

## What Makes Value Aesthetic?

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Aesthetic value is not as peculiar as we might think. We don't walk into museums expecting to find there a good so refined that it bears no continuity with the other things we love. What meets us inside can be funny, captivating, soothing, galling, life-changing, mesmerizing, and so on, just as anything else can be. The ways in which they are valuable are many and various, and there is nothing aesthetic about the way in which it's valuable to be funny, captivating, soothing, etc.

But aesthetic value is still special. Being funny or captivating or soothing sometimes grounds an object's having *aesthetic* value, but sometimes it does not. Two factors make the difference.

First: an object's *aesthetic* value derives from the distinctive value of experiencing that object. The distinctive value of such an experience of an object is the value that experience bears in contrast with other ways of (re)presenting that object. If an object is just as funny in description as it is when seen, heard, or felt, then its being funny isn't an aspect of its *aesthetic* value in particular.

Second: it's not just the value of *any* experience of the object that grounds its aesthetic value. You can have an aesthetically *correct* and *complete* (i.e. proper) phenomenal of an object, or one that is *incorrect* or *incomplete* (improper). What determines the proper kind of experience of an object varies between cases. Something's depictive properties, its visual style, its historical context, or the intentions with which it was made can all be relevant. Even the fact that an object affords greater pleasure when experienced one way rather than another can contribute to its being correct to experience it in the former way. It is likely a particularistic matter what contributes here, and how those contributions combine.

To combine these two factors: it's the distinctive value of the proper experience of an object that fully grounds its aesthetic value.<sup>1</sup>

Say that a proper experience of a nocturne offers a sense of relief in frustration, but only in phenomenal experience of the work played as composed. To the extent that such an experience of relief in frustration is valuable, that value can partially ground the work's aesthetic value.

Consider a monument to the victims of a disaster, one which offers a deeply painful but grounding way to grieve communally when properly phenomenally experienced, and not otherwise. That is a valuable, if not pleasurable, form of experience; its being so valuable can similarly ground the monument's own aesthetic value.

A short poem might offer an immersive experience (in imagination) of drumming alliteration that mimics the sound of heavy artillery fire it describes, at least when properly experienced, and not otherwise. If so, the value of that kind of experience can ground the poem's aesthetic value.

This approach is liberally inclusive of a great variety of grounds of aesthetic value—more so than most other contemporary views. This type of approach is sometimes called “*empiricist*,” in that it derives the aesthetic value of an object from the value of an experience of that object.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Peacocke (2021). I'll amend one point: I now think that focus on sensory features is required only for some aesthetic objects and not others (like works of literature). The requirement of sensory appreciation should be enfolded into our (particularistic) grasp of what it is to have a proper experience of an individual object—and not incorporated into the high-level theoretical definition of what aesthetic value is.

<sup>2</sup> See e.g. Shelley (2010).

Like several other forms of empiricism, it allows that any intrinsic value of a proper experience of an object can ground aesthetic value of that object itself. But it goes further in also allowing that even *instrumental* value of that proper experience contributes directly to aesthetic value. Any distinctive value of a proper phenomenal experience can ground an object's aesthetic value.

While this view breaks with more exclusive tradition, it also respects certain traditional constraints. Importantly, it honors the essential centrality of phenomenal experience in aesthetic practices—of creation, criticism, and appreciation. We can make good sense of Kant's idea that aesthetic judgments are "autonomous," and good sense of Wollheim's (otherwise too extreme) commitment to the "Acquaintance Principle," by recognizing that aesthetic value all derives, fundamentally, from the distinctive value of phenomenal experience *as such*.<sup>3</sup> On this approach, specially aesthetic value relates constitutively to the ways in which seeing, hearing, tasting, or otherwise feeling something for yourself can be valuable.

There are further advantages here too. The more liberal approach makes sense of how we can learn to appreciate aesthetic objects. We come to love the arts not by training ourselves to recognize a previously mysterious or inaccessible value, but rather by learning how to have the proper experiences individual objects demand, and by seeing how such experiences are *good*—in familiar ways. This view also predicts the relevance of the great diversity of praise used by art critics. When critics describe the aesthetic value of a work, they use a full suite of evaluative concepts, rather than specialized or technical concepts that are peculiar to criticism.

All of this is consistent with the existence of concepts that capture forms of value *as* aesthetic. To be *beautiful* or *sublime* is, as a constitutive matter, to have aesthetic value. What is important is to realize that the special aesthetic nature of beauty or sublimity lies not in some *sui generis* way of being valuable, but rather in the conditions under which an otherwise familiar form of value is realized. To be beautiful is to have sensory features that offer great pleasure distinctively when properly experienced. To be sublime is to offer awe of a certain kind or intensity just when properly experienced.

## References

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<sup>3</sup> Kant (1789/1987); Wollheim (1980).