

Aesthetic Value and the Practice of Aesthetic Valuing

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Abstract: A theory of aesthetic value should explain what makes aesthetic value good. Current views about what makes aesthetic value good privilege the individual's encounter with aesthetic value—listening to music, reading a novel, writing a poem, or viewing a painting. What makes aesthetic value good is its benefit to the individual appreciator. But engagement with aesthetic value is often a social, participatory matter: sharing and discussing aesthetic goods, imitating aesthetic agents, dancing, cooking, dining, or making music together. This article argues that we should understand aesthetic value in a way that centers these social forms of aesthetic engagement. To this end, the article argues that there is a social practice of aesthetic valuing, characterized as a participatory practice governed by the value of aesthetic community, which engages us in the social development of our capacities for discretionary valuing and volitional openness. Current theories of aesthetic value have trouble capturing the character of the practice of aesthetic valuing, and this motivates a novel communitarian theory of aesthetic value: aesthetic value is what is worthy of engagement in the social practice of aesthetic valuing.

Keywords: aesthetic value, valuing, practices, community, aesthetic communitarianism

1. Introduction

If you have been doing philosophy for a while, then it should be fairly easy for you to sketch some influential theories of morality, justice, knowledge, or reality. Give it a try: What are some theories of morality? And off you go: deontology, consequentialism, contractualism, virtue ethics—a little lecture tidily packed in your brain. Even more niche topics enjoy variety that is easy enough to survey offhand, at least if you've been around a while—for example, various theories of perception, disagreement, or the logical connectives. That's how philosophy works. We find fascinating and difficult questions, brilliant people come up with different ways of answering them, and we discuss, scrutinize, and develop those answers.

Now sketch a few influential theories of aesthetic value. Can you sketch one? Two? I bet you can't even name a third. It's not your fault. There isn't a third, or at least not one that contemporary philosophers discuss, scrutinize, and develop. The mid-twentieth-century boom in value theory produced a variety of detailed views about morality and justice; diverse theories blossomed in every other historically significant area of philosophy; and new areas were defined. Aesthetic value was snubbed. The result is that, even today, a single view is dominant. "Aesthetic hedonism" is the view that the aesthetic value of an item is the value of the pleasure it affords when experienced aright.¹ Philosophers have been oddly unwilling to develop alternatives to this view—it is so dominant that it shows up as the 'definition' of aesthetic value in dictionaries of philosophy.² Whether this is due to an inability, neglect, the marginalization of aesthetics, or something else, the fact remains: philosophy is in a bad state if there are no, or very few, alternatives to an influential but forcefully criticized answer to one of the oldest questions in philosophy.

Here I develop an alternative. When thinking about what makes aesthetic value good, philosophers tend to focus on the individual's engagement with it: listening to a musical work,

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¹ For articulations and defenses of this influential view, which James Shelley (2019) calls the "default theory of aesthetic value," see Beardsley 1958; Budd 1995; Goldman 1990; Grant 2023; Levinson 2010; Matthen 2017; Peacocke 2021; Stecker 2006. For a lucid summary of criticisms, see Van der Berg 2020. } Dominic McIver Lopes (2018) rejects hedonism in favor of his novel 'network theory', which analyzes aesthetic value in terms of reasons individuals have to succeed in specific aesthetic practices. I discuss these views in more detail in section 5.

² *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, 2nd rev. ed., s.v. "aesthetic values"; or see the *Encyclopedia of Quality of Life and Well-Being Research*. The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* has no entry entitled "Aesthetic Value," though there is some nuanced discussion in a subsection of James Shelley's entry "The Concept of the Aesthetic," and there is a selective and largely historical entry entitled "Beauty" by Crispin Sartwell.

viewing a painting, watching a film, or reading a novel or poem. Aesthetic value is thought to be a good that accrues to an individual when they engage with art, nature, people, sneakers, haircuts, gardens, or pretty much anything, and respond with a certain kind of pleasure or in a way that is sensitive to the aesthetic reasons the item grounds. The approach is natural because so many of our aesthetic experiences are so enjoyable to us as individuals, even meaningful, self-defining, or otherwise profound (Riggle 2015, 2016). These experiences and activities make our lives better, more interesting and vibrant, more pleasant and richer with achievements.

However, thinking about what makes aesthetic value good in this way, venerable and common though it is, is a mistake. It is as misguided as thinking about moral worth in terms of what an individual can gain from it. Aesthetic value, I will argue, is a communal affair. Even in our very private moments in our individual aesthetic lives we are engaging in a special social practice, *the practice of aesthetic valuing*. Like many practices, it exists because it provides distinctive goods in a distinctive way. Only when we understand the structure of this practice can we understand what makes aesthetic value good, and when we do, we can see how other ways of thinking about aesthetic value's goodness fall short.

After clarifying what practices in general are and making a few distinctions (sec. 2), I argue that there is a practice of aesthetic valuing. I characterize the practice as a value-governed, participatory practice in which we characteristically share aesthetic value, imitate it, and use it as a means of self-expression (sec. 3). The existence of this practice is good because it is oriented around the goods of individuality, volitional openness, and, ultimately, aesthetic community (sec. 4). I then raise the question: What is aesthetic value such that the practice of aesthetic valuing has this character? I argue that current theories of aesthetic value have difficulty making sense of the practice of aesthetic valuing (sec. 5). Understanding aesthetic value requires understanding

the notion of a practice-dependent good, and since we can define the practice of aesthetic valuing in nonaesthetic terms, we can define aesthetic value noncircularly in terms of the practice: aesthetic value just is what is worthy of engagement in the social practice of aesthetic valuing. I call this view *aesthetic communitarianism* (secs. 6–7).

2. How to Characterize a Practice

First, some basics about practices: practices are not mere behavioral patterns. They are organized activities. They are activities, so they involve intentional action. And these activities are organized and repeated, so there are patterns of intentional action that make up the practice. Organized how? Most simply, there is uniformity of action across individuals: different members of the practice tend to act in similar ways under similar practice-relevant conditions. A *characterization* of a practice, then, would have to capture the source(s) of its uniformity.

Practices are governed by rules, values, or conventions. It is in following the rules, values, or conventions of a practice that members act uniformly, and so we can characterize practices in terms of how they are governed and which action-types best serve a practice so governed. Some practices are *rule governed*. Action is organized by being subjected to the rules or stringent norms of the practice. Many games and sports are practices of this sort (Guala 2016). Other practices are *value governed*. Actions are organized by a value or values that the practice realizes (Raz 2003). Consider the practice of being punctual. Here what governs the practice is the value of being on time for appointments and such, and there are no rules for realizing that value. In fact, the presence of rules might undermine the practice by decreasing the flexibility one might need to realize the goods.³ Other practices are *conventional* (Lewis 1969). Actions are

³ I include in this category practices organized around paradigms or exemplars—e.g., certain scientific practices that attempt to recreate, or use as a model, successful scientific methods and results.

organized by entrenched routines or popular dispositions. Walking up or down stairs on the right-hand side, or shaking hands when you meet someone. Walking on the right-hand side is not better than walking on the left-hand side; it's just what one does in certain times and places. The practice is governed by the force of popular preference.

Some practices are organized in only one way; many are organized in two or all three ways. Some are organized in multiple ways but primarily in only one of the ways. Two practices can be governed by the same value(s) but very differently rule governed. Consider French and Japanese cooking. Both are part of the human practice of eating and its goods: physical and mental health, community, creativity, and so on. But the rules and more specific values structuring each differ substantially.⁴

Because practices are patterns of action governed by rules, values, or conventions, we can characterize practices partly in terms of their rules, values, or conventions, and partly in terms of their *characteristic actions*—action-types that are central, integral, or otherwise important to the practice because they play a special role in following the governing rules or conventions or in realizing the governing values. In other words, a practice's characteristic actions bear a special relation to the practice's governance. For example, we might characterize farmers' markets in terms of selling local produce, but not in terms of wearing shoes. Though both figure in the practice, only the former bears a certain relation to the governing values of the practice.

Characterizing practices in terms of governance and characteristic action makes sense because practices are ways of doing things, and to specify *which* way of doing things a practice

⁴ Perhaps all practices are ultimately justified, if at all, by appeal to value, but that would not mean that all practices are governed by value. What governs a practice is what regulates action within it. So, for example, in political governance laws regulate action. Even if laws are justified only by appeal to value, it needn't be the value that governs or regulates action, since a value can be realized in different ways by different practices, laws, or policies.

is we can specify both how it is governed and which actions tend to be performed in line with that governance. To say that an action-type is characteristic of a practice is not to say that it is unique to the practice—other practices might be characterized by actions of the same type. Pulling produce from the ground characterizes the very different practices of home gardening and industrial farming; avoiding tacklers while running with an oblong ball characterizes both football and rugby. To understand why an action-type characterizes a practice we have to understand how that type of action especially serves the rules, values, or conventions of the practice, and once we do we can see how that action-type gets instantiated in special ways within the practice—the particular techniques of hitting a ball with a racket in tennis versus racquetball, or the delicate forms of slicing fresh fish in Japanese versus Italian cooking.

Likewise, if we are wondering whether there is a practice around some value(s), convention(s), or rule(s) we can investigate whether there are characteristic actions—ones that tend to realize the value(s) or satisfy the rule(s) or convention(s). Sometimes characterizing the practice captures it in its entirety—for example, the practice of taking off one’s shoes at the door, or walking on the right-hand side of the sidewalk. But usually practices are more complex and involve multiple characteristic actions.

Importantly for what follows, practices can also be *individual* or *participatory*. A practice is *participatory* if and only if one’s engagement in the practice enjoins the engagement of others. Practices “enjoin the engagement of others” in various ways. Promising is a participatory practice because it enjoins the engagement of the promisee—they must *take up* the promise. High-fiving in celebration is a participatory practice because it requires outreach and calls for uptake. Promising and celebratory high-fiving could not exist as practices if promises were never accepted and high-fivers were always left hanging. Participatory practices are such that engaging

in the practice involves others engaging, too, as subjects of outreach, agents of uptake, or in other ways. A practice is *individual* if and only if one's engagement in the practice does not enjoin the engagement of others. Putting out the trash cans on trash day and washing the dishes are, unfortunately, individual practices.⁵

The distinction between participatory and individual practices cuts across the distinction between social and nonsocial practices. Social practices are commonly defined in terms of mutual awareness in this sense: a social practice involves not just a bunch of people engaged in the same type of activity but coordinated awareness of each other as doing so and responsiveness to each other as engaged in the practice (Wolterstorff 2015: 83–106; Haslanger 2018). While all participatory practices are social in this sense, so are some individual practices. A practice can carry on without participatory engagement but still require mutual awareness of and responsiveness to other participants. Nicholas Wolterstorff's example of mowing the lawn is illustrative. Imagine the first lawn mower—a person who begins cutting their grass regularly because they happen to prefer the look when cut to a uniform short length. This is a personal, not a social, practice. The first lawn mower can do whatever they want. They might quit and let it sprawl, they might cut zigzags or wide stripes. Now suppose lawn mowing catches on and other people come to like the uniform look. Before long the practice of lawn mowing involves understanding of and responsiveness to socially established norms requiring one to cut the grass

⁵ The phenomenon of participatory action is discussed in the speech acts literature, but the distinction between individual and participatory practices is hard to find anywhere. The closest I have come is from Suzy Killmister (2011), drawing on Denise Réaume (1988): [Certain] practices cannot be undertaken by isolated individuals, but gain their meaning from the fact that they are shared. . . . The notion of participatory goods articulates the difference between a group of individuals simultaneously partaking in an activity, and a group of individuals sharing an activity. While the former refers to an activity that two people happen to be pursuing at the same time, though perhaps in separate locations, the latter refers to an activity that two people are undertaking in partnership. Participatory goods are shared in this way, reflecting the fact that they are cooperative endeavors. Thanks to Erich Hatala Matthes for the reference.

to a uniform length. Patchy cuts are incorrect; especially uniform ones are especially good; zigzags are unusual and worthy of comment. Now lawn mowing is a social practice because it requires awareness of and responsiveness to socially regulated standards of cutting grass, but still one might always mow their lawn alone, even taking great pleasure in doing so, never talking to anyone about it. It is a social, nonparticipatory practice.

3. Aesthetic Valuing as a Practice

With these pieces in place, I want to argue that there is a practice of aesthetic valuing. But first, two clarifications. If you think of aesthetic life as a life of engaging with artworks, then you might think that an aesthetic valuing practice is a habit of going to the museums and galleries, attending the opera or symphony, or keeping up with the latest in poetry and literature. Call this an art-centered view of aesthetic life. These activities are included in my conception of the aesthetic valuing practice, but only along with a wide range of other things well outside of the ‘artworld’ commonly conceived. We typically engage in aesthetic valuing when we do our hair, dress, decorate, do our makeup, taste for seasoning, choose what to listen to in the car, paint a room, watch TV, and so on. Second, there are many *specific aesthetic practices* with their distinctive norms—practices of classical piano performance, graffiti bombing, espresso making, sneaker design, pop art painting, and so on.⁶ And no doubt aesthetic evaluation (the attribution of aesthetic value properties) and aesthetic valuing (valuing something for its aesthetic value) are central to these practices: Is the espresso shot too bitter, the pop art painting vivid enough, the piano performance appropriately subdued? But my focus in this section is on a *general* practice

⁶ For illuminating discussion of specific aesthetic practices and their norms, see Lopes 2018; Kubala 2020; Rohrbaugh 2020.

of aesthetic valuing that interacts with specific aesthetic practices. (The question of how they interact will be of interest in sections 6–7.)

There are many valuing practices, or practices centered around engagement with valuable things as such, from numismatics to bird-watching. A practice is a valuing practice if and only if, and to the extent that, valuing is part of the practice. Valuing is commonly conceived along the lines drawn by Samuel Scheffler (2011) as “a complex syndrome of interrelated dispositions and attitudes,” where a person who values x : (1) believes that x is good or valuable; (2) is disposed to experience as merited a range of context-dependent emotions regarding x ; and (3) is disposed to treat x -related considerations as reasons for action. To convince you that there is a practice of *aesthetic* valuing, I want first to characterize the practice in terms of the characteristic actions performed in the practice, as specified in the previous section.

But you might be skeptical that this is possible. Aesthetic life involves a wide range of action-types: listening, watching, creating, displaying, tasting, comparing, sharing, debating, evaluating, judging, discriminating, and many other things. So many action-types feature in aesthetic life that you might wonder how we could characterize the practice of aesthetic valuing at all—Which of these action-types could we nonarbitrarily select as characteristic of the practice? Joseph Raz (2003: 37–38) notes the problem:

The more general the values the less appealing appears the thesis of their social dependence. . . . We doubt whether there are practices sustaining [general values such as beauty], for their very generality challenges our common expectations of what practices are like. . . . We do not think of people’s behaviour toward issues involving beauty as a practice, for there is no specific action-type, performance or approval of which can constitute the practice of beauty, so to speak.

Our appreciation of beauty can be manifested by almost any conceivable action under some circumstance or other.

Let's set aside the apparent non sequitur. It is true that aesthetic valuing can be manifested by many different actions, but it does not follow that no actions are characteristic of the practice. The practice of Japanese cooking can be manifested by myriad action-types, but it does not follow that there is no practice or that no actions are characteristic of the practice.

To address this skepticism, we have to set two parameters.⁷ First, we should not restrict ourselves to any particular aesthetic practices. We cannot characterize the general practice of aesthetic valuing by investigating special action-types in specific aesthetic practices—for example, the special forms of paying attention in our appreciation of abstract expressionist paintings, or the ways of absorbing ourselves in a good action movie. Doing so would require privileging some specific practice(s) as being more exemplary of aesthetic valuing. But if we knew how to pick out some practices as more or less exemplary of the practice of aesthetic valuing, then we would already know something about the structure of the general practice and presumably about the action-types that are better suited to that structure. In other words, we would already have what we would need for a characterization. For now, then, we are egalitarians about specific aesthetic practices.

⁷ To be clear, Raz is voicing this skepticism in order to rebut it. But he responds to it by arguing that general values are sustained by their more specific practices—e.g., beauty by the practices of landscape painting, literature, and so on. Even if there is not a general practice of 'beauty valuing', he argues, the general value could still be 'sustained by practices'. He thus appears to accept the view that there is not a general practice of aesthetic valuing. Recent work on aesthetic value embraces the skepticism (Lopes 2018) but there are some exceptions (Matherne 2021: 230-231). Furthermore, in seeking a characterization of the practice of aesthetic valuing, I am setting aside a sort of nihilistic historicism according to which the only resource for thinking of it as a coherent practice is genealogy. Thanks to Kenneth Walden for discussion of this point.

Second, I worry that the skepticism is motivated by an unwarranted assumption—namely, that any characterization will be in terms of *individual* action, an individual’s act of “appreciation”: listening, watching, responding, collecting, creating, and so on.⁸ Skepticism is reasonable if the assumption is right—there are simply too many individual-level appreciative actions that we perform in aesthetic life. But why think that the practice of aesthetic valuing should be characterized primarily, or at all, in terms of individual appreciation? We should at least be sure to study participatory action—things we do *with* or *for* each other in aesthetic life, to see whether we can do better.⁹

A characterization of the practice of aesthetic valuing, then, will seek *participatory* action-types that specific aesthetic practices have *in common*. In fact, when we expand the range of our consideration it is easy to see that many of the aesthetic actions we frequently perform fit this mold. We listen, watch, taste, collect, display, craft, and so on, so as to engage in participatory actions. The following three are paradigmatic:

Imitation. Often when we aesthetically act we are using someone or something as a positive model for our own actions. We try to play guitar like Prince, dress like Bowie, sing like Beyoncé, or rap like Kendrick. We usually are not merely copying or mimicking; we are using someone or something as a good model for our own aesthetic actions. And even when we are not simply using another as a model, we might imitate them in the sense of being inspired by them to aesthetically act a certain way, mirroring their actions with our own twist or incorporating their

⁸ Raz’s (2003: 38) example of a typical action within a practice is an individual’s act of giving 10 percent of their salary to charity.

⁹ An aside for aesthetics folks: the Auburn view (Shelley 2011; Watkins and Shelley 2012; Gorodeisky and Marcus 2018; Gorodeisky 2019) moves from the thought that aesthetic value is a determinate value to the thought that individual appreciation determines aesthetic value. Here I question this move by eschewing the individualism that underlies it. One might think that a value is determined by the character of the valuing without thinking that individual appreciation must characterize the valuing, as long as we think of aesthetic valuing nonindividualistically. Riggle 2022b motivates thinking this way.

characteristics or ways of acting into our own. We might be inspired by the way someone looks and direct that inspiration toward our own rather different look. We might be moved by the use of an ingredient in a meal and use it slightly differently in another dish. Notice how natural it is to sing along to a beloved song, or move our bodies to the beat. Wittgenstein (1980: 24) claims that a “narrow definition” of beauty could be given by the fact that when the eye sees something beautiful, the hand wants to draw it.¹¹

Sharing. Many of our aesthetic actions are acts of sharing. In fact, sharing is so intimately tied to so many aesthetic experiences that it can seem to be their functional output. Seeing a beautiful sunset or landscape and pointing it out to others. Falling in love with a painting, film, or album and exhorting others to engage with it. Texting a picture of your outfit to friends. You send someone a copy of the book you just read and loved, you share a favorite recipe or recommend a TV show. We display, perform, or publish the aesthetic items we create. The hand draws the beauty the eye sees and then offers it up.

Self-Expression. Another thing we are often doing when we aesthetically act is expressing ourselves. We express ourselves to put ourselves out there, presenting some otherwise invisible aspect of our individualities to others: By wearing makeup, dressing a certain way, creating or playing music, going to the concert, decorating our homes, telling the joke, ordering at the restaurant, or buying the Italian rather than the Californian red. We articulate our individualities by expressing our sense of humor, our sense of dress, our taste in music, and so on. We engage in aesthetic valuing in part to discover ourselves, to learn what we find worth

¹¹ Wittgenstein writes, “If I say A has beautiful eyes someone may ask me: what do you find beautiful about his eyes, and perhaps I shall reply: the almond shape, long eye-lashes, delicate lids. What do these eyes have in common with a gothic church that I find beautiful too? Should I say they make a similar impression on me? What if I were to say that in both cases my hand feels tempted to draw them? That at any rate would be a *narrow definition* of the beautiful.” (Wittgenstein 1980: 24)
See also Scarry 2001: 3.

valuing—what comedy, food, clothes, vacation spots, cars, paint colors we want to engage with—and then we make our aesthetic selves known, laughing at this joke, not that, becoming experts in one cuisine not another. Often our self-expressive aesthetic engagement is an expression of aesthetic love: in exploring aesthetic value, we form meaningful or otherwise important attachments to novels, films, poems, directors, singers, and so on. We are not always mere fans of, or simply entertained by, the aesthetic items we engage with. They can help us become and, through our continued engagement, remain the individual we are or aspire to be. (Riggle 2022c)

Notice that the practice of aesthetic valuing, as partially characterized by imitation, sharing, and self-expression, is clearly a *participatory* practice, which we defined as any practice that enjoins the participation of others. Sharing in aesthetic life involves outreach and the hope that others will take up what we share. Self-expression involves communication with an audience—putting oneself out there to be recognized, acknowledged, or valued by others. And aesthetic imitation presumes a culture of imitation—the engagement of imitatees whose actions or products are worth imitating, and of imitators who take up and innovate on our actions and products.

We can also begin to appreciate how a practice characterized in this way is a *valuing* practice, or a practice that enjoins valuing to a high degree.¹² Imitation, sharing, and self-expression all involve believing something to be valuable. The sharer typically believes either that the shared item is valuable or the sharing is valuable (usually both). The imitator believes that the imitatee is worth emulating. And the self-expresser believes that the medium of self-

¹² I do not mean to place the entire justificatory burden on these three action-types when it comes to the claim that the practice is a valuing practice. The characterization of the practice as a valuing practice won't be complete until I discuss 'discretionary valuing' and 'volitional openness' in section 4.

expression—the artwork, clothing item, song, and so on—is valuable, usually for what it is and for its capacity to capture something about themselves. Likewise, perhaps obviously, each action-type involves regarding the believed-valuable thing as a source of reasons for action—the thing is worth sharing, imitating, or being deployed or engaged with as a medium of self-expression. And our attachments to aesthetic value and to imitating and sharing it make us emotionally vulnerable in a range of ways. These actions dispose us to experience various feelings and emotions as merited: forms of hope and aspiration (and despair and disillusionment) related to imitation and inspiration; emotions of intimacy and community (and antagonism and alienation) related to sharing; emotions of love and feeling at home related to self-expression; and many others.

The characterization of the practice of aesthetic valuing in terms of imitation, sharing, and self-expression is partial and omits many action-types that are common in aesthetic life. For example, some might wonder whether ‘judgment’ characterizes the practice of aesthetic valuing. There is a notion of judgment that is common in aesthetic valuing, and that is the notion of an aesthetic evaluation, or an attribution of an aesthetic value property. Obviously aesthetic beliefs and claims of this sort are integral to sharing, imitation, and self-expression, and so ‘judgment’ in this sense is woven throughout the list. But evaluation in general does not characterize a practice, and aesthetic evaluation in particular does little to illuminate the particular practice of aesthetic valuing since we can aesthetically evaluate without engaging in valuing. ‘Judgment’ is also often used in a somewhat peculiar way in aesthetics to mean a very specific type of aesthetic belief or claim, one that, following Kant, is based on a feeling but nonetheless universal, or such that everyone ought to agree with it. This type of ‘subjectively universal’ claim does not always feature in our aesthetic valuing practices, and we can get along just fine aesthetically without it.

When we express, imitate, or share, we needn't do so thinking that everyone ought to agree with the implicit or explicit evaluative aesthetic claims we make in doing so. Furthermore, aesthetic judgment is often associated with ranking as better or worse. But we can rank as better or worse without valuing any of the items on our ranked list—we might be indifferent or negative toward them, we might merely comparatively evaluate the items without caring much about them. So judgment in the sense of comparative evaluation cannot characterize a valuing practice.

Perhaps other action-types characterize the practice of aesthetic valuing. For example, we also often *create* and *imagine* in aesthetic life, and no doubt creating and imagining often figure in sharing, imitation, and self-expression. It is not immediately obvious how creating and imagining characterize a valuing practice. But even if they do, again, I am not offering an exhaustive characterization. What matters for my purposes is that imitation, self-expression, and sharing are included in and central to the proper characterization of the practice of aesthetic valuing, not whether other actions are also included.

Furthermore, the claim is not that *every* practice that can be characterized by imitation, sharing, and self-expression is thereby an aesthetic valuing practice. In principle, a single action-type or collection of action-types can characterize multiple practices. And in fact, sharing, self-expression, and imitation characterize philosophy pretty well, at least as some people practice it.¹³ The differences between similarly characterized practices emerge from the different rules, values, or conventions these action-types serve. Where philosophy serves the goods of

¹³ On self-expression in philosophy, Setiya 2020 puts it beautifully: What do I get from reading philosophers with whom I sharply disagree, where the conflict can be traced to our disparate priors? Often arguments I've not considered, problems to address, neglected possibilities, ideas. But also a created world, built from words or concepts, that is the self-expression of an individual, the realization of a unique temperament. There's a delight in experiencing this not unlike the pleasure one takes in a novel or a poem. Some philosophers are great writers; some who are not great writers create conceptual art. I don't need to agree with the guests on my podcast [*Five Questions*] to love the worlds they have made for themselves. But I also care about the facts.

understanding and truth, the practice of aesthetic valuing serves other goods, which we must now consider.

4. Aesthetic Valuing as a Value-Governed Practice

What unifies sharing, self-expression, and imitation? Without an explanation of what unifies these action-types, we do not really understand why they characterize a practice, and grouping them together is arbitrary. One way to approach this question is to ask what explains our sharing, imitating, and self-expressing in the practice of aesthetic valuing: are we following rules or conventions, or are we pursuing values? If we know what the governing rules, conventions, and values are, then we might better appreciate why these actions serve the practice so well.

While many specific aesthetic practices are governed by rules, it is not clear what rules might be governing the practice of aesthetic valuing as characterized here. There are no rules to the effect of ‘hear the beat, nod your head’ (an example of imitation) or ‘love a poem, send it to a friend’ (sharing). Furthermore, if one fails to respond to the beat or the poem with these actions, then one is not open to sanction in the way one typically is when violating a rule.¹⁴

And while conventions play important roles in the practice of aesthetic valuing, sharing, imitation, and self-expression are not typically governed by convention. Conventional practices allow for pat justifications that directly appeal to the convention(s) to justify one’s action. Why

¹⁴ To be sure, though, philosophers have proposed some strict norms or rules for aesthetic life—e.g., the ‘acquaintance principle’ and the ‘principle of autonomy’. The acquaintance principle and the principle of autonomy are presented sometimes as principles or important truths and sometimes as norms or rules, though there is not enough discussion of their source and authority, or whether they are indeed rules, regularities, nomological restrictions, or what. If they are rules, one question is whether they are *constitutive*, or in Rawls’s (1955) terminology ‘practice’, rules, or whether they are more like ‘summary’ rules and as such serve some practice-governing goods. In the latter case we would want to know what those goods are and how these rules serve them. For discussion of the acquaintance principle, see Hopkins 2011; Riggle 2024; Shelley 2023; and Wollheim 1980. For discussion of the principle of autonomy, see Nguyen 2019 and Riggle forthcoming.

put the fork on the left-hand side? That's just what one does (these days, around here). Why wear a wedding band on the left-hand ring finger? That's what one does (these days, around here). Why use the inscription 'cat' to refer to cats? And so on. To be sure, conventional practices typically allow for some further appeal to value—Why do you use 'cat' to refer to cats? Because I am solving a coordination problem—but the point is that they also allow for the direct appeal to convention. Value-governed practices typically paint such appeals as odd, and this is true of the practice of aesthetic valuing. When we share, imitate, and self-express, such pat justifications fail. When asked why we are drawing what the eye sees as beautiful, we cannot say 'That's just what one does'—we appeal to value; we say in one way or another: 'It's so aesthetically good'.

This leaves us with the thought that the practice of aesthetic valuing is a value-governed practice. So what good or goods govern our sharing, imitating, and self-expressing? It would be revealing if these action-types have some good in common. A hint that they do is given by the fact that they are complementary; they fit together into sequences of participatory action:

Imitation → *Self-Expression* → *Sharing*: Rae is a gardener and home cook. She loves a pasta dish from the chef at her local restaurant and tried to recreate it at home, giving it a little twist by using some different herbs from her garden. She invited some friends over and shared it with them.

Self-Expression → *Imitation* → *Sharing*: Nandi always dresses well. One day Rae saw her walking to work and loved the way she layered her sweater and light coat with a collared dress shirt. Rae decided to try that herself and texted a picture of her outfit to a friend.

Sharing → *Imitation* → *Self-Expression*: Rae's band widely shares their music, and Oli is a big fan—they inspired him and his friends to write songs in the same genre and start their own band.

We can also characterize a single person's aesthetic action as partaking of all three action-types. For example, a person's dancing with others is usually imitation (of the music and other dancers), self-expression (via dancing however they dance), and sharing (one's dancing

with other dancers doing the same). Making a cocktail for someone can easily be sharing, self-expression, and imitation.

These action-types work together or complement each other presumably because they all aim to realize some value or values. Turning on the stove, grabbing an egg, and slicing butter are rather different actions, but they fit together because they help realize the value of enjoying a fried egg. To know what the goods are, we need to know what we get out of the practice of aesthetic valuing.

The question needs refinement, since we obviously get so many good things out of the practice: pleasures, achievements, technological improvements, knowledge, community, and so on. A decent hypothesis: the practice would not exist unless it delivers distinctive goods or packages goods in a distinctive way. If a practice doesn't deliver distinctive goods, or package available goods in a distinctive way, then it would be redundant and either disappear or be replaced. Yet the practice of aesthetic valuing has been around for some time and shows no signs of perishing.

So what goods do we get out of the practice of aesthetic valuing? We do get pleasure, achievement, knowledge, and so on, but we get these from all kinds of practices, maybe even from the majority of them. Do we get *distinctive* pleasures, achievements, knowledge, or get those goods in a distinctive way? Or do we get something else?

Obviously, a good that sharing, imitation, and self-expression have in common is aesthetic value. But now that we have characterized the practice of aesthetic valuing, we should be able to give a deeper answer. Here is my deeper answer: the practice is governed by *the distinctive value of aesthetic community*—a form of community that we cannot get in any other

way. By sharing, imitating, and self-expressing we create the conditions for and realize aesthetic community.

The very idea of aesthetic community can seem strange. ‘Community’ typically refers to a group of people who have something in common—mutual dependencies and interests, shared values and ideals, or common ways of life (Mason 2004)—and aesthetic valuing is so often associated with difference, individuality, and disagreement. However, aesthetic community is distinctive in the way it *thrives on* individuality, even in the face of disagreement. Aesthetic community is the *community of individuals*. Two or more people form an aesthetic community when their ways of engaging in the practice of aesthetic valuing are mutually supportive: their practices might overlap in significant ways, they might value similar things in similar ways, their valuing might cohere or be complementary, or their valuing might be rather different but nonetheless mutually enlivening. Two or more people form an aesthetic community when their individualities ‘harmonize’, promoting and advancing their aesthetic engagement, enriching and furthering their aesthetic valuing practices by looping them into shared patterns of self-expression, imitation, and sharing.

That is a little gloss on aesthetic community, but I want to define aesthetic community more carefully. A more careful definition reveals that we can understand aesthetic community independently of the concept of aesthetic value. The more careful definition is this: aesthetic community exists between two or more people when, only when, and because their ways of exercising their capacities for *discretionary valuing* and *volitional openness* are mutually supportive. Aesthetic community brings these capacities, and the goods their exercise produces, to fruition and is an end in itself.

To spell this out in more detail, first consider discretionary valuing. Much of our valuing is compulsory or heavily conditioned by powerful social forces: valuing one's family and friends, honest work, happiness and health, and so on. Or disvaluing the murder of innocents, dishonesty, or taking advantage of people. Our *compulsory* valuing practices result in a wide range of commonalities among us—everyone ought to despise the murder of innocents, value love, and seek honest work. Someone who is able to but fails to value in these ways we say is a bad person or has deep personal flaw. But our valuing capacities are not limited to the realm of the compulsory or socially compelled. In many cases we can *choose* what to value among a rich variety of things: K-pop, heavy metal, or twelve-tone music; big trucks, sleek motorcycles, or cute VW Bugs; short fiction, epic poetry, or Proustian novels; minimalism, brutalism, or midcentury modernism. When we engage in discretionary valuing, we choose to devote our time, attention, care, and concern to the thing of our choice. And we take a certain pride in, even identify with, the results. We become food people, travelers, music lovers, fashionistas, rappers, guitar players, break dancers, car lovers, wine aficionados—in other words, we become *individuals*. When we exercise our discretionary valuing capacities, we establish patterns of discretionary valuing and cultivate our individuality.

The exercise of discretionary valuing is not limited to the practice of aesthetic valuing. We can choose to invest time and energy in charitable giving, animal activism, or curing cancer (though we should be careful to distinguish between discretionary moral valuing and bad moral judgment or moral conviction gone awry). But the practice of aesthetic valuing *calls on and cultivates* this capacity, and so our individualities, in profound and distinctive ways. By exercising our discretionary valuing capacities and imitating, self-expressing, and sharing with respect to the things we value, we cultivate ourselves as individuals and create a world where we

find coolness and minimalism, Black ivy and David Bowie, goths and punks, poets and rappers, extravagance, irony, camp, and subtlety.¹⁵

The practice of aesthetic valuing also calls on our capacity for *volitional openness*, regularly putting us in a special state of freedom. The capacity itself is good but so is its appropriate exercise, or the good of *being* volitionally open. Other philosophers have discussed this capacity in the guise of ‘play’ (Schiller 1993, Ridge 2022) and ‘spontaneous freedom’ (Gingerich 2022). It is the ability to discount or temper our normal modes of action and reaction and act from an open perspective that is directly engaged with and immediately responsive to one’s environment. Thus, while it is a form of freedom, it is not a form of autonomy, at least as typically understood as the agent’s determining their conduct by their own most highly cherished values, or choosing in accord with their own moral convictions or principles (Darwall 2006: 264). The capacity for volitional openness enables us to set aside the typical modes of action encouraged by our cherished values and moral convictions and act from a generous, curious, exploratory, or spontaneous place. As a result, volitional openness puts us in touch with new values or values that we might otherwise be inclined to discount or ignore, given our various dispositions, values, and habits.¹⁶

Again, the practice of aesthetic valuing is not the only practice that engages our capacity for volitional openness—some religious practices do, too—but it calls on and cultivates the capacity in distinctive ways. Many artworks are explicitly designed to engage our volitional

¹⁵ There is precedent for thinking that something like discretionary valuing should feature in a theory of aesthetic valuing, as evinced by the centuries-long emphasis on cultivating ‘taste’ in aesthetic life. Also note that people’s patterns of discretionary valuing may or may not overlap significantly, so there is no conceptual connection between being an individual in this sense and being ‘unique’.

¹⁶ There is precedent for thinking that volitional openness should feature in a theory of aesthetic valuing. Friedrich Schiller (1993), in *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, called this capacity the play drive and thought that aesthetic value just is what engages the play drive, making us aesthetically free. For a comprehensive reading of Schiller’s *Letters* along these lines, see Matherne and Riggle 2020–21.

openness, inviting us to value new and unusual perspectives, techniques, and contents. Simply entering a museum, theater, or concert hall we typically shed our normal strictures and ready ourselves to be engaged come what may. Aesthetic agents innovate, surprise, and shock. The music moves you to dance late into the night; the beautiful landscape washes away your sense of self; the film absorbs every ounce of your loving attention; the poem sheds a new and wonderful light on some aspect of the world.

Discretionary valuing and volitional openness are capacities that work together in our individual lives. Volitional openness is engagement with and responsiveness to present and potential value; individuality results from patterns of discretionary valuing. To develop patterns of discretionary valuing, one must be volitionally open to what is discretionarily valuable. But once those patterns are set, they can close one off from present and potential value and so threaten the breadth and flexibility of one's capacity for volitional openness. Keeping those patterns alive and dynamic thus requires nurturing one's capacity for volitional openness. The practice of aesthetic valuing yokes these capacities together, calling on practitioners to exercise both, individually and in concert.

But something special happens when we exercise these capacities *socially* with and for each other.

Discretionary valuing is good. It is a complex benefit to the person: its exercise generates self-knowledge, contributes to one's sense of meaning in life, cultivates intellectual virtues like curiosity and discernment, and engages one in a wide range of valuable activities. But only in aesthetic community can it fully flourish. Aesthetic community brings discretionary valuing to fruition because it places it in the realm of interpersonal reason, where one's decisions about what and how to value are sensitive to the attitudes and responses of other discretionary valuers

who support, improve, expand, challenge, refine, or affirm one's practical attitudes and emotions. In doing so, aesthetic community socializes the emotions and reasons for action involved in exercising discretionary valuing. Furthermore, aesthetic community enriches and refines our discretionary valuing practices by putting us in touch with a wider range of things to potentially value—the actions, products, and individualities of other discretionary valuers. In doing so, aesthetic community furthers itself by generating these further sources of imitation, expression, and sharing and thereby furthering the general practice of aesthetic valuing.

Like individuality, volitional openness is a benefit to the person, but its goodness only comes to fruition socially, when we create and proliferate for one another opportunities to exercise this freedom. Exercising volitional openness requires setting aside our typical modes of agency, but these modes of agency are *typical* for us, and as such their influence can be difficult to ignore. Better to join a social practice wherein we invite each other to exercise volitional openness—entrancing music, transporting performances, alluring images, mesmerizing dance parties. And better to construct one where, through the committed cultivation of discretionary valuing, *we make ourselves into* such occasions. In doing so, we open each other up to a wider world of value and create new opportunities to express, cultivate, refine, or change our individualities.

Aesthetic community is formed when two or more people's aesthetic valuing practices are mutually supportive. More precisely again: aesthetic community exists between two or more people when, only when, and because their capacities for discretionary valuing and volitional openness are mutually supportive. In aesthetic community, agents' patterns of discretionary valuing and inclinations to be volitionally open are conducive to their sharing, self-expressing, imitating, and the like. Aesthetic community thus requires the balanced exercise of both

capacities—we must possess and express individuality while cultivating volitional openness to other individuals and their aesthetic products and actions. Doing this together in a mutually supportive way redounds to the capacities and their exercise. Discretionary valuing and volitional openness are thus ‘ingredients’ of aesthetic community that are also improved by it (an analogy: eggs and sugar are good just as they are, but they are transformed and improved when they become part of a delicious cake).

Aesthetic community exists when volitionally open individuals are supportive of each other as such, as discretionary and free valuers, when they animate and amplify each other’s aesthetic lives. Examples abound: friends who share a sense of fashion, partners who love landscaping or interior decorating together, writers who understand each other and trade literary insights and critiques, artist collectives, bands, restaurants, book clubs, online film discussion groups, actors and directors who galvanize each other, stand-up comedy performers who are competitive yet supportive, sitcom production teams who share a vision, curators who work well together, the relationship between performer and audience or between artist and fan, and so on.

The essential feature of the practice of aesthetic valuing is that it is a practice organized around the values specified here. Sharing, imitation, and self-expression characterize the practice of aesthetic valuing because these action-types tend to realize aesthetic community. Must the practice of aesthetic valuing always include these action-types? Can the practice’s values be realized by means other than imitation, sharing, and self-expression? Notice that the constitutive values of the practice put pressure in the direction of each characteristic action. We tend to express ourselves to make our ways of discretionary valuing known and kick off aesthetic community. Exercising volitional openness is so much richer with aesthetic goods to imitate and share. And a culture of imitation ensures a general tilt toward mutual attentiveness and can itself

easily occasion aesthetic community. But despite these pressures, it is conceivable that some groups realize aesthetic community in other ways, via other characteristic actions or by downplaying some of those emphasized here. For example, maybe some groups frown upon self-expression or restrict sharing for cultural, political, or religious reasons. They can nonetheless have culturally significant ways of realizing aesthetic community.

Furthermore, I have not claimed that every *individual* who engages in the practice of aesthetic valuing must imitate, share, and self-express. When a practice exists, there can be numerous individual deviations from it that still count as part of the practice. Perhaps some practitioners are really into sharing but wary of imitation, or really into sharing but hesitant to express themselves overtly and frequently. It is possible to personally realize the goods of the practice in various ways. This possibility inheres in the nature of practices: a pattern can hold despite various deviations from it.

In sum, the practice of aesthetic valuing is a participatory, value-governed practice. In aesthetic life, we characteristically express ourselves, imitate the actions and products of other aesthetic agents, and share our aesthetic perspectives and products in ways that support imitating, expressing, and sharing in turn. Aesthetic community—the social exercise and improvement of our capacities for discretionary valuing and volitional openness—governs the practice and explains why we tend to socially imitate, share, and self-express.

5. Theories of Aesthetic Value

Now that we have an idea of what the practice of aesthetic valuing is, we can turn our attention to aesthetic value and pose a new question about it: What is aesthetic value such that it figures in the practice of aesthetic valuing?

5.1. Aesthetic Value as Pleasure

The classic theory of aesthetic value, aesthetic hedonism, holds that there is a constitutive relation between aesthetic value and pleasure. Aesthetic value just is the capacity to please—pleasure is what makes aesthetic value good. More precisely, the aesthetic value of an object is the value of the pleasure the object affords, when experienced properly by the right people under the right conditions. Aesthetic hedonism is sometimes modified to aesthetic ‘empiricism’ on the grounds that pleasure is too narrow a category to capture all of the good experiences that aesthetic value affords.¹⁷ Some aesthetic experiences are good but not pleasurable—for example, various thrills, frights, horrors, challenges, surprises, shocks, confrontations, and so on. So the aesthetic empiricist holds that the aesthetic value of an object just is the value of the experience the object affords, when experienced properly by the right people under the right conditions.

The difference between these views does not matter here. If the hedonist cannot explain how aesthetic value figures in the practice of aesthetic valuing, then neither can any modification of it, for even if pleasure is too narrow for an adequate theory of aesthetic value, it is still so paradigmatic of valuable experience that it is implausible that some other way that experience can be valuable is what accounts for the central features of the practice of aesthetic valuing.

Since sharing, imitating, and self-expressing are characteristic of the practice of aesthetic valuing, any theory of aesthetic value should explain what makes the bearers of aesthetic value sharable, imitable, or worthy of self-expression. Can the hedonist explain why sharing, imitating, and self-expressing are so central to the practice of aesthetic valuing?

¹⁷ For a recent defenses of empiricism, see Peacocke 2021; Grant 2023.

Consider motivation. Pleasure's typical motivational profile enjoins the continued engagement with its source.¹⁸ The excellent chocolate moves you to eat more; the fun film moves you to watch it again; the pop song plays on repeat. But how can the hedonist draw a connection between pleasure and the characteristic action-types in the practice of aesthetic valuing? When we imitate a beautiful outfit because of its beauty, or share an excellent recipe because of its aesthetic excellence, more goes into the action's motivation than whatever is sourced in the pleasure taken in the aesthetic object. Pleasure *alone* cannot be doing the motivational work. And it's not clear that pleasure is required to do any work, since we can appeal to aspirations to style or desires for aesthetic community.

Notice that the tempting thing to say here is not something the hedonist can say—namely, that it is the recognition of the kind of value the outfit or recipe has that moves us to share it or imitate it, for that value is supposed to be identical to the value of the experience of the outfit or dish, and since that value is identical to the pleasure of the experience, pleasure is the only source of motivation. Since pleasure lacks the right motivational profile, it alone cannot explain the character of the practice of aesthetic valuing.

A similar point can be made in terms of appropriateness instead of motivation. Sharing, imitating, and self-expressing are appropriate ways of engaging with aesthetic value as such. Why? Hedonism's only resource is pleasure, but that is not enough to do the normative work. Why is the hand correct to draw the beauty the eye sees? Why is sketching the landscape an appropriate response to its beauty? The hedonist says that the landscape's beauty is a source of pleasure. If so, then an appropriate response would certainly be to continue to view and explore

¹⁸ This is a key feature in every account of aesthetic pleasure that I am aware of, including Kant's. For contemporary accounts, see Gorodeisky 2019; Matthen 2017.

the landscape so as to continue to be pleased by it. Which we do. But why draw it? The hedonist might say that drawing is appropriate because we can be pleased by its image. But we are surrounded by the real thing! Furthermore, sketches are not always successful and require hard-won skill and effort that might not reward. So maybe it is the *potential* pleasure of making a *good* sketch? No, because it is not necessary that the sketch be pleasing. The act of imitation *itself* is an appropriate response to the beauty. The appropriateness of imitation is not contingent on its product producing pleasure.

Similar criticisms apply to hedonic forms of primitivism, as developed, for example, by Keren Gorodeisky. On her view, aesthetic value is necessarily related to pleasure:¹⁹ “Artworks that are valuable *qua* artworks merit, deserve, and call for a certain pleasure, the same pleasure that reveals (or purports to reveal) them to be valuable in the way that they are, and constitutes their aesthetic evaluation” (Gorodeisky 2019: 200). The aesthetic hedonist would agree with this claim. However, against the hedonist, Gorodeisky is committed to “the denial that what makes artworks valuable is their power to please” (202), preferring instead a primitivist position according to which aesthetic value itself is the source of normativity and pleasure is the right response to that value. On this view, the experience of pleasure does not constitute aesthetic value, but it does reveal it and it does wholly constitute aesthetic evaluation. Therefore, like standard hedonism, pleasure must account for the normative and motivational character of aesthetic valuing.

Gorodeisky has an especially sophisticated account of aesthetic pleasure, one that a standard hedonist would probably accept. The traditional hallmarks of pleasure’s motivational profile—for example, its ‘self-maintenance’—are still present: “[Aesthetic pleasure] tends

¹⁹ Gorodeisky focuses on artworks as paradigms of aesthetic value.

towards its own continuation such that one typically wishes to, and tends to, retain the same pleasurable experience.” This reflects the kind of value Gorodeisky thinks aesthetic value is: “Artworks that are valuable *qua* artworks merit pleasure merely by virtue of being valuable in this particular way, neither by virtue of their contribution to any further end nor by their fittingness to some requirement, principle, rule or law” (207). As she puts it, aesthetic pleasure is ‘self-maintaining’ and ‘self-contained’. It is self-maintaining because it motivates and makes appropriate its continuation. It is self-contained because it is a response to the aesthetic object alone, independently of some other way that the object might be valuable.

Accordingly, the kind of value an aesthetic object as such has is revealed in a self-maintaining and self-contained response. These features of aesthetic pleasure tie the motivational and normative forces of aesthetic valuing so firmly to the aesthetic object that they prevent the account from explaining the practice of aesthetic valuing. The self-maintenance of aesthetic pleasure motivates and makes appropriate continued engagement with the object, so what value-relevant feature of the object could motivate and make appropriate sharing, imitation, and self-expression? It cannot be whatever pleasure one might take in using the object for those actions, since that would amount to taking pleasure in some other way the object is valuable, which clashes with self-containment. And if it is not pleasure, then, by the hedonic primitivist’s lights, it is irrelevant to aesthetic valuing.

When the practice of aesthetic valuing is made explicit, it is tempting to call on it as a resource here. It is tempting to say that it is the fact that the pleasure is felt *in the context of the practice of aesthetic valuing*, with its governing value of aesthetic community, that tilts its normative and motivational profile toward sharing, imitation, and self-expression. But again the hedonist cannot fall prey to temptation here, for it undermines their claim that aesthetic value is

identical to hedonic value. It undermines this claim by introducing a higher, practice-governing value—aesthetic community—to which the value of pleasure is subordinate.

This suggests that what makes a pleasure a source of aesthetic value is not the fact that it has some very specific profile or that it makes experience valuable, but the fact that it makes sharing, imitating, and self-expressing worthwhile. In other words, certain pleasures can play a role in the realization of aesthetic community—the good that governs the practice of aesthetic valuing.

5.2. Aesthetic Value as Reason for Aesthetic Action

Dominic McIver Lopes (2018) rejects hedonism and its primitivist cousin and understands aesthetic value in terms of reasons for aesthetic action that are generated in specific aesthetic practices. He calls his view the *network theory* because it construes aesthetic value in terms of the special reasons for action that arise among networks of agents acting together in specific aesthetic practices. The wine's complexity is a reason to linger over its flavor; the fact that the paint's hue fits the room's decor is a reason to use it for the accent wall; the perfume's vivid floral and citrus notes are a reason to wear it in the summer. What makes these features of the wine, paint, and perfume reasons to aesthetically act in one way rather than another? Lopes argues that an answer to this question requires understanding the structure of specific aesthetic practices—the practices of wine appreciation, interior design, and olfactory art. There are norms for acting in these practices and experts who set standards of achievement—that is, standards for success in them. The wine's complexity is a reason to linger over it because the practice of wine appreciation, with its specific norms and achievements, makes it such that one has reason to linger over complexity but not over high acidity—and doing so amounts to success in the practice. Aesthetic values are thus anchored in the norms of specific aesthetic practices and

constitute reasons for action only for those involved in them—that is, only for those who are committed to acting well in the practice.

Can this view explain the centrality of imitation, self-expression, and sharing to the practice of aesthetic valuing? Not as it stands. Lopes understands specific aesthetic practices as worlds unto themselves. Someone who participates in the practice of filmmaking is bound by its norms and achievements, but they have no reason to act in one way rather than another with respect to any other practice they are not involved in. In other words, there is no *specific-practice-transcendent* source of aesthetic normativity. Aesthetic reasons are internally tied to the specific practices that generate them.

But imitation, sharing, and self-expression are important *across* specific practices. These action-types are central to a vast range of paradigmatic specific aesthetic practices: to the worlds of coffee, wine, perfumery, filmmaking, photography, poetry, fashion, music, literature—pick your favorite uncontroversial aesthetic practice and you will find that these action-types are central and appropriate to each. If aesthetic normativity is wholly confined to specific aesthetic practices, then it is a miracle that all of these paradigmatic aesthetic practices have this in common.

The problem is highlighted by the easy fix: if specific aesthetic practices participated in a more general practice—the practice of aesthetic valuing—then the normativity of the general practice could inform, or even generate, the normativity of its subpractices, while still allowing for some aesthetic reasons to be highly practice-specific. We could then say that the reason sharing, imitation, and self-expression are central to so many specific aesthetic practices is that these practices are all specific ways of engaging in the general practice of aesthetic valuing via norms and traditions that serve this larger practice. But, again here, admitting this point

undermines the network theory of aesthetic value. By admitting a practice-transcendent source of normativity, aesthetic normativity is not, or not entirely, generated within specific aesthetic practices.

6. Aesthetic Communitarianism

When we understand the practice of aesthetic valuing as a value-governed practice structured by the distinctive good of aesthetic community, then a theory of aesthetic value is in the offing.

Why think that what makes aesthetic value good is any particular thing—pleasure, achievement, property, or response—when we can say this: aesthetic value is whatever is such that engaging with it would make the practice of aesthetic valuing go well? Aesthetic value just is what is worthy of engagement in the social practice of aesthetic valuing.

In general, practices generate goods—*practice-dependent* goods. Some things depend for their existence and their goodness on the practices they are involved in. To take an obvious example, a bat-shaped piece of hardwood is a baseball bat only if there is a practice of playing baseball. The wood's being a baseball bat depends on the existence of the game. So does its value. Value is conferred on things within a practice in different ways. One way that value is conferred is by the practice's constitutive rules or governing values. The rules of baseball require mitts and baseballs, so anything that is a mitt or baseball will be good for the practice simply in virtue of the fact that these objects make the playing of baseball possible. The practice of French cooking requires a saucepot, so any such pot will have some value relative to the practice of French cooking. Call this *constitutive goodness*: an item has constitutive goodness if and only if the practice requires the thing's use—without it, one could not engage in the practice.

Constitutive goodness facilitates the existence of a practice, and so it is important in the

realization of whatever structures the practice. The goodness of any constitutive good depends on and derives from the goodness of those ends.

Some things are good within a practice in another way, not because they are required for engaging in the practice at all, even if they are, but because they are *especially good* at realizing the goals set out by the rules or the values that govern the practice. A baseball bat can be good because it meets the requirements of play (constitutively good) but also because its properties make it such that it excels at scoring points and winning. Knives are required for Japanese cooking, and so they are good in that respect, but light, high-carbon, steel knives are especially good at realizing the values of Japanese cooking. In French cooking, any old pot is good, but sauciers are great. Call this *realization goodness*.

Any value-governed practice will confer realization goodness on whatever excels at realizing the values that govern the practice. If the point of the practice is to realize some values, then anything that excels at doing that will be realization-good relative to that practice (as long as it doesn't run afoul of whatever rules or restrictions also govern the practice). Of course, a practice can be organized around bad rules, evil ends, and disvalues. So let's call *realization value* realization goodness in genuinely valuable practices, where the latter are practices organized around genuine values, rules, or conventions.

Practitioners typically take constitutive goodness for granted. If there is a practice at all, practitioners will be interested in adhering to its structure. They will thus have good reason to focus their practice-relevant valuing activities on realization goodness—the things that will help the practice flourish, not merely keep it from dying.

The practice of aesthetic valuing is a value-governed practice. So we can ask: What has realization value in the practice of aesthetic valuing? Given the complexity of the practice, it is

unlikely to be any single kind of thing—pleasure, valuable experience, the free play of imagination and understanding—and we needn't be so restrictive anyway. We can say that aesthetic value is *anything* that is worthy of engagement in the practice of aesthetic valuing. Aesthetic value is realization value in the participatory and community-governed practice of aesthetic valuing. Call this view *aesthetic communitarianism*.²⁰

This answers the *value* question, which has been my focus throughout: What makes aesthetic value *good*? The value question is typically distinguished from a question we have not yet posed—namely, the *demarcation* question, What makes aesthetic value *aesthetic*? (Lopes 2018; Riggle 2022b; Shelley 2019, 2021). Aesthetic communitarianism can readily address this question. Practices are individuated by the values, rules, or conventions that structure them. So we can say that what makes the practice of aesthetic valuing *aesthetic* is also what makes aesthetic value good—aesthetic community, the social exercise and improvement of our capacities for discretionary valuing and volitional openness. A specific practice is *aesthetic* to the degree that (and because) it ‘participates’ in the practice of aesthetic valuing—its governing rules or values can be justified by appeal to the values that govern the practice of aesthetic valuing. In other words, specific *aesthetic* practices are those whose values, rules, and conventions ‘serve’ the practice of aesthetic valuing. The realization goods such practices produce are aesthetic in

²⁰ Some readers will have noticed that there is a structural similarity between aesthetic communitarianism and the institutional theory of art (Dickie 1974; Abel 2012). On the institutional theory of art, art is any product of the artworld that directly affects how well its institutions function (Abel 2012: 686), where its institutions function well when they promote various values. (Catharine Abel [2012: 683–84] lists these values: positive aesthetic properties, the expression of emotion, worthwhile intellectual challenges, formal complexity and coherence, the communication of complex meanings, the exhibition of individual points of view, originality, and the exercise of a high degree of skill.) In other words, there are these practices, art institutions, that function to promote various goods. Art just is what directly affects the flourishing of these practices. Despite the affinity in structure, I am not very attracted to the institutional theory of art. The aesthetic communitarian might craft a new aesthetic theory of art: art just is any artifact made with the intention of having aesthetic value—that is, being worthy of the practice of aesthetic valuing. This aesthetic theory of art need not employ the notion of an ‘artworld’, and by defining aesthetic value nonhedonically, it avoids the many problems that plague traditional aesthetic theories of art. It is worth exploring in more detail.

virtue of the relation the specific practice bears to the practice of aesthetic valuing. So, for example, what makes a good portrait painting an *aesthetic* good is the fact that it is the product of the specific aesthetic practice of portrait painting—a specific practice that is aesthetic because its governance (rules, conventions, values) can be justified by appeal to the practice of aesthetic valuing. The full treatment of this issue requires showing how the rules and norms of a range of specific aesthetic practices can indeed be justified by appeal to the practice of aesthetic valuing, showing how various subpractices serve the superpractice.²¹

7. Clarifying Aesthetic Communitarianism

In developing aesthetic communitarianism, I have introduced several novel elements and arranged them just so. In this final section I will summarize the view and address some immediate concerns.

There is a social practice of aesthetic valuing. This is a participatory, value-governed practice structured by the value of aesthetic community, in which participants tend to imitate, share with, and express themselves to each other. In doing so, they create and cultivate aesthetic community. Aesthetic community involves the social exercise of capacities that we can engage outside of aesthetic life but that aesthetic valuing essentially calls on and cultivates. These are our capacities for discretionary valuing and volitional openness. In aesthetic community we jointly engage and improve these capacities, thereby realizing the goods of their social exercise, individuality and volitionally open states. Aesthetic community is the mutually supportive engagement of volitionally open individuals. By imitating, sharing, and self-expressing, participants reveal, deepen, and refine their individualities and capacities for volitional openness. Because we can define the practice of aesthetic valuing in non-aesthetic terms, we can define

²¹ For one such illustration, see my discussion of Western classical music performance below.

aesthetic value in terms of it. Aesthetic value just is whatever is worthy of engagement in the social, participatory practice of aesthetic valuing: it is what we create or use to self-express, what we make and share with each other to create and sustain aesthetic community, what we imitate to propel our aesthetic lives forward. This is a non-hedonic theory through and through, since there is no need to deploy the concept of pleasure at any stage.

(1) When I say that aesthetic value is what is worthy of engagement in the practice of aesthetic valuing, do I mean engagement of any sort or *appropriate* engagement? I mean both. Much of aesthetic life involves engagement in specific aesthetic practices, and these practices have their own norms and rules. For example, a Western classical music performer has surprisingly strong reason to play every note of the composition they are performing (Rohrbaugh 2020). The rule *play every note* is a practice-internal norm, internal to specific practices of musical performance, and the rule holds even when playing a different note or series of notes would have more immediate value—it might be more beautiful, more expressive, shock the audience, call to mind a beloved work, and so on. So what justifies this norm if not such evaluative considerations, ones that concern musical aesthetic value, the very kind of value that the musical practice is about? In other words, what gives this norm such force—as Guy Rohrbaugh (2020: 86) puts it, a force of “surprising deontological character”—if not in-the-moment evaluative considerations?

Rohrbaugh (drawing on Edidin 1997) locates four reasons for the practice-internal norm. First, some musical value is realized only in works so complex that they could not be improvised; only by writing down the score and playing it as is can the value be manifest. Second, when written down, music can be repeated any number of times for all to hear. Third, such spread allows performers and listeners to deepen their valuing of the music. And fourth, this

allows us to interpret the music in different ways, playing it with different emotional inflections and technical nuances that realize different expressive, performative, and appreciative values.

According to aesthetic communitarianism, a specific practice with the *play every note* rule is justified (as aesthetic) if and only if complexity, repeatability, deepened valuing, and creative interpretation contribute to realizing the governing values of the practice of aesthetic valuing. Do these goods matter for the practice of aesthetic valuing? Indeed they do: they help us cultivate our individualities; express them in performance, interpretation, and appreciation; and engage with and value each other as individual interpreters, performers, or creators. In this way, we can justify the rules that govern *specific* aesthetic practices by connecting them to the values that govern the *general* practice of aesthetic valuing in a way that reveals how the specific practice participates in the general one and how its specific rules work to promote the general practice. Engagement with works in the practice of Western classical music performance, then, ought to conform to the rules of that particular practice.

But the ‘ought’ here is conditional. Such practices can take on lives of their own and lose track of the larger practices in which they participate—practitioners might fetishize rules, lose sight of or gamify the governing values, fall into unreflective habits, divert the practice to other ends, or fail to see how social change has made the practice or some of its rules irrelevant or counterproductive for the practice of aesthetic valuing. When that occurs, the norms and rules of the practice are no longer binding and one can engage with the products of the practice in any way that serves the larger practice of aesthetic valuing. You might reclaim clothes that are out of fashion, forms of dance or speech that have lost their expressiveness, vintage furniture, or Jell-O recipes from the 1950s.

In other cases, the norms and rules of a practice are binding but are so violated by a product of the practice that one is free to find other ways to aesthetically engage with it. In other words, when appropriate engagement according to the rules or values of a specific practice returns something of disvalue, then it is fair game to find other ways to aesthetically value it. This is the case with movies that are ‘so bad they are good’. Such films violate entrenched norms of filmmaking. One might think that failing the norms of plot coherence, convincing acting, and sensible editing is enough to make a film unworthy of the practice of aesthetic valuing. But a practice’s norms cannot always account for all of the ways we might successfully engage with its products. Movies that violate all kinds of decent filmmaking norms can still be fascinating sources of individuality, volitional openness, and aesthetic community. What’s bad according to the norms of a specific aesthetic practice can still be worthy of engagement in the practice of aesthetic valuing, if and only if valuing it can source the goods of the practice of aesthetic valuing.²²

(2) Something is worthy of engagement in the practice of aesthetic valuing just in case engagement with it would source individuality or volitional openness in ways conducive to aesthetic community. But people vary in how they exercise the relevant capacities, and so people vary in their potential for aesthetic community. This means we should expect a lot of variation in what is regarded as worthy of engagement and so as having aesthetic value. And, of course, that is what we see in aesthetic life, the locus classicus of interpersonal variation and disagreement. Does this mean that something’s *having* aesthetic value varies from person to person? Is beauty

²² See Strohl 2021 for a fascinating account of bad movie love that embodies such creativity in aesthetic valuing.

in the eye of the beholder? Or is there a more general or universal notion of engagement-worthiness and so of aesthetic value?

First note that aesthetic value cannot be agent-relative on the communitarian view. The practice of aesthetic valuing is a participatory practice, so some item *o*'s having realization value in the practice for some agent, *p*, implies that *o* has realization value in some other person *q*'s practice of aesthetic valuing. This is because *o*'s realization value consists in its potential for aesthetic community. *O*'s having aesthetic value entails that *o* is worthy of engagement for more than one person. Engagement-worthiness, and so aesthetic value, is not agent-relative in the sense that it is determined by how it might be engagement-worthy for a single agent.

If something does have aesthetic value, then it is worthy of engagement in the practice of aesthetic valuing, and that is a general fact about it. If you think there is an analytic or otherwise strong connection between value and reason, then you might like to say that everyone thereby has a reason to engage with it. But this 'reason' is so weak as to be practically nonexistent. What matters for the practice of aesthetic valuing is whether *you* have sufficient reason to aesthetically engage with some item, whether doing so will advance your practice of aesthetic valuing and so contribute to the general practice. Merely knowing that it has aesthetic value will not answer that question. The answer will depend on your sense of aesthetic community, how you have exercised discretionary valuing, cultivated your individuality, developed your capacity for volitional openness. Merely knowing that something is food, and so meets some general conditions on being worthy of eating, does not mean you should eat it.

Aesthetic communitarianism does allow for the possibility that some things are worthy of aesthetic engagement for everyone—that is, that some things are such that everyone has

considerable reason to aesthetically engage with them. It is an open question whether anything is actually like this, and so it should be no surprise that it is controversial whether anything is.

(3) I said at the outset that it is a mistake to think that what makes aesthetic value good is some benefit to the individual. Yet I defined the practice of aesthetic valuing in terms of aesthetic community, which in turn I defined in terms of the mutually supportive exercise of individual capacities: discretionary valuing and volitional openness. So how is this theory of aesthetic valuing communitarian? If aesthetic community is simply a matter of supporting each other in obtaining individual goods, then what makes aesthetic value good are benefits to the individual, or so the objection goes.²³

We can read the question from another angle. Aesthetic communitarianism places aesthetic community at the top of the value structure. But why not think that the practice of aesthetic valuing supplies various related goods—individuality, volitional openness, and aesthetic community—and they are all on a par, each a benefit to the individuals who engage in the practice? What exactly makes the view *communitarian*?

First of all, as noted earlier (sec. 4), aesthetic community perfects discretionary valuing and volitional openness—their value is incomplete without it. When completed in aesthetic community, the value of discretionary valuing is also a benefit to us, as a people engaged in the practice of aesthetic valuing. Likewise for volitional openness. Aesthetic community completes the other goods and leverages their complete value into another, even higher good.

Second, in addition to perfecting our capacities, aesthetic community perfects the valuing practice. Suppose the practice of aesthetic valuing were an individual, nonparticipatory practice,

²³ Thanks to Dominic McIver Lopes for pressing this objection.

where practitioners independently developed their volitional openness and discretionary valuing. In such a practice, we would have no particular reason to attend to each other's aesthetic valuing, no special reason to imitate, share, or self-express. Such a practice could carry on even if we were all doing our own thing, alien to one other, and so there would be little or no point to claims about there being a special kind of *value* in one thing or another. Such claims could be met with indifference or ignored as little more than expressions of personal preference. By putting a premium on the social exercise of these capacities—by centering the value of aesthetic community—the practice of aesthetic valuing makes us face each other, establishes and enriches the interpersonal force our aesthetic claims (Riggle 2021). It makes us focus on things we can imitate, share, and use to express ourselves intelligibly to one another. In doing so it makes possible claims about aesthetic *value*, claims about what is *worthy* of aesthetic valuing.

Finally, in this way aesthetic community establishes a social practice that transcends any individual practitioner. People can come and go, outsiders can join in, novices can train up. In sourcing aesthetic community, aesthetic value contributes to a social practice that persists through temporal and cultural change. Like many social practices, there is typically a benefit to the individuals who engage, but the practice's goodness is not located at the individual level and cannot be reduced to a summation of the individual benefits. In this respect, the practice of aesthetic valuing is like a public good, and aesthetic value contributes to that public good.

(4) No doubt the reader will have wondered how this view handles a range of counterexamples and how it addresses various problems in aesthetics.²⁴ One obvious kind of

²⁴ For a detailed look at how this theory handles aesthetic discourse, see Riggle 2021, where I argue that the best characterization of the illocutionary force of typical aesthetic claims is as *invitational*, and this is due to the communal structure of the practice of aesthetic valuing. To see how the view handles aesthetic autonomy, see Riggle Forthcoming, and to see how the view handles aesthetic testimony, see Riggle 2024.

counterexample goes something like this: consider a lifelong hermit who never encounters another person and so cannot form aesthetic community. It might seem that items in their life cannot have aesthetic value because they cannot form aesthetic community. Aesthetic communitarianism can make sense of the idea that objects in the hermit's life have aesthetic value, but the hermit cannot fully grasp their aesthetic value. The hermit can engage in some discretionary valuing, selecting these seashells and not those, or this narrow and smooth cave and not that wider craggy one. They can also engage their capacity for volitional openness, dancing in the rain, swimming freely in the rivers. When it comes to the characteristic actions, it seems they can imitate (maybe they imitate bears and wolves) and, to an extent, self-express. What they clearly cannot do is form aesthetic community. So the hermit has access to the ingredients of aesthetic community but not to aesthetic community itself. Call the hermit's practice the practice of h-aesthetic valuing, and the realization goods h-aesthetic goods. The h-aesthetic goods are a proper subset of the aesthetic goods (or, at least, they strongly overlap), so the h-aesthetic goods are also worthy of aesthetic valuing, even though the hermit can only engage with their h-aesthetic, and not their full aesthetic, value. The communitarian thought is that the hermit is clearly missing out on *the very best thing* about aesthetic value—what really makes it good. While the hermit can understand some features of aesthetic value's goodness, they cannot grasp the best thing about it.

Aesthetic communitarianism has the power to address a wide range of objections and problems; the view will not fall at the swipe of a counterexample or two. A systematic theory of aesthetic life must be subject to systematic considerations. One view's weakness is another's strength; where one has a bug, another has a feature, and vice versa. It is time to round up the various potshots and problems and start thinking systematically in aesthetics.

8. Conclusion

The problem with theories of aesthetic value thus far is that they have been inattentive to an ambiguity in the value question: What makes aesthetic value good? The question is ambiguous between a *top-down* answer and a *bottom-up* answer. Making the practice of aesthetic valuing explicit reveals that there must be a top-down answer, because there must be some value(s) governing the practice, shedding their goodness on the things that contribute to the practice's flourishing. From the top down, what makes aesthetic value good is the fact that engaging with it would promote the governing values of the general practice of aesthetic valuing. Aesthetic value is realization value, so its goodness derives from the governing good(s) of the practice, which the aesthetic communitarian says is aesthetic community. But from the bottom up what makes some aesthetically good thing good might be any number of things: it might be pleasurable to experience, tasty, fun, scary, liberating, thrilling, socially generative, inventive, sleek, or shocking. It might be groundbreaking, weird, puzzling, transformative, or unconventional. Having a capacity to cause pleasure amounts to an aesthetic value when, only when, and because, engaging with it is good for the practice of aesthetic valuing. Having a capacity to cause pleasure is not in and of itself aesthetically good, though it might seem to be when we are engaged in the practice. In other words, the aesthetic goodness of the capacity to elicit pleasure is *conditional* on the practice of aesthetic valuing; its aesthetic goodness is not wholly derived from the intrinsic goodness of the pleasurable state. What goes for pleasure goes for anything else. This is a broad, pluralistic, and open-ended theory: whatever keeps the practice strong gets the stamp of aesthetic approval.

From the vantage point of aesthetic communitarianism, the mistake of so many theories of aesthetic value is to ignore the practice of aesthetic valuing and focus too narrowly on the

individual's relation to the aesthetic object, locating the source of aesthetic value either mysteriously in the object itself or in some way an individual is, experiences, or acts with respect to the object. But this ignores the social, participatory nature of aesthetic life and tries to factor out the myriad bottom-up ways that something can be aesthetically good. The general problem with all theories of aesthetic value thus far is that they try to read the metaphysics of aesthetic value off of individual-level evaluative considerations, as if aesthetic life happens entirely between an object and an individual. But both are embedded in the social practice of aesthetic valuing.

A difficult question remains: Why should anyone care about the practice of aesthetic valuing? One answer simply points to the constitutive values of the practice: volitional openness, discretionary valuing, and aesthetic community. But, as valuable as those things are, it is possible to be dissatisfied with that response and hope for an even deeper answer that explains why we are right to live aesthetic lives at all, to want or need the special forms of valuing, freedom, and community that aesthetic life enjoins. A deeper justification of the practice of aesthetic valuing, and so of aesthetic value in general, would have to deal with that question.²⁵

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²⁵ In my book *This Beauty: A Philosophy of Being Alive* (Riggle 2022a) I develop an existential answer to this question. Engaging in the practice of aesthetic valuing not only supplies the structural values of the practice but also puts us in touch with reasons to value being alive, reasons we should want to access regularly given the fact that we did not choose this onerous existence.

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