty through testimony, just as I can get to the point in space where the finish line is by taking a taxi. But I cannot “cross the finish line” of a marathon by taking a taxi, and I cannot grasp appreciative beauty through testimony. We must follow rules to grasp appreciative beauty. This is not metaphysically weird; it has the same socially embedded metaphysics as a game goal. Ur-

beauty is not a social construct, but appreciative beauty is a social construct.

Our behavior patterns when in search of appreciative beauty arise from a complex interaction between natural considerations and constructed social practice. Consider the pre-lusory goal of a game, like getting the ball through net in basketball. There are all kind of physical considerations that emerge from that goal which inform the tactics of basketball. The net is a certain size, the ball a slightly smaller size, which allows some angles of entry but not others. Much of how we play basketball is driven by the simple physics of the pre-lusory goal. But these physics do not explain everything about how we play basketball. We might puzzle for a very long time trying to figure out what about the physics of balls and nets could possibly explain the player's avoidance of stepladders. But there is no answer just in the physics. There is nothing in the natural properties of nets and balls alone that would make stepladders impractical. It isn't that we *cannot* use a stepladder because of the physics of getting the ball through the net. It is that we *refrain* from using a stepladder as part of the constraints which construct a particular activity.

Similarly: there might all sorts of physical demands about how we must perceive ur-beauty that arise from its natural properties. The physical nature of perfume, and of our olfactory capacities, shapes some of how we approach it: we need to smell it in a relatively low-odor environment, and not in a sewer. But nothing in that physical nature could explain our unwillingness to use testimony and inferences in drawing conclusions about the perfume. That unwillingness is best explained as part of the normative constraints of a constructed social practice.<sup>15</sup>

Let me sketch a simple theory of ur-beauty. I doubt things are actually this easy, but a concrete proposal may help show how it's all supposed to hang together. Suppose that ur-beauty is a disposition to provoke a particular kind of subjective response. An object is ur-beautiful, then, if it disposed to prove some particular range of feelings in some appropriate range of viewers. This would explain why aesthetic properties are so entangled with our subjective responses. But notice that dispositional properties can be grasped through ordinary empirical methods, like testimony and inference. Suppose that "nauseating" turns out to be the disposition to create some set of phenomenal experiences of nausea in some appropriate range of viewers. Even though this is a subjective disposition, we don't need to experience that subjective phenomenon for ourselves to know some object is nauseating.

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<sup>15</sup> Those readers interested in the problem of demarcating the aesthetic domain may be worried by my account. What makes these activities distinctively aesthetic? After all, in my account, the kind of activity (looking, interpreting) is continuous with non-aesthetic activity. Furthermore, the values we might find in the activity (the value of autonomous behavior) is continuous with non-aesthetic activity. So what makes it aesthetic? Once response I can now suggest is: the aesthetic is a practice-relative concept. The domain of the aesthetic is marked off by the practice of approaching things inside constraints like the no-testimony and the no-inference rule. By way of an analogy: the kinds of actions in basketball are continuous with non-basketball actions, and the values we might attain in basketball are continuous with non-basketball values. What makes it basketball is that it is an activity constituted by this set of rules. But this is only the tentative beginnings of a suggestion.

The fact that an object has that disposition is a natural fact. We can learn what is nauseating through testimony. We can infer our way to knowledge about what is nauseating. There can be a science of the nauseating. (I am, for example, willing to declare on the basis of pure inference, with no qualifications and maximal conclusiveness, that the content of our diaper disposal unit is nauseating.) Similarly: ur-beauty turns out to be a property whose contours are set by a relationship to subjective experience, but one which is still embedded in the natural, mechanical, scientifically-knowable world.<sup>16</sup> It is appreciative beauty, the socially constructed object, which cannot be grasped through testimony or inference.

And interests will vary. In aesthetic life, some people care about knowing about ur-beauty, and others about beauty. The art historian who cares about tracking a distinctively Japanese style of brushwork is after an ur-quality; they would be happy to learn about it through testimony. And I'd bet that the executives at Marvel Studios, who want to infuse all their movies with the same sense of jokey familiarity and the same warm glow of superheroic success, would use any and all inferences principles available to them to do so. But in the practice of aesthetic appreciation, we avoid such inferences. What forbids us from doing inferences and following testimony is nothing about the dispositional subjective quality, but arises from the social norms that we have adopted for certain contexts. Our goals are different. Marvel Studios wants to make money by putting out a reliable product; I want to drive myself deeper into the activity of aesthetic engagement. Marvel Studios seeks ur-beauty; I seek appreciative beauty.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> I don't want to commit myself here to a dispositional theory of ur-beauty — though I think my analysis here makes some sort of dispositional theory more plausible, by relieving the theory of some of the metaphysical burden which have plagued it: namely, offering a metaphysical explanation of the refusal to use testimony or inferences.

<sup>17</sup> What about the artist? This is a complicated issue. Some creators of art products would happily use inferential pathways to reliably create certain aesthetic effects — like, say, commercial pop music factories aimed at churning out as many hit singles as possible. But other artists — like, say, Miles Davis — avoid inferential pathways to success. We might begin to suspect that their activity, too, is a striving activity. Miles Davis, I would guess, is aimed at producing aesthetic qualities while within the constraints of appreciative beauty. He wishes to arrive at them through autonomous and particular activity, rather than through testimony and inference.

The practice of aesthetic appreciation is, we might think, part of a social network of related practices, many of which might have a similar character. There is the practices of appreciation — of going to museums, reading books, watching movies, and perceiving them and interpreting them for yourself. There are the practices of artistic creation. There are in-between practices — of curation, of criticism, of collection. And some of these other practices might also have a striving character.

They might not always be striving activities. One can imagine a practice of artistic creation engaged in for strictly non-striving purposes, for a clear outcome — like giving rise to the best appreciative activities in the audience. But we can also imagine practices of artistic creation which are built for the striving pleasure of the artistic creators. (In my own experience: my classical training in piano makes me suspect that the performers in classical music are trained more towards good outcomes for appreciation by a downstream audience. But my brief flirtation with jazz playing makes me suspect that the jazz practice is more of a striving activity for its players.) I take inspiration here from Lopes' (2018) network theory of aesthetic value, in which aesthetic value must be understood in terms of varying activity at different nodes of a network of aesthetic practice — including appreciators, curators, reviewers, creators, painting-hangers, and more. For further discussion of variance in the process

Let's return to our original puzzle: that aesthetic properties seemed non-inferential, but also admitted of critical support. The distinction between ur-beauty and appreciative beauty lets us resolve this puzzle more precisely. What natural metaphysical kind could explain these two features? The answer is: there is no natural metaphysical kind. Rather, the features that make possible the practice of critical support emerge from the ur-beauty aspects, but the non-inferentialism comes from a social norm that is added on top of the ur-beauty. The lusory goal of a game consists of the pre-lusory goal with the addition of some social norms. Similarly, appreciative beauty consists of ur-beauty with the addition of some social norms. The apparent puzzle arose from conflating the two different aspects of appreciative beauty: its ur-aspect, arising from its relationship to the natural, causal world; and its appreciative aspect, arising from a social practice which specifies a particular mode of interaction.

Please note, however, that nothing I've said so far requires that there be one "true" aesthetic appreciative practice. My analysis shows that certain intuitions about avoiding testimony and inference arise inside a contingent and constructed social practice. It is, I suspect, a modern practice, and one local to a specific Western European-derived cultural tradition. It is but one game among many. I would expect to find other practices of aesthetic engagement which reject the no-testimony and no-inferences norm, especially when we turn to other times and places. And even when we focus on appreciative practices that subscribe to the no-testimony and no-inference norms, I suspect we will find significant variation — just like chess has its many variations. Some variations demand stricter adherence to these norms, others are more relaxed about one or both. What I've offered is a functional analysis of one particular set of norms -- the no-inference norm and the no-testimony norms. It is not an argument that these norms are universally authoritative. My account explains what those norms are for — and so can serve as a starting point for analyzing practices which partially subscribe to those norms and that function, and for understanding why other practices might diverge.

### **Art vs. science**

Let me take a step back now and sketch a bigger picture. The peculiarity of this constructed practice of aesthetic judgment is perhaps plainest in comparison with the practice of science. In Michael Strevens' (2020) recent account, science also turns out to be a constructed practice governed by contingent social norms. But science employs very different norms, tuned to a very different function.

Science, says Strevens, seems bound by a strict limitation. Scientists cannot use political reasons, aesthetic reasons, or religious reasons in their official arguments

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quality of different aesthetic practices, see my discussion of the process arts in Nguyen (2020b).



of record. Scientists must defend their conclusions using only empirical evidence. But, Strevens notes, this constraint only applies to science's official public record – its professional publications. In their private reasoning, scientists actually use all sorts of non-empirical reasons. Scientists have often chosen to work on a theory because it is elegantly beautiful; they have rejected a research program because of its political implications. A scientist can choose their research topics in light of their moral or religious views. And the use of such non-empirical reasoning is entirely reasonable. Why wouldn't your decision about research projects be informed by your sense of moral urgency or political commitments? Why shouldn't you follow your sense of elegance, if it has paid off time and again in the past?

But, says Strevens, the norms of scientific practice require that the use of these non-empirical reasons must be *stricken from the professional public record* – the scientific journal articles. Professional scientific discourse is subject to the Iron Rule of Discourse: that all disputes must be settled by going and gathering more empirical evidence, which must be entered into the record in publicly accessible form. Privately, you can use your sense of beauty help guide your choice of theories. But to publish a paper defending your theory, you must to find and present new empirical evidence. Interestingly, notes Strevens, scientists will happily admit to their non-empirical reasons in unofficial contexts: magazine interviews, autobiographies, public lectures. It's only in the professional record where they must obey the Iron Rule. The Iron Rule is a *discourse rule* that applies to one specific form of discourse. And that Iron Rule serves a clear purpose. In its grips, scientists are driven to slowly accumulate and publish more and more information, creating a vast database of publicly available data. And that database is the real product, and the real source of power, of the modern sciences. The Iron Rule, concludes Strevens, is not an epistemic requirement but a social norm. It takes all the various motivations and energies that drive a scientist — curiosity, the desire for status, competitiveness — and channels it all towards the creation of that vast public database.

A scientist, says Strevens, is like a coral polyp. A living polyp is a squishy thing, but it excretes hard coral. And when it dies, all the squish disappears – but it leaves behind its contribution to slow accumulation of the coral reef. Similarly: a scientist lives and decides by their own squishy private reasons. The Iron Rule channels those reasons, drives scientists to excrete hard public data. When a scientist dies, all their squishy reasons die with them. But they leave behind their excreted hard data: their contribution to the ever-accumulating coral reef of science.

The discourse norms of science, then, create a very particular form of activity. The norms of science:

1. Permit inference
2. Permit empirical evidence.

### 3. Permit testimony.

Those permissions, together with the Iron Rule, foster the creation and use of a vast collective database of publicly accessible empirical evidence.

But, I would like to add, living with and using this database can be quite painful. We must sacrifice much of our intellectual autonomy. In the contemporary epistemic landscape, we cannot do all the thinking for ourselves. The database of science is far beyond what one human mind can handle. It forces us to trust each other to gather data and to interpret it. We are now deeply epistemically dependent on one another (Hardwig 1985). That dependence is stronger than ever, because science has become radically hyperspecialized. Elijah Millgram puts it this way: a scientific argument crosses so many specialist domains, that no individual person can actually grasp the details of the whole argument. Perhaps individually grasping the whole of a scientific argument was possible in the early enlightenment, but the size of contemporary science makes that impossible. In the current era of hyperspecialization, says Millgram, intellectual autonomy is now but a distant fantasy (Millgram 2015). Using this vast database forces us to trust others, which leaves us deeply vulnerable (Baier 1986). And our trust in science often brings us to ignore certain compelling personal phenomena. Science is a realm which demands that we often devalue the particular phenomena of our personal experience. Science centers the kind of depersonalized information which can be readily transmitted between strangers, and which can be easily aggregated in large-scale, bureaucratic efforts of data-collection (Porter 1995; Scott 1998; Bowker and Star 2000).

The power of science comes with a high price. Some have refused to pay it. As I've suggested elsewhere, this may be part of why we may be seeing so many alternate belief communities, which refuse to accept the conclusions of mainstream science. Such communities can bring back a feeling of intellectual autonomy. Consider, for example, conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theorizing provide an illusion of mastery and control. Conspiracy theories are explanation that one human mind can take on and deploy, with no need to defer to others (Nguyen 2021). It is perhaps no surprise that the rallying cry of conspiracy theorists, right now, is: "Do your own research" (Ballantyne and Dunning 2022). Accepting a simple conspiracy theory restore a sense of intellectual autonomy, but at the price of intellectual accuracy.

Here is my suggestion: the practice of aesthetic appreciation has been constructed to relieve the pains of scientific life.<sup>18</sup> The norms of aesthetic appreciation:

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<sup>18</sup> Note that I have no basis for making this as a historical claim. My claim is a functional one: the construct functions to relieve the pain of scientific life. I also very much doubt that the construct was done intentionally. It most likely the product of cultural evolution. See A.W. Eaton's (2020) discussion of functions in evolved cultural

1. Forbid inference.
2. Permit empirical evidence.
3. Forbid testimony.

The *no testimony* rule forbids us from deferring to experts. The *no inference* rule forbids us from using past data to make reliable inferences. When we combine these constraints, along with a directive to use empirical evidence — to look and see — then the package drives us away from the methods of science, and towards a sensuous, intuitive, independent perception of particulars. The practice of aesthetic appreciation restores to us a small patch of life where we are still permitted the joys of intellectual autonomy and individualistic perception. And aesthetic life is a less dangerous place to indulge in our taste for such things. It is relatively safer to refrain from scientific efficiency in developing my own quirky aesthetic judgments, than it would be if I developed my own quirky conspiracy theories about vaccines and climate change.<sup>19</sup>

Science is a more effective way to collectively advance towards correct answers. But it requires a radical adjustment to our intellectual conduct. Scientific judgment cannot be approached individually, and it cannot be confined to immediate judgments based on the direct perception of individual objects. The scientific life demands that we trust and defer to the web of experts — to defer to evidence recorded and rules manufactured elsewhere. We might say: science is efficient, in part, because it gives us mechanisms to *skip over* some of our need to constantly be inspecting the world. Once we can classify an object inside a pre-established category, we can apply the inferentially-derived principles to that category and jump to a conclusion. We use the systematic collation of past observations so that we can, in the present moment, observe a little less. Science gives us an *efficient shortcut around some of our laborious perception of particulars*.<sup>20</sup>

But to the extent that intellectual autonomy is satisfying — and to the extent that rich personal engagements with particular things is valuable — then the efficiencies of science also deprive us of some crucial satisfactions of human life. They deprive us of some of our potency as individual knowers and perceivers.<sup>21</sup> This is

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artifacts.

<sup>19</sup> But it is not perfectly safe. There are clearly long-term consequences to some systematic misjudgments — for example, ones that, say, reflect systematic biases against women artists, or artists of color. There is an important relationship here with a discussion, in the literature on games, about whether games exist in a “magic circle” secluded from ordinary life. I have suggested elsewhere that the right answer is that games are partially, but not perfectly, secluded (Nguyen 2020, 177-80. I also offer an overview of the literature on the magic circle in Nguyen 2017b). I would suggest a similar conclusion about aesthetic life.

<sup>20</sup> My view here is particularly influenced by Bowker and Star (2000), a study of the process of classification and standardization involved in capturing large-scale data sets.

<sup>21</sup> I am drawing out a thread from Borgmann (1984), about how technology seeks to efficiently deliver products and outcomes, while quietly separating us from the richly textured activities of creation.

particularly heightened for scientific outsiders like myself, who must put ourselves entirely at the mercy of medical science, engineering, and a thousand more disciplines. But even for the scientist: their work depends on enormous amounts of trust in the work of scientists in adjoining disciplines. The procedure of efficient science, in the era of hyperspecialization, forces us to abdicate much of our intellectual autonomy.

But games aren't efficient. As Bernard Suits puts it, games forbid certain efficient paths. When we play a game, we are trying to struggle as efficiently as possible within the given constraints, but the fact that we are voluntarily taking on extra constraints indicates that efficiency is not the main purpose. We play games because we like the particular struggle which arises when we adopt some set of constraint. Games are constructed, valuable inefficiencies. So too with aesthetic appreciation: we avoid the most efficient path because sometimes we value a particular *mode of activity* more than we value having the right outcome.

Aesthetic life is a *constructed shelter*, made to provide occasional protection from the painful demands of scientific life. Appreciative aesthetic properties are the constructed targets that help constitute that sheltering practice – a practice that restores to us, at least within one small sector of our lives, a richly textured activity – of doing it for ourselves, and of looking at particular things on their own terms.

### **What if disagreement is the point?**

So far I've talked as if the value of aesthetic engagement lies solely in individual activity – in one's own perceiving, interpreting, and judging. But there is another, more radically social possibility. What if the various social practices of aesthetic discourse — arguing, giving reasons — were also valuable activities in and of themselves?

Consider the role of disagreement. In epistemic analyses of the sciences, disagreement is usually taken to be something to be gotten past. Disagreement among the experts in a scientific domain is a sign of incomplete progress; the convergence of expert beliefs is a sign of scientific success. But what if, in aesthetic life, disagreement weren't just a road-bump on the way to a brighter future? What if disagreement were much of the point? What if aesthetic life is *constructed to prolong certain kinds of conflict*, because we cherish those forms of conflict? This would not, after all, be such an unusual phenomenon. Many games are intentionally designed conflicts, sculpted to provide maximal delight.<sup>22</sup>

There are, we might say, at least two variations of the engagement account: an *individualist* version and a *social* version. In the individualist version, the valuable

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<sup>22</sup> As I've argued elsewhere, games designers work in the *medium of agency*, structuring the environment of play, and the goals and affordances of play, to design struggles. And they often do so to create aesthetically valuable activities of struggle (Nguyen 2020, 1-26, 101-140).

activity lies strictly in individual experiences and activities, such as perceiving, directing one's attention, interpreting. Aesthetic conversation, then, would be only instrumentally valuable. Somebody might point out a feature of a painting to me, but that conversation only has aesthetic cash value when I bring it home to my own experience — when I use that conversation to enhance what I experience for myself. But in a social version of the engagement account, the valuable activity of engagement could also include various forms of distinctively social activity, such as exchanging reasons, disagreeing, arguing, convincing. The conversation — arguing, suggesting, pointing out things, changing your mind— can be aesthetically valuable in and of itself.<sup>23</sup>

I suspect that our various aesthetic practices lie scattered along a spectrum between wholly social and wholly individual. But to get our bearings, let's first imagine a strictly individualist and a strictly social practice. If the value of conversations were merely instrumental, then we should expect to find norms which make aesthetic conversation quicker and more efficient, which drive us back into individual engagement as quickly as possible. Such a practice might firmly emphasize norms which required immediate experience of an aesthetic object before formulating any new aesthetic judgment. On the other hand, we should expect a socially oriented aesthetic practice to contain norms which function to *elongate* disagreements and conversations. It should have norms that encouraged people to get mired in delightful, never-ending conversation. To design such a practice, we might not always want to push people back to direct experience. We might permit some new aesthetic conclusions to be established in a strictly conversational context.

What might that look like? Consider the practice of making top-ten lists or populating aesthetic categories. My friends and I sometimes sit around after dinner and come up with some goofy category (like “Best Theme Music for the Apocalypse”) or trying to rank art objects along some bizarre spectrum (like ranking Nicolas Cage movies by their Cage-ness<sup>24</sup>). These practices, as I encounter them, usually don't require that we cash out the value of a conversation in some ensuing individual experience. Instead, the practices involve exchanging reasons and giving arguments in the air, away from direct experience. It would permit sometimes changing our minds about, say, the proper Cage ranking during a conversation without actually re-watching those movies.

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<sup>23</sup> What makes it *aesthetically* valuable, you might ask? The account I've given can give a peculiar answer: what makes it aesthetically valuable is that it has emerged inside the practice of aesthetic appreciation, while following the relevant social norms. That is, what demarcates aesthetic value from non-aesthetic value is the social practice in which it arises, rather than being some distinctive form of value. What makes something a “value of basketball” is not something distinctive about the value, but something distinctive about the activity of basketball.

<sup>24</sup> The philosopher of art Matt Strohl has attempted such a ranking (Strohl, 2017).

I suspect that there are a wide variety of aesthetic practices, some more individualist and some more social, and that we slide easily between them. But the discourse norms which surround aesthetic life do, as a whole, seem distinctive. In science, conversation is instrumentally valuable – a tool which helps us get to a true account of the world. Given that goal, disagreement is simply a goad – a sign that we need to keep going. We want to get rid of disagreement and arrive at convergence.<sup>25</sup>

But our aesthetic life seems designed to mire us in endless disagreement. We create ambiguous, multifaceted art. And then we follow norms of judgment and norms of conversation which take away any of the normal mechanisms of belief-settling and leave everything up in the air. We don't create some settled database of agreed-upon facts; every claim is up for re-interpretation and re-evaluation. Our practices leave us stuck in an unending process of perceiving, interpreting, feeling – and in an unending process of aesthetic conversation. If we were trying to get down to business and settle the issues, this would be a terrible way to go about it. My suggestion is that the way our aesthetic practices gets us stuck – in endless conversation, in re-interpretation and re-evaluation – is no failure and no accident. The best explanation of certain norms of aesthetic appreciation is that *they are designed to get us stuck here, because we like it.* (Or, at least, if you prefer a more cultural evolutionary view: the norms of our appreciative practice function to prolong disagreement and that helps to explain why those norms have stuck around.)

Aesthetic appreciation is practice that we have shaped, through elective social norms. It restores to us what scientific life has so often stripped away — a sense of ourselves as intellectually and perceptually autonomous beings, who can think and perceive for ourselves, who see with our own eyes and engage in our own debates. With science, even when we don't understand, sometimes it is fruitless to disagree. Sometimes we have to shut up and just accept that other people understand the math and the science far better than we possibly could on our own. Scientific life is overwhelming because the world is overwhelming. The attempt to understand the actual world forces us into the productive, but painful, methodology where we must surrender much of our intellectual autonomy, and link together in a vast collective endeavor of trust and abstraction.

Our artistic and aesthetic practices offer us a respite from that vast, draining endeavor. We have shaped a domain where we can each engage with the world with our own minds – or in nicely human-sized small groups. We have shaped a domain where we can return to looking at particular things directly, instead of seeking general principles. This form of aesthetic life functions as a relief from the harsh demands of our collective effort to understand the world. Our aesthetic life

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<sup>25</sup> A particularly insightful recent account of the role of agreement and convergence in the sciences — and their relationship to scientific norms of autonomy — is in Dellsén (2018).

is a constructed shelter from science.<sup>26</sup>

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