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Levinson on the Aesthetic Ideal

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INTRODUCTION

Many of us want our lives to be, in part, aesthetic lives. Is there an "ideal" of aesthetic life? One influential thought descends from David Hume, who wondered if we could make sense of the idea that there is a standard of taste by which we could reconcile disputes over aesthetic matters. His proposal is that the standard of taste is given by the joint verdict of true judges—people with highly developed sensibilities who, according to Hume, have "strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice." The Hume-inspired thought, then, is that we should develop an ideal sensibility, as defined (at least) by the characteristics Hume requires of a "true judge".[1]

Jerrold Levinson, one of this view's staunchest defenders, raises a challenge to it in his recent paper "Artistic Worth and Personal Taste".[2] Our aesthetic lives concern an array of aesthetic attitudes directed at a range of objects, from artworks to items of style and décor. At least some of these attitudes, we think, contribute to one's being the kind of person one is. But due to the fact that true judges, or "ideal critics" as Levinson calls them, share aesthetic preferences, they must lack unique "aesthetic personalities". Levinson thinks we should preserve such uniqueness, and so a worry arises about whether one really should strive to be like the ideal critic in one's aesthetic life.

In response to this problem Levinson argues that, despite appearances, ideal critics *can* have unique aesthetic personalities. My aim in this short paper is to critique Levinson's responses. I begin by presenting the problem (§I) and Levinson's proposed solutions (§II). I criticize Levinson's solutions to the problem (§III) and conclude with a question about the status of the purported challenge from uniqueness (§IV).

The Uniqueness Challenge to the Hume-Inspired Aesthetic Ideal

I. We generally want to make sense of the possibility of an aesthetic judgment's being mistaken (or correct). I'll focus, like Levinson, on aesthetic judgments about artworks (keeping in mind that our aesthetic lives extend well beyond the artistic domain). Suppose someone

[1] David Hume, "Of the Standard of Taste". Note that the term "true judge" is not widely used today and has been replaced by the term "ideal critic". Notably, Hume himself does not make the claim that the "true judge" constitutes the aesthetic ideal. Jerrold Levinson extends Hume's view in this direction in "Hume's Standard of Taste: The Real Problem".

[2] *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Summer 2010. See also Alexander Nehamas's *Only a Promise of Happiness: The Place of Beauty in a World of Art*, pg. 83.

makes the claim that Shakespeare's love sonnets lack (or possess) aesthetic value: we want to make sense of the thought that this person's judgment is, in some sense, incorrect (or correct). Levinson's preferred way of making sense of this is Humean in outline. Roughly, the aesthetic value of an artwork consists in its capacity to afford intrinsically rewarding aesthetic experiences in ideal critics. Ideal critics are those whose sensibilities are developed so as to be able to fully appreciate masterpieces, which are the artworks that have stood the test of time. The responses of the ideal critics together determine the standard of taste.[3] Their developed sensibilities allow them to enjoy and appreciate aesthetic items to the full extent, and they appreciate them for the right reasons. They enjoy nothing less than full access to the world's beauty. Sounds good! Those who seek aesthetic value, Levinson argues, ought to get their sensibilities in line, to have the right responses and make the right aesthetic judgments.

However, in developing an "ideal sensibility," we run a serious risk. According to Levinson, we risk losing the *uniqueness* of what he calls our "aesthetic personality," which he defines as follows:

> "One's taste, in the sense of personal preferences in matters aesthetic, arguably not only partly *reveals* who one is or what sort of person one is, but also partly *constitutes* who one is or what sort of person one is. Let us term the totality of such aesthetic preferences an *aesthetic personality.*" (228)

Notice first that this definition can be read *four* ways, due to the following two ambiguities. First, the term "personal preferences in matters aesthetic" is ambiguous between a set of preferences that includes non-aesthetic preferences and one that doesn't. Some of our preferences-with-respect-to-artworks are non-aesthetic, as when one prefers a song because, for example, it simply reminds one of a friend. Second, it matters whether we think in terms of the set of preferences a person has at a time, or the set a person has across some relevant time span.[4]

Thus, there are two notions of what we might call a *wide aesthetic personality*: the set of *all* of one's preferences, where the set either does or does not include relevant non-aesthetic preferences.[5] And there are two notions of what we might call a *narrow aesthetic personality*, where we restrict the set to some proper subset of one's preferences, where the set either does or does not include relevant non-aesthetic preferences.

Arguably Levinson should opt for some version of the narrow aesthetic personality that includes (All? Some? Only?) one's more stable aesthetic preferences, for otherwise he cannot

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[3] For the details of Levinson's view, see his "Hume's Standard of Taste: The Real Problem". Talk of the ideal critic's preferences "determining" aesthetic value is ambiguous between a tracking, epistemic account, and a constitutive account. For our purposes, nothing hinges on specifying one account or the other, so I'll cautiously use the ambiguous term. Levinson prefers a tracking account.

[4] A similar unclarity is evident in Levinson's excellent "Aesthetic Properties, Evaluative Force, and Differences of Sensibility," where he defines the "attitudinal sensibility" in terms of "a disposition to react to phenomenal impressions of certain sorts with attitudes of favor or disfavor" (p. 331). Here too we can ask whether he means *all* or just *some* of one's dispositions. Another concern I have about both definitions is the restricted characterization of the relevant attitudes as concerning "favor or disfavor" or "preference". Two people might both "favor" or "prefer" a work but nonetheless have considerably different attitudes toward it and thereby have different "aesthetic personalities". This suggests that a proper characterization of the aesthetic personality, or perhaps a related notion, will need to countenance a wider range of aesthetically-relevant attitudes.

[5] The notion of "relevance" here would have to be defined.

account for changes in aesthetic preference that do not constitute changes in aesthetic personality. But then we should like to know what subset of aesthetic preferences matters. I favor the works of Shakespeare and have for a long time, but does this say anything about my aesthetic personality? Maybe it does, maybe it doesn't. Saying the preferences that matter are those that "reveal" or "partly constitute" what sort of person one is doesn't help, for we would need an answer to the very interesting question of what it *is* for an aesthetic preference to have such a status. We needn't decide the matter now.[6] I show below that different disambiguations seem to operate at different points in Levinson's responses.

Levinson's concern is this: the more "ideal" we become the more our aesthetic preferences become indistinguishable from those of any ideal critic. Insofar as the uniqueness of our aesthetic personalities is valuable, then, we seem to have reason *not* to pursue the Hume-inspired ideal. So what do we do? How should we live our aesthetic lives? Levinson sets out to show that, despite appearances, it is possible for the ideal critics to have unique aesthetic personalities.

Levinson's Proposed Solutions

II. In this section I detail Levinson's proposals, and in the next section (§III) I argue that they are unsatisfactory. Levinson's first (endorsed[7]) response points out that, although the ideal critics have identical aesthetic preferences, they will nonetheless have quite distinct aesthetic *histories*, and this suffices to make the ideal critics different from one another:

> "…we have, so far, entirely overlooked the role of one's concrete *path* toward appreciative perfection… For a person who *currently* prefers, in company with all ideal critics, all and only what is artistically best and ultimately most aesthetically rewarding is still inalterably the person who *formerly* preferred this and that work of lesser value…" (231)

Thus, the ideal critic can have a distinctive aesthetic history that suffices to make him unique at least in that respect.

The second response, which is the one that Levinson says is "perhaps the one most worth putting weight on," (232) is that the ideal critics are free to prefer different works among those that they all agree are of equal value:

> "…the existence of objectively better and worse in artistic matters, and the aesthetic perfectionism that that may motivate, is compatible with a pluralism of taste as between works of great value in a given genre that are more or less on a plane. One's distinctive aesthetic personality could thus find adequate expression even were one to perfect one's taste…" (232)

According to Levinson, the perfected critic will still be able to freely choose among works that are, according to the ideal critics, equally good. The ideal critics are free to choose among these equally valuable works and are thereby able to differ at least that much in their aesthetic personalities. (I ignore Levinson's distracting emphasis on "finding adequate expression"—one must *have* a distinctive personality in order to express it.)

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[6] I deal with the issue at greater length in my paper "On the Aesthetic Ideal".

[7] Levinson ultimately (and, I think, rightly) puts no weight on his first proposed response, so I won't address it. See pp. 230.

Levinson's third and final response is to argue that ideal critics will have different aesthetic experiences of the same artworks. Even as ideal critics,

> "…it will remain the case that we, as irreducibly distinct *appreciators*, with our own specific memories, and histories, will have different *responses*, on the small and large scale, to our commonly preferred works. That is to say, it will remain the case that we will have different resulting *aesthetic experiences* of the works that we, by hypothesis, jointly hold in the highest regard…" (232-33)

Even with perfected taste, the ideal critics will not always have identical experiences of the artworks they scrutinize. And these differences in aesthetic experience suffice to differentiate those with perfected taste.

Levinson hopes to establish that even if one were to become (or nearly become) an ideal critic, one could still have a distinctive aesthetic personality via (1) one's aesthetic history, (2) one's preferences among equally valuable artworks, and (3) one's distinctive aesthetic experiences.

Problems with These Proposals

III. These three responses are less promising than they might seem. Levinson's first response points out that the ideal critics will differ in their *aesthetic histories*. The problem with this response is that one's aesthetic history does not differentiate one *in the relevant sense*. One's history makes one an individual in the sense that it makes one distinct from those with different histories (*i.e.*, everyone). But, by Levinson's own lights, one's history does not even *partly constitute* one's aesthetic personality, which is a set of aesthetic preferences. At best it plays a causal role in bringing about that personality. So although one's history is individualizing, it does not contribute to the uniqueness of one's aesthetic personality.

Levinson's second response states that the ideal critics can differ in their preferences for works whose value they agree on. The adequacy of this response crucially depends on whether the preferences that hold sway in a choice between equally valuable works are *part of* one's aesthetic personality. As noted above, it would be a mistake to assume that *all* preferences-with-respect-to-artworks are part of one's aesthetic personality.[8]

Thus, for the second response to succeed we need to know more about the relevant preferences that play a role in individual choices. Levinson seems to need a concept of "aesthetic preference" that plays *no* role in his account of the objectivity of aesthetic judgment, but which is nonetheless a preference that partly constitutes one's aesthetic personality. If this preference relation were to play a role his account of objectivity, then the ideal critics would presumably share it, in which case it could not distinguish them aesthetically.

One move would be to distinguish between the set of aesthetic preferences a critic has *at a time* and the set of preferences a critic has *across time*. Two ideal critics might have the same *enduring* preferences, while differing somewhat in their preferences at any given time. Today a critic prefers Warhol paintings, while another would rather look at Motherwell. Although they

[8] Of course, some such preferences can enter the picture if Levinson opts for a version of the narrow aesthetic personality that includes certain non-aesthetic preferences. But then we would need to know why some non-aesthetic preferences partly constitute one's aesthetic personality.

ultimately both agree on the aesthetic value of these works, they differ, at least for now, on which one's they'd like to appreciate.

But why think that such preferences contribute to one's aesthetic personality? Why not say about these differing critics that they might *seem* aesthetically different at that time, but they really aren't?[9]

Levinson's third and final response is that the ideal critics will have differing aesthetic experiences, even of the artworks they all agree are aesthetically great. This response is subject to a complaint similar to the first: a difference in the *character* of aesthetic experience does not make the critics' *aesthetic personalities* any different, for aesthetic personalities, according to Levinson, concern *aesthetic preferences*, not the character of aesthetic experience. So a difference in the character of aesthetic experience is not, strictly speaking, relevant. This suggests that Levinson is operating with a concept of "aesthetic personality" that differs significantly from the one he explicitly defines.[10]

Suppose we alter Levinson's notion of an aesthetic personality to accommodate the intriguing suggestion that it should include the *character* of one's aesthetic experience. So even if two people have the same aesthetic preferences they can have different aesthetic personalities if the character of their aesthetic experience is sufficiently different. For this modified response to succeed, Levinson must show that it is possible for the character of an ideal critic's aesthetic experience to be different enough to ground a robustly unique aesthetic personality.

But it is unclear whether the ideal critic's experience *could* be sufficiently different from the experiences of the other ideal critics. If ideal critics value *all* the same works across a huge variety of artforms, genres, styles, media, subject matters, themes, expressiveness, and so on, then it seems reasonable to suppose that the character of their experience will largely converge along with their aesthetic preferences. After all, their experiences are, or ground, the reasons for their preferences. And when these grounds are spread across such a huge variety of works—even restricting our attention to the "masterworks"—it becomes less and less likely that the ideal critics will have different reasons for their converging preferences. Or, if they *do* have different reasons, if the character of their experience does differ, then the difference won't be pronounced enough to ground a robustly unique aesthetic personality.

Perhaps we cannot rule out the possibility of a kind of "inverted aesthetic spectrum", where the ideal critics can agree in all their aesthetic preferences while having robustly different aesthetic experiences. But in that case, none of the ideal critics would *seem* very different—to us or to themselves—for their distinctive personalities would, *ex hypothesi*, never be overtly expressed. But then it is unclear whether this degree of uniqueness has the *value* that unique aesthetic

[9] Perhaps this is one place where Levinson can make further use of Hume's own account, where he allows for variation in "humors" that produce differences in the *degree* of blame or approbation that the true judge accords a work. This would also require altering his definition of "aesthetic personality" to include the *degree* of "blame or approbation". (Thanks to an anonymous referee for bringing up this point.)

[10] As mentioned above, there is already pressure on Levinson to refine his definition; this point would require him to revise it.

personalities supposedly have. Much of that value would presumably lie in the *expression* of uniqueness and the role such expression plays in a community of individuals.

So, at the very least, Levinson's responses need refinement and elaboration. But the challenge from uniqueness might not be the most serious challenge to the Hume-inspired ideal. In fact, there is some reason to think that it's not a genuine challenge at all. I conclude by briefly raising this concern.

Is the Challenge from Uniqueness a Genuine Challenge?

IV. Perhaps there is an easier, more sweeping, response to the challenge from uniqueness. Sometimes there are reasons not to pursue some ideal without there being, thereby, any threat to the ideal's status *as* an ideal. Suppose that the epistemic ideal is to believe only truths. We might have non-epistemic (*e.g.*, practical) reason to believe some falsehood and so have some reason not to pursue the epistemic ideal. But this wouldn't challenge the very idea that believing only truths is the epistemic ideal. What would be problematic for such a view is if we had *epistemic* reason not to pursue the ideal. If some such norm issued from the epistemic domain, then we'd have reason to doubt whether this really is the epistemic ideal. Likewise, we might have prudential reason not to pursue some moral ideal—*e.g.*, to maximize the good or to act on universalizable maxims—without this undermining the very idea that the moral ideal *is* a moral ideal.

The final worry I'll voice is that Levinson hasn't done enough to show that aesthetic uniqueness is something we have *aesthetic* reason to preserve; it is not clear that having a unique aesthetic personality is something we should care about from the aesthetic point of view, even if we should care about it for other reasons. If Levinson's uniqueness challenge is meant to threaten the very idea that the Humean ideal is the aesthetic ideal, then he must show how aesthetic considerations ground the value of uniqueness—we must have aesthetic, not merely prudential or practical reason to have unique aesthetic personalities. The best response might be to show that uniqueness considerations are not a genuine threat.

I think that there *are* serious considerations against the view that the ideal critic constitutes the aesthetic ideal. These considerations issue from facts about aesthetic value and concern the importance of love in our aesthetic lives. In my view, the Humean ideal cannot be the aesthetic ideal, but I'll have to explain why another time.[11]

[11]These comments have benefited from many helpful discussions. I would like to thank the participants of the Fall 2011 Conference on the Nature of Taste in Paris, the participants of the 2011 Eastern Division Meeting of the American Society for Aesthetics, Paul Boghossian, Anthony Cross, Daniela Dover, Jerrold Levinson, Béatrice Longuenesse, Jim Pryor, Jeff Sebo, and David Velleman.