Can't Kill the Vibe: Against *Hope* in Aesthetic Discourse

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Abstract: In a recent paper, Nat Hansen and Zed Adams argue for an aesthetic discourse governing principle they call *Hope of Convergence*. Inspired by the work of Stanley Cavell, they argue that when we speak with each other about the aesthetic value of an object we hope that our attitudes about the object will converge. They characterize this shared hope as involving the exercise of rational capacities in the service of sharing feelings and attitudes, and as accommodating enough to sanction even acrimonious aesthetic exchanges. To establish their view, they critically discuss my view that aesthetic discourse is governed by a 'vibing' norm that I call *Community*: When we speak with each other about aesthetic value we presuppose that we ought to vibe, or supportively engage with each other's individuality. Here I argue that Hansen and Adams's criticisms are unconvincing and there are substantial reasons to abandon *Hope*.

1. Introduction

The film criticism duo Siskel & Ebert often disagreed. In their contentious review of David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* they circled around the thought that Lynch wants to 'play his audience like a piano,' manipulating their emotions by eliciting and subverting their expectations for the film genres of comedy and thriller. Ebert wraps up his critique, 'If [Lynch] wants to play me like a piano, he'd better get some music worth listening to.' But Siskel gets the last word: 'I think this is a good song.'[1]

Is this a successful aesthetic conversation? Many philosophers would say (or be committed to saying) 'No' because they are committed to the thought that aesthetic discourse is *state-oriented*, or aimed at achieving some state of agreement. But while Siskel and Ebert agree on some things—Lynch is a talented director—they do not arrive at a shared aesthetic belief about the aesthetic value of the film and they disagree about the aesthetic character and value of various aspects of the film. They do not 'converge' nor do they seem to care to, focusing instead on expressing and refining their own views by bouncing them off each other. But the presupposition that they ought to converge is often thought to be a constitutive feature of aesthetic conversation (Isenberg 1949, Egan 2010), of evaluative conversation in general (Perez Carballo and Santorio 2016), or simply of *conversation*. Many philosophers are committed to:

> *Convergence*: When we speak with each other about aesthetic value we presuppose that there is a unique normative standard on which our attitudes ought to converge.

[1] See Siskel & Ebert 2009 for video of this review.

Siskel and Ebert seem unconcerned about converging on the merits of *Blue Velvet* (and many other films) and so they failed (many times over) in their attempt to have a successful aesthetic conversation.

In my paper 'Convergence, Community, and Force in Aesthetic Discourse,' (Riggle 2022a) I argue that aesthetic conversation is much richer and more varied than *Convergence* allows. There are many aesthetic conversations that are successful even if we do not presuppose that our attitudes ought to converge on a unique standard. Instead, I argue that we should think aesthetic conversation is governed by the value of engaging in aesthetic community. Aesthetic discourse is governed by the following *Community* norm:

> *Community*: When we speak with each other about aesthetic value we presuppose that we ought to achieve a state of mutual valuing of individuality.

The goal of aesthetic conversation is to achieve aesthetic community in which the interlocutors express their 'individualities'—this is one of my technical terms—to each other in a way that promotes the social exercise of distinctive aesthetic capacities. I gloss this as 'vibing', a process of mutually engaged activity that Siskel & Ebert seemed to have mastered. In a reflection on the tenth anniversary of Siskel's passing, Ebert wrote about how well they vibed:

> Gene Siskel and I were like tuning forks, strike one, and the other would pick up the same frequency. When we were in a group together, we were always intensely aware of one another. Sometimes this took the form of camaraderie, sometimes shared opinions, sometimes hostility. But we were aware.[2]

Community captures the sense that Siskel and Ebert's conversation about *Blue Velvet* is a success. So many of their conversations were like that: they do not presuppose that they ought to agree, they fail to reach agreement, and they are practiced at not caring much about that.

In a recent article for this journal, Hansen and Adams (2024) argue that *Community* is not the only norm that can capture conversations like Siskel and Ebert's and avoid the faults of *Convergence*. They agree that *Convergence* fails but they seek to retain its spirit by drawing on the work of Stanley Cavell, who they see as claiming that the *hope* of convergence is what matters for aesthetic conversation, even if the object of that hope never materializes. In place of *Community*, they offer *Hope*:

> *Hope (of Convergence):* When we speak with each other about the aesthetic value of an object we hope that our attitudes about the object will converge.

[2] 'Remembering Gene' on www.RogerEbert.com, February 17, 2009: https://www.rogerebert.com/roger-ebert/remembering-gene

When we hope that our attitudes will converge, we do not merely express our own aesthetic beliefs. We try to find common ground, we clarify our aesthetic claims, and when challenged we engage in worthwhile practices of giving and asking for reasons, defending our claims, critiquing each other, and so on.

In this way, Hansen and Adams agree with me that aesthetic discourse is process-oriented—its value lies in certain processes of discursive engagement rather than in any particular end-state (e.g. of agreement). But they think that the relevant process is not that of engaging in aesthetic community. They argue that *Hope* evades my criticisms of *Convergence* and that, against *Community*, 'There are vibing conversations that do not go beyond expressions of personal preference and there are acrimonious aesthetic arguments that [*Community* rules out but] are still worth having' (Hansen and Adams 2024, p. 758). Their worry is that if *Community* sanctions conversations that are little more than exchanges of preference, then it does not adequately support the important activities involved in hoping to share attitudes. And if *Community's* emphasis on vibing steers conversation too acutely toward amicability, then it cannot sanction grittier, more heated, or acrimonious exchanges that could be sanctioned by the hope of sharing attitudes.

Here I argue that Hansen and Adams's critique of *Community* is unconvincing, but seeing why unearths a deep source of disagreement about how to think about the rationality and general structure of aesthetic discourse. I argue that they do not succeed in showing that *Community* allows mere exchanges of preference and that *Hope* and *Community* are on a par when it comes to acrimonious aesthetic exchanges. In developing this response, I will highlight several reasons to be *Hope*-less and show how we can understand the rationality of aesthetic discursive practices, and of aesthetic life more generally, without centering the 'serious' forms of discursive engagement that Hansen and Adams emphasize.

2. Hoping and Converging

In (Riggle 2022a), I argue that aesthetic conversations are constitutively governed by *Community* and aim at the 'mutual valuing of individuality'. But to understand this view, we have to spell out my technical definition of individuality: a person's individuality is constituted by their exercise of a capacity that I call 'discretionary valuing'. This is the capacity to decide what and how to value. Much of our valuing is compulsory: valuing love and disvaluing murder are not optional. But we can choose to spend our time engaging with burly motorcycles over cute VW Beetles, hip hop over punk, Schubert over Brahms. In doing so we develop our capacity for discretionary valuing, deciding what to pay attention to, how to attend to or interpret it, what to revisit, how to listen, see, or aesthetically act. While other practices might promote or permit discretionary valuing, aesthetic valuing centers and celebrates its exercise. (Riggle 2024)

A person's individuality is constituted (in part) by the way they exercise their discretionary valuing capacity. And so individuality is expressed not merely, and

sometimes not at all, by expressing what one likes or dislikes—where liking and disliking are broad enough to include trivial preferences and innate dispositions—but primarily in how one exercises this capacity for engaged *valuing*. One may like or prefer something without loving or valuing it. I like but do not love cucumbers, and I would not be very bothered if my attitude changed to indifference or dislike. Many of our preferences change without mention. And one may value something toward which they have no natural preference, learning to value it through repeated engagement and effort. Aesthetic conversations are opportunities to exercise and express this capacity in a mutually supportive way, and such conversations are successful when this kind of mutual support is carried off.

My argument against *Convergence*, in brief, is this:

(1) Aesthetic community exists when, only when, and because agents 'vibe', i.e. mutually support the expression and development of their capacities for discretionary valuing (and volitional openness).
(2) There are many aesthetic conversations that are good in virtue of their promoting or constituting aesthetic community.
(3) Presupposing that we ought to converge on a shared standard is not necessary for aesthetic community.
(4) *Convergence* says that aesthetic conversations are good if and only if interlocutors presuppose that they ought to converge on a shared standard.
(5) Therefore, *Convergence* is false.

(1) gives a definition of 'aesthetic community'; (2) asserts that there are aesthetic conversations that are good in virtue of how they promote aesthetic community; (3) asserts that presupposing the existence of a standard on which we ought to agree is not necessary for aesthetic community; and (4) states that *Convergence* requires aesthetic interlocutors to make such a presupposition.

Hansen and Adams largely accept this argument (perhaps they would quibble with (1)). However, they argue that a slight modification of (4) *is also* true and thus so is a slight modification of *Convergence* that competes favorably with *Community*. They thus locate a middle position between *Community* and *Convergence* expressed by *Hope*.

What is the difference between *Hope* and *Convergence*? The primary way that Hansen and Adams distinguish between them is as follows:

> Riggle assumes that advocates of a convergence norm are committed to the idea that interlocutors' sensibilities are fixed in advance of the developing conversation—whereas we think that one of the things a rewarding conversation about art can do is reveal that your ability to appreciate the artwork isn't immutable, and the conversation itself can be a means by which one comes to be able to acquire that ability. (Hansen and Adams 2024, p. 751)

I cannot tell why they think it is reasonable to attribute this assumption to me. I never states this restriction, and the *Convergence* norm itself does not presuppose that the relevant standard already exists in one or the other of the interlocutors. Furthermore, none of my criticisms of *Convergence* depend on the thought that it does. *Convergence* is still satisfied when the standard that the interlocutors suppose they ought to converge on is one neither had previously. Furthermore, changing our aesthetic views during an aesthetic conversation is such a common feature of aesthetic discourse that I would count it as one of the more obvious ones that any theory of aesthetic discourse must account for. Given that this is so common, it is strange to read a caveat against it into *Convergence* (and *Community*, see p. 751)

So how exactly is *Hope* any different from *Convergence*? Presupposing the existence of a standard on which interlocutors ought to agree is not very different from hoping for agreement, since the presupposition is the very thing *Hope* requires. *Hope* requires the possibility of agreement, and agreement is possible if and only if there is some standard to agree on.

As stated, *Hope* does not require the presupposition of a normative standard; it simply calls for shared attitudes.[3] However, merely sharing attitudes cannot be what *Hope* demands. Suppose that after a long and passionate conversation we come to agree that Warhol's Brillo Boxes are wickedly scary. Our attitudes about Brillo Boxes align but have we had a successful aesthetic conversation? It seems not, since our judgments and feelings are unhinged, divorced from standards that ought to guide us. (Indeed, I am pretty sure that Hansen and Adams would rule out this conversation as not 'serious' in the sense that I discuss below.)

If there is another relevant difference between *Hope* and *Convergence*, then I am not sure what it is. So I am left somewhat puzzled about the distinction between *Hope* and *Convergence*.

3. Aesthetic Acrimony

Still, Hansen and Adams argue that *Hope* is preferable to *Community* on the grounds that *Community* rules out acrimonious aesthetic conversations and sanctions mere exchanges of preference. They argue that, 'There are lots of examples of non-defective aesthetic claims that don't involve vibing' (Hansen and Adams 2024, p. 755). If they are right, then there is a whole class of counterexamples to *Community* involving acrimonious but worthwhile aesthetic conversations that, they claim, can be captured by *Hope*.

The example they discuss at length is an infamous exchange between art critic Michael Fried and artist Donald Judd. Fried (1988) claims that Judd's 'literalist' art is merely interesting and lacks the conviction possessed by art that can hold its own when compared to relevant work whose quality is not in doubt. Judd (2016, pp. 205–6) responds by calling Fried's article a 'stupid' 'pedantic pseudo-philosophical analysis' that uses

[3] Thanks to the referees for emphasizing this.

'shit' methods. Judd highlights Fried's misunderstanding of his thinking: 'I was especially irked by Fried's ignorant misrepresentation of my use of the word 'interesting'. I obviously use it in a particular way but Fried reduces it to the cliché 'merely interesting'…' (2016, pp. 205–6). Hansen and Adams describe this conversation as one that *Community* would reject as defective and claim that it is 'non-defective' (Hansen and Adams 2024, p. 755) and a 'worthwhile aesthetic exchange' (Hansen and Adams 2024, p. 756).

However, it is difficult to see how Hansen and Adams's own account construes this as a worthwhile conversation. In the passage they quote from Judd, he is explicitly explaining why he 'gave up on Michael Fried' (Judd 2016, p. 205). He gave up on him because he is a stupid pseudo-philosopher who uses shit methods and is inclined to misrepresent Judd's ideas. These are good reasons to think that there is *no hope* for them to share attitudes, since you cannot reasonably hope to converge with someone you have given up on. Or, if Hansen and Adams think you can, then *Hope* is so normatively weak that it could sanction almost any aesthetic conversation. So it seems that *Community* and *Hope* should agree on the Fried-Judd exchange. The conversation is not worthwhile.

Even if Hansen and Adams can show how *Hope* sanctions the exchange, it is clearly a vitriolic extreme, and there could be reasonable disagreement about whether a theory of aesthetic discourse should sanction malicious exchanges full of mutual misunderstanding. It is not the kind of case that should be decisive in selecting between principles like *Community* and *Hope*.

Hansen and Adams's claim is more sweeping anyway. They claim that 'Expressions of contempt are incompatible with vibing' (Hansen and Adams 2024, p. 757). Expressions of contempt abound in aesthetic life, so if they are incompatible with vibing then *Community* is in serious trouble. Why think that expressions of contempt are ruled out by *Community*? Hansen and Adams simply quote me to support this claim: 'Riggle's commitment to vibing being a feature of non-defective aesthetic conversations leads him to claim that 'contempt rarely if ever feature[s] in aesthetic utterances' (p. 625). We think this is more than an overly sunny assessment—it strikes us as simply false.' (Hansen and Adams 2024, p. 757).

This is an unfortunate misreading of what I wrote, using a quotation that is taken out of context. When I state that 'contempt rarely if ever feature[s] in aesthetic utterances' I am talking specifically and explicitly about contempt *as a candidate for the directive illocutionary force* of aesthetic claims. Contemptuous directives are things like 'Die you horrible cook!' or 'Get a life you fool!'—quite different from contemptuous aesthetic judgments. The quote is from a section entitled 'Directive Character and Varieties of Force' where I survey the varieties of force that might attach to the directive character of everyday aesthetic claims. When one says that something is beautiful to another, they are characterizing the thing as beautiful. But are they doing something else, too? Are they directing or encouraging you to do something? Are they *recommending* it to you, *inviting* you to appreciate it, or, as Kant thought, *demanding* your agreement? After surveying several varieties, I rule out contempt as a plausible candidate because it rarely, if ever,

features *as the directive force* of aesthetic utterances. In nonfigurative utterances that something is beautiful, one is usually not also communicating a contemptuous directive to the addressee.

Contemptuous aesthetic evaluations are common in aesthetic discourse, and any theory that ruled contempt out *tout court* would be a nonstarter. In fact, *Community* sanctions a broad range of disagreements, and there is no reason to think that something goes haywire whenever contempt rears its head.

But it is important to distinguish between person-directed contempt and belief-directed contempt. Contempt is an emotion that construes its target as beneath consideration, and regarding a *person*, or someone's views *in toto*, as beneath consideration is *at best* in tension with hoping to form aesthetic community with them. Fill in the awkward blank: 'Your aesthetic views are always worthless and beneath my consideration, but let's agree that ____.' Why would anyone seek agreement from someone whose views they regard as beneath consideration? Perhaps there are cases where it makes sense, but by and large it doesn't. Similarly awkward: 'Your aesthetic views are worthless and beneath my consideration, but let's vibe over ____.' Why would anyone want to vibe with someone whose aesthetic views they regard as beneath consideration? Again, perhaps there are cases where it makes sense, but by and large it doesn't. *Hope* and *Community* vibe like that.

But not all aesthetic conversations involve this kind of blanket dismissal of a person or their views. We might think that someone's judgment in a particular case is beneath consideration but for that very reason invite them to see it from another perspective or hope to change their mind. As Siskel used to put it to Ebert, 'You may be an asshole, but you're my asshole.' Contempt, dismissal, hatred, incredulity—they are all familiar enough in aesthetic life and compatible with flourishing aesthetic conversation.

My playful emphasis on 'vibing' should not obscure the fact that *Community* sanctions a wide range of aesthetic conversations that are full of friction, when that friction is compatible with, and especially when it generates, the kind of mutual support I highlight.

4. Preferring and Vibing

The most direct way to argue for *Hope* would be to show that the kinds of cases that I highlight to support *Community* over *Convergence* either also support *Hope* or are not in fact worthwhile. For example, I highlight the following conversation as one that *Community* clearly embraces but *Convergence* rejects:

the dialogue

S: That bridge is beautiful.
A: Hmm, I think it's clunky.
S: The pillars are robust and stately. Exactly right for a bridge, especially that

one. A: Perhaps for some, but that bridge is squat and inelegant.
S: You do tend to hate any hint of Art Deco.
A: And you can't get enough of it.
S: I love the fanning shapes, the geometric layering. Just beautiful.
A: Have you seen the new building on 54th St.? Lots of fanning shapes.
S: I have! I stared at it for twenty minutes the other day. It's fantastic.
A: Not nearly as stunning as the sleek new library down the block.
S: That thing? It's so boring. (Riggle 2022a, pp. 618–619)

One can imagine the conversation continuing along such lines. Hansen and Adams write,

> we submit that this is not an example of an excellent aesthetic conversation, but rather much closer to an exchange of preferences. … In this conversation, we primarily learn about the preferences of the interlocutors... Importantly, we don't get much insight into the objects that they're talking about or why their features are or are not aesthetically significant. (Hansen and Adams 2024, p. 753)

This characterization of *the dialogue* is puzzling in two respects. First, while they say it is 'closer' to a mere exchange of preferences, it clearly is *not* a mere exchange of preferences. A mere exchange of preferences would look very different:

mere exchange

S: I like art deco bridges
A: I'm indifferent. I like sleek modern ones.
S: Oh, I don't like those.
A: That's too bad.
S: I'm ok with it.

Here the interlocutors are simply exchanging information about what they like and dislike, and this clearly fails to count as an aesthetic conversation. But *the dialogue* clearly does involve insights into the objects they are talking about: 'The pillars are robust and stately,' 'The bridge is beautiful,' 'Fanning shapes'. So how is *the dialogue* 'closer' to *mere exchange* than it is to a genuine aesthetic conversation?[4]

Secondly, for *the dialogue* to be a defective conversation by the lights of *Hope*, it would have to be obvious that the interlocutors do not hope to agree. But nothing rules out the possibility that they hope for some agreement on some things. Indeed, this conversation is far more conducive to convergence than the bitter exchange between Fried and Judd that they claim *Hope* sanctions.

[4] Although their official claim is that there vibing conversations that 'do not go beyond' (p. 758) expressions of preference, they focus their arguments instead on the claim that *Community* sanctions conversations that are 'closer' to mere exchanges of preference than they are to genuine aesthetic conversations. I deny both claims.

To diagnose this second issue, we have to clarify *Hope*. Does it require that the interlocutors hope to agree on everything, on something, on enough things? Consider these variations:

> *A Hold on Hope* When we speak with each other about the aesthetic value of an object we hope that *some* of our attitudes about the object will converge.
>
> *Heaps of Hope*: When we speak with each other about the aesthetic value of an object we hope that *all* of our attitudes about the object will converge.

The dialogue does not abide by *Heaps of Hope*, but isn't that principle a nonstarter anyway? Hope is rational only if it is rational to believe that the desired outcome is possible. But aesthetic life is replete with disagreement and variation. Even when talented critics agree that something has aesthetic value, they almost certainly disagree on the details. As Hansen and Adams themselves hilariously illustrate, the idea of an 'ultimate argument settler'—a method for determining who, if anyone, is right in any aesthetic disagreement—is absurd (Hansen and Adams 2024, pp. 742-43). The hope for *full* agreement is irrational, or at least very often so, and so *Heaps of Hope* is out.

A Hold on Hope is so weak as to sanction nearly every conversation, including *the dialogue*. Sure, the interlocutors are not dead set on coming to an agreement, but that is not the only thing interlocutors need to do in order to agree. They also need to understand each other's sensibilities, feel out their respective ways of valuing, gauge their degrees of openness to change, and so on. The interlocutors are at least doing that, and so their actions are compatible with *A Hold on Hope*. In that case, *Hope* and *Community* generate the same result.

This suggests that Hansen and Adams regard a shared hope as *necessary* but not *sufficient* for a good aesthetic conversation. Indeed, the main argument that Hansen and Adams develop to establish that *Hope* does not sanction *the dialogue* is that it lacks a property they call 'seriousness', where a conversation is serious when the interlocutors are ready 'to argue for the correctness of their aesthetic claims in the face of disagreement.' (Hansen and Adams 2024, p. 746) For Cavell such readiness is part of the 'discipline of accounting' for one's aesthetic judgments: defending one's aesthetic claims, supplying justifying reasons, proving one's judgments are correct, arguing against opposing views, and so on. 'Seriousness' is the hallmark of *Hope* because it embodies the means of agreement.

If sharing a hope for agreement is necessary *but not sufficient* for aesthetic conversation, then *Hope* is significantly understated. What we need are answers to two questions. What exactly is 'seriousness' in aesthetic discourse? And why does it matter?

Hansen and Adams outline an answer to the first question but say essentially nothing about the second. Yet the second issue is crucial to their account. Remember, they are developing a process-oriented theory of aesthetic discourse. Process-oriented views need to make sense of the *value of the process* that discursive norms are designed to

promote. State-oriented views do not face this particular problem, since the value of the process is instrumental for the good of the sought-out end state. But as part of a process-oriented view, *Hope* is supposed to make aesthetic conversation worthwhile in the absence of that end state of agreement, whether or not the interlocutors' attitudes align. So Hansen and Adams have to appeal to something valuable that bears some relation to the process-activity that *Hope* promotes, in a way that preserves the process-oriented character of the view. This is why a characterization and defense of 'seriousness' matters so much, since it would seem to embody whatever value that is.

As we have seen, Hansen and Adams follow Cavell in characterizing seriousness as a sort of giving and asking for aesthetic reasons. This involves a 'readiness to argue for the correctness of one's aesthetic judgments in the face of disagreement' (Hansen and Adams 2024, p. 746) and making '…a sustained attempt to spell out their criticisms of each other's views in detail and defend their own views in the face of disagreement.' (p. 754) Of course, such reasoning will have an aesthetic inflection. Hansen and Adams account for this with Cavell's notion of 'passionate utterances', wherein the speaker expresses their emotions in a way that calls on the hearer to respond in kind and puts the speaker in danger of being rebuffed if they do not (Cavell 2005). Calling on the hearer in this way engages the speaker in discursive moves that are familiar from the literature on art criticism (Cross 2017): exhortations to notice, invitations to appreciate, attempts to guide experience, clarifying commitments and so on. This implicates the discursive partners in practices of navigating forms of intimacy and alienation involved in attempts to form emotional bonds, share judgements, and align their attitudes. Nonetheless, Hansen and Admas embrace Cavell's thought that 'serious' aesthetic conversations are marked by a certain 'dogmatism'. Cavell writes 'I think that air of dogmatism is indeed present in [aesthetic claims]; but if that is intolerant, that is because tolerance could only mean, as in liberals it often does, that the kind of claim in question is not taken seriously' (Cavell 1976a, p. 96).

One might wonder how such seriousness and dogmatism square with the openness to change that Hansen and Adams recognize as a valuable feature of aesthetic discourse. But setting that question aside, one response to the claim that *the dialogue* lacks seriousness is simply: so much the worse for seriousness! We can have lots of fun, interesting, lovely, dynamic, insightful conversations without responding to disagreement 'seriously', that is, by trying to prove that our interlocutor should feel the way we do.

So why care about seriousness? Hansen and Adams do not explicitly answer this question, but by promoting serious aesthetic conversations *Hope* appears to excel at promoting two valuable activities: *the activity of coming to share attitudes* as guided by *the exercise of rational capacities*. In doing so, *Hope* ensures that aesthetic discursive practices are *rational practices* because they centrally involve the exercise of rational capacities in the hope of sharing attitudes. In this way, *Hope* guarantees that our rational capacities have a place in our aesthetic discursive practices. Much ink has been spilled in attempts to support the rationality of aesthetic discourse, and this route is a natural one: Plug

rationality directly into the practice by ensuring that individual contributions involve giving and asking for reasons in the hope of sharing attitudes.[5]

The worry that motivates their emphasis on seriousness is that conversations that lack seriousness will fall into mere exchanges of preferences: 'if vibing only requires recognizing and mutually valuing these sorts of differences, without the hope of agreement it's hard to see how it involves more than the expression and appreciation of personal preferences' (Hansen and Adams 2024, p. 754). They even go so far as to characterize *Community*-governed conversations as exemplary of what they call 'the concierge view', according to which 'the main point of listening attentively to your interlocutor is to figure out what they value and keep the vibing going by making recommendations or discussing topics that they will enjoy (and have them do the same in return)' (pp. 753-754). Hansen and Adams see no middle ground between 'serious' aesthetic conversations that embrace a sort of 'dogmatism' and servile expressions and exchanges of preference. 'Crucially,' they write, 'the inherently discretionary nature of our choices implies that no one could ever seriously contest someone else's preferences' (p. 755).

But what exactly is this crucial implication? If someone merely 'likes' something—olives, say—then there is no disputing it. That much is familiar enough. But if the discretionary choice to value something is, well, *discretionary*, then that would that mean that it could be contested. I exercised my discretion; I chose to repeatedly engage in a valuing way with Guided By Voices instead of R.E.M., even though I believe both are aesthetically good. We could talk about it. I could tell you why. Maybe you will understand even if you are just the opposite. Maybe you can persuade me to go beyond my respect and admiration for R.E.M. and become a more full-blooded fan. Maybe I could persuade you. Even if neither of us does, we can have an aesthetically worthwhile conversation, talking our way through our connections to our respective musical choices, explaining why we think they are worthy of aesthetic valuing, challenging each other when appropriate. We do not need to hope for convergence in order to support each other in our aesthetic valuing practices, for our individualities to 'harmonize'.

Or for us to 'vibe'. As we noted, I use a technical notion of 'vibing', but notice that *mere exchange* does not amount to vibing *even intuitively*. Now let's see what happens when we augment the *mere exchange* with some 'mutual appreciation':

mere exchange+

S: I like art deco bridges
A: Oh, right on. It is a fascinating style, but I never really got into it. I do really love sleek modern ones.
S: Cool, yeah, I can see why, even though I'm not a huge fan. But what do you like about them?

[5] I would characterize this as an instance of 'individualist' theorizing in aesthetics (Riggle 2022b).

A: I like their sleekness and smoothness, almost futuristic.
S: Yeah I can see that. Funny because I think I like the almost antiquated look of art deco bridges.

Adding the mutual valuing of individuality transforms *mere exchange* into an aesthetic conversation. Clearly, *mere exchange+* and *the dialogue* are not identical, but I claim that they are more similar than *the dialogue* is to *mere exchange.* This illuminates how important the mutual valuing of individuality is to aesthetic conversation. Valuing other individuals requires information about individuality. Information about individuality is information about the exercise of aesthetic capacities, discretionary valuing (and volitional openness). Information about the exercise of these capacities is information about what items the individual chooses to engage with and how they engage. Without gleaning that information one way or another, we have little to value; by including it, we gain substantive aesthetic information about the individual.

Hansen and Adams are right that, if a conversation is little more than an exchange of preferences, then it is not a worthwhile pursuit. Hence the fact that people tend not to exchange information about their preferences for no particular reason. Witness the pure comedy of one of my favorite early Internet videos, the kid in a zombie costume who says, when a live reporter asks him what he thinks about the festival he is attending, 'I like turtles.' Me too, kid.

Community demands more than the mere exchange of preferences, but that alone does not show that *Community* supports a rational discursive practice. While some practices are rational in virtue of their calling on participants to exercise their rational capacities, other practices are rational in virtue of their *rational structure*. Suppose there were some goods that could not be attained unless people acted together in a social practice. And suppose that the social practice is such that by following its norms, rules, and conventions people do indeed realize the values they are after, in a way that is acceptable (morally sound, just, efficient enough). Then we can say that the practice is rational, or that we have reason to engage in the practice, *considerable* reason if the practice's values are especially good.

The aesthetic communitarian holds that aesthetic discursive practices are rational in this way, by being rationally structured by the value of aesthetic community (see Riggle 2024). When we aim to realize this value in aesthetic discourse, we might rationally argue and come to value things just as our interlocutor does, bonding over shared attitudes or feelings. But we also might not. There are many ways we might satisfy *Community*. Dogmatism and seriousness can flex their muscle now and then, but they needn't police the affair. We can balance our tendencies to dogmatism with open-mindedness, creative invitation, and a generous willingness to understand, value, and learn from alternative ways of engaging in the practice of aesthetic valuing.

5. *Hope*less Community

In a sense the issue comes down to different ways of understanding the value of aesthetic community and whether or not it requires attempting to share aesthetic attitudes. Hansen and Adams seem to think that there are three options for aesthetic community: the community of serious interlocutors who hope for agreement, the community of individuals who exchange information about their preferences, and the community implied by the 'concierge view', the happy exchange of well-considered recommendations.

It should be clear at this point that, contrary to Hansen and Adams's portrayal, *Community* adamantly does not embrace the concierge view's happy exchange of recommendations. Recommendations tend to efface the individuality of the speaker. That is why they are appropriate for the role of concierge, who is at the service of the guest. But the *mutual* expression and uptake of individuality is, by design, the central point of aesthetic discourse governed by *Community*. I argue at length that recommendation is not the typical illocutionary force of aesthetic discourse precisely because of its 'concierge' character (Riggle 2022a, pp. 632-636). Recommendations crowd out the sensibility of the recommender and focus on what the hearer would like. I argue that, instead, everyday aesthetic claims have the force of an *invitation* calls on the invitee to join them in aesthetic valuing.

We are left with the choice between the community of serious hope and the mere exchange of preferences. Since the latter is no community at all, we seem to be stuck with the community of serious hope. But this is a false dilemma, and we can see it in action in their discussion of dining at a food court with a friend:

> If you and I go to the DeKalb Market Hall … you are free to get a Hawaiian poke bowl at Wiki Wiki while I get a Pakistani burger at BK Jani, and we can each appreciate each other's choices as expressions of our individual identities. … By contrast, …Cavell's ideal is illustrated by our going together to Jiang Nan Flushing and agreeing to share their Peking duck and steamed barramundi. (Hansen and Adams 2024, p. 755)

These are not our only options. While *Community* certainly encourages sharing and discussing food, we can appreciate its spirit via a third option: we could invite each other to try our favorite dishes. Perhaps one friend says, 'You have to try the Pakistani burger at BK Jani!' And the other responds, 'Ok but only if you try a poke bowl from Wiki Wiki.' The ensuing aesthetic conversation will focus on exactly the things that *Community* promotes.

Hansen and Adams quote Cavell to suggest that arguments can be worthwhile without agreement. 'Without the hope of agreement, argument would be pointless; but it doesn't follow that without agreement...the argument was pointless' (Cavell 1979, pp. 254–255). *Hope* and *Community* both entail that aesthetic arguments without agreement are not pointless—indeed, as Hansen and Adams point out, failing to achieve shared attitudes can reveal the limits of self-knowledge (Hansen and Adams 2024, p. 752). But

unrealized hopes are always, for that reason and to that extent, *disappointing*. That is part of the logic of hope. However, as *Community* shows, aesthetic conversations that fail to achieve agreement are not, solely in virtue of that, disappointing—they can be wonderful, powerful, lovely, profound, communal—and that is reason enough to lose *Hope*.

6. Art and the Ends of Aesthetic Life

Despite their party-pooping efforts Hansen and Adams have not killed the vibe. Their aim was to establish that 'There are vibing conversations that do not go beyond expressions of personal preference and there are acrimonious aesthetic arguments that [*Community* rules out but] are still worth having.' (Hansen and Adams 2024, p. 758) But, as I have argued, first, the discussion they characterize as 'close to' or as 'not going beyond' an exchange of preferences is no such thing. Secondly, exchanges of preference are not aesthetic conversations to begin with, and however we characterize *the dialogue,* their own principle of *Hope* seems to sanction it. Third, *Hope* is not as friendly to acrimonious aesthetic arguments as they suppose, and *Community* is nowhere near as hostile.

In responding to their arguments against *Community* I have developed three arguments against *Hope*. First, it is ambiguous between a 'some' and an 'all' reading, where the former is too weak, the latter is too strong, and, in any case, insufficiently distinct from *Convergence*. Secondly, it falsely implies that aesthetic conversations that fail to achieve agreement are, in virtue of that, disappointing. Lastly, *Hope* adopts a false individualist thesis, namely, that the rationality of aesthetic discursive practices depends on participants' exercise of rational capacities.

This question about the rationality of aesthetic discursive practices points to one of the more fundamental differences between aesthetic communitarianism and many of its rivals. Process-oriented views hold that the norms of aesthetic discourse issue from the value of certain processes, and so such views need to say what that value is and why it matters. Previously, I noted two potential sources of process-value for *Hope* (§4): the processes of attempting to share attitudes with its 'passionate utterances', and the exercises of rational capacities involved in 'serious' exchanges. But exercising rational capacities is not good in itself, and it would seem that the value of attempting to share attitudes is itself dependent on success and so on some outcome. Both seem to threaten *Hope*'s supposed process-orientation. So what exactly is the value of the discursive process that *Hope* enjoins?

One answer that Hansen and Adams might develop, following Cavell, is that serious aesthetic discourse is the process reflects a faith in 'great art'. In an essay on the work of Arthur Danto, Cavell distinguishes between different kinds of aesthetic claim, those that 'speak with necessity and universality' and those that do not (Cavell 2007, pp. 35-36). His claims about Warhol's films, for example, do not, but his claims about *The Philadelphia Story* or the works of Beethoven do. Cavell writes:

> I find that I am not vividly interested in whether others agree with me about Warhol's films, or perhaps no more interested than I would be in whether they understand and like a joke I like, which may be no small matter. But this is not the role I have counted on from the great arts, which is rather to prepare my experience for judgment by making experience mine, and to show the world, I might say show the justice of the world, to deserve judgment. (Cavell 2007, pp. 35-36)[6]

Cavell endorses a special category of 'great art' that offers some special understanding, ability, or value that 'prepares' us in some way and that reveals the world to be worthy of 'judgment'. The rest is just art.

On this view, there is some higher good offered by great art and promoted via the processes enjoined by *Hope.* This higher good, whatever it is, gives aesthetic discourse a kind of solemn or reverential character: great art stands on a pedestal and we must rationally commune and hopefully converge to behold it, to love it, and to attune ourselves to its greatness. To do so, we must 'speak with necessity and universality,' exhorting others to share our attitudes. While this might seem to cast aside the view's process-orientation, it needn't: the discursive activity enjoined by *Hope* might not merely exemplify but also *constitute* the category of great art.[7]

But I still wonder whether a Cavellian faith in great art really motivates *Hope*. *Community* happily accommodates a profound love of aesthetic value without casting art in the role of greatness. A skeptic might see Cavell as leveraging his lack of appreciation for certain aesthetic goods into a sweeping distinction that universalizes the aesthetic goods that feature in his particular life. In doing so he avoids faithfully engaging with—seeing the 'greatness' in—the work he calls mere 'art' and communing with those who genuinely love it. Cavell is into modernism. Danto is into post-modernism. Siskel loves *Blue Velvet*, Ebert doesn't, we are different. And our differences run deep. If we turn away from those differences, then we lose the opportunity to be volitionally open to them and to let our open engagement with them enrich our own individualities. Danto responds to Cavell, 'The differences between selves, however parallel their lives, is indelible and intractable. But that does not prevent me from embracing Stanley with a kind of love for his difference, for his depth and brilliance as a thinker, and for the beauty of his soul.' (Cavell 2007, p. 42)

That captures the spirit of aesthetic communitarianism. I reject the picture of aesthetic life as oriented around 'great' objects, in favor of an *atelic* and *person-centered* communal vision—a vision that welcomes shared attitudes but that also embraces and thrives on differences. Aesthetic community is a good we can realize even when we do not hope for agreement, and it is a good that sees disagreement not as a threat to the existence of great art but as an opportunity for the kinds of shared inquiry, joint

[6] Thanks to Zachary Weinstein for highlighting this passage for me.
[7] See Walden 2023 for a proposal along these lines.

exploration, and cooperative creativity that aesthetic valuing thrives on. The highest good of aesthetic life is the good of *being in aesthetic community*, the good we socially create and embody when we cultivate supportive relationships in the exercise and improvement of our capacities for discretionary valuing and volitional openness. Aesthetic value is what is worthy of engagement in this pursuit. And so art is subservient to aesthetic community. Art is to be revered because, first and foremost, *we are*, we discretionary and free valuers. While some art deserves a special place in our estimation, we should not lose sight of the fact that art lifts us up to value each other. It is the pedestal *we* stand on.[8]

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