The Default Theory of Aesthetic Value

I. Introduction

What makes aesthetic value aesthetic? What makes aesthetic value value? Suppose we call the first question *the aesthetic question* and the second *the normative question*. *Strict perceptual formalism*—the view according to which the aesthetic value of an object is value it has strictly in virtue of its perceptual properties (where these are primarily visual and auditory, but possibly also tactile, gustatory, and olfactory)—is an answer to the aesthetic question. *Hedonism*—the view according to which the aesthetic value of an object is value it has in virtue of some pleasure it gives—is an answer to the normative question. If we combine answers, we arrive at a view according to which the aesthetic value of an object is the value it has in virtue of the pleasure it gives strictly in virtue of its perceptual properties. I refer to this view as *the default theory of aesthetic value*. In so doing, I am not suggesting that this theory is, or ever has been, the dominant or standard theory of aesthetic value. I am suggesting that for the past several decades, at least, the default theory has been the starting point from which most theorizing about aesthetic value begins and the point to which most theorizing about aesthetic value returns once it has been found to have taken a wrong turn. The default theory of aesthetic value, in other words, has become our default setting for thinking about aesthetic value in something like the sense in which a computer’s factory settings are its default settings. Insofar as a theory of aesthetic value takes the default theory as its starting point, I refer to it as a version of *the standard theory of aesthetic value*.[[1]](#footnote-2)

This paper does not argue that the default theory fails as a theory of aesthetic value. That is something almost everyone knows. It argues that the default theory fails as a default theory—that the default theory is the wrong point from which to begin theorizing about aesthetic value. It argues, in other words, that standard theories of aesthetic value fail as theories of aesthetic value because they take the default theory as their point of departure.

How did the default theory come to be the default theory? What is its appeal? Part of the answer is that the default theory offers clear answers to both the aesthetic question and the normative question. Any answer to the aesthetic question should explain the oft-observed connection between aesthetic value and perception, the term *aesthetic* deriving from the Greek for perception. Strict perceptual formalism does this by asserting aesthetic value to be value strictly in virtue of perceptual properties. Any answer to the normative question should explain why we pursue things having aesthetic value. Hedonism does this by asserting aesthetic value to be value in virtue of pleasurability. For while pleasurability is not the only property whose *tout court* attribution implies value, it is surely one such. Since the philosophical appeal of the default theory consists in the clear connections it establishes between aesthetic value and perception, on one hand, and aesthetic value and a known source of intrinsic value, on the other, any aesthetic theory that severs these connections risks failing to answer the questions it is the business of a theory of aesthetic value to answer.

If the default theory is the point of departure for most thinking about aesthetic value, why is it the destination of almost none? Why, in other words, is the default theory not the standard theory? The default theory fails because strict perceptual formalism and hedonism are thought to be extensionally inadequate. Some objects to which we ascribe aesthetic value—such as novels or scientific theories—either do not seem to have any perceptual properties or at least do not seem to have the aesthetic value they have strictly in virtue of any perceptual properties that they have. Other objects to which we ascribe aesthetic value—such as certain depictions of war or of the crucifixion—either do not seem to give pleasure or at least do not have the aesthetic value they have in virtue of any pleasure they give.

II. Formalism

Aware of this problem, standard theorists have set about broadening both tenets of the default theory. One way to broaden strict perceptual formalism is to remove the requirement that the perceptual formalism in question be strict, allowing a thing's non-perceptual content to matter aesthetically so long as it is embodied or expressed through its perceptual form. Jerrold Levinson suggests a particularly appealing way of doing this when he asserts that

to appreciate an object’s inherent properties aesthetically is to experience them . . . as bound up with and inseparable from its basic perceptual configuration; . . . [it is] to approach [the object] in a disinterested fashion with a concern not only for its resultant, high-order qualities, meanings, and effects but also for the way these intertwine with and rest on the work’s lower-level perceptual face.[[2]](#footnote-3)

Consider *Guernica*, Picasso’s particular response to the Nazi bombing of *Guernica* and general response to the Spanish Civil War. Because its high-order properties—including its cognitive, moral, and political content—intertwine with and are inseparable from the shapes and colors that constitute its ‘lower-level perceptual face,’ a non-strict perceptual formalist might hold these properties to contribute to *Guernica’s* aesthetic value as surely as its shapes and colors do. A difficulty with this approach is that it only gets us so far. Consider *Homage to Catalonia*, George Orwell’s personal account of the Spanish Civil War. It merits praise for many of the same reasons *Guernica* does—for its fiery moral eloquence, for its capacity to immerse one in the claustrophobic and fevered situations it represents, for the way it is at once topical and timeless, for the way it renders the nasty ingredients of war immediate and inescapable. But if we value *Guernica* for the same kinds of reasons that we value *Homage*, and our reasons to value *Guernica* are reasons to value it aesthetically, it seems arbitrary to say that our reasons to value Homage are not. A common range of ostensibly aesthetic predicates—*fiery, unflinching, eloquent, powerful, riveting, timeless, searing, unsparing*—seem to apply to both.

Levinson is fully aware of such difficulties, and so he qualifies:

We apprehend the character and content of an artwork—including formal, aesthetic, expressive, representational, semantic, or symbolic properties—not as free-floating but rather as anchored in and arising from the specific structure that constitutes it on a primary perceptual (or cognitive) level.[[3]](#footnote-4)

The qualification, of course, is the parenthetical acknowledgement that the work’s lower-level structure may be cognitive as well as perceptual—an acknowledgment Levinson explains as follows:

The parenthetical qualification is intended to acknowledge the somewhat special status among the arts of literature, whose basic structural material—meaningful words—is not fundamentally tied to a sensory medium and thus, if perceived, is not perceived in quite the sense as the basic structural material of painting, sculpture, music, or dance.[[4]](#footnote-5)

I agree that works of literature are aesthetic objects as surely and as fully as are paintings, sculptures, musical pieces, and dances. At least literary works have been regarded as objects of beauty for as long as works of any other art form have, and no one has ever questioned their aesthetic status who did not possess an aesthetic theory that forced that question. What I wonder about is the wisdom of treating literature as aesthetically ‘special’ in the way Levinson seems to advocate. Doing so invites the thought that when an aesthetic object’s lower-level structural material is perceptual—as it is in the non-literary arts—it is the perceptual nature of that structure that explains the object’s aesthetic status, whereas when an aesthetic object’s lower-level structural material is not perceptual—as it is not in the art of literature—then the non-perceptual, verbal nature of that structure somehow steps into the perceptual void, shouldering the explanatory burden it is the usual and proper business of perceptual structure to shoulder. But of course this cannot be. If some are tempted by the thought that *Guernica's* aesthetic value is aesthetic because its lower-level structural material is colors and shapes, no one, I think, is tempted by the thought that the aesthetic value of *Homage to Catalonia* is aesthetic because its lower-level structural material is words.

I should stress that the position I have just outlined is merely one I take Levinson's wording sometimes to suggest and not his considered view. His considered view, which I take to be expressed in the following, remains neutral as to the nature of the structural material that anchors and gives rise to a work's character and content:

Pleasure in an object is aesthetic when it derives from apprehension of and reflection on the object's individual character and content, both for itself and in relation to the structural base on which it rests.[[5]](#footnote-6)

This position, making no reference to perceptual properties, is obviously no kind of perceptual formalism, and so obviously no longer offers the appealingly clear answer to the aesthetic question that versions of perceptual formalism do. But it remains a kind of formalism—assuming we are willing to identify an object’s form with what Levinson calls its ‘lower-level structural base’—inasmuch as it holds aesthetic appreciation to require not merely that we apprehend and reflect on an object’s character and content, but that we do so in relation to its form. It thus seems that the quest for extensional adequacy has forced a double amputation, strict perceptual formalism having had first its strictness and then its perceptuality lopped off. How content you are with the stump that remains likely depends on whether you are more concerned to preserve the connection between the perceptual and the aesthetic or the connection between the aesthetic and the literary. Levinson seems rightly concerned to preserve both. Otherwise why the gap between his preferred way of expressing his position—a perceptual formalism that alienates the literary—and his considered position—a bare formalism that alienates the perceptual?

But given that I have taken what I just called *bare formalism* to be Levinson’s considered position, let’s leave perceptual formalism aside and inquire instead into bare formalism’s prospects. An argument from Malcolm Budd convinces me that they are bleak. Bare formalism, as noted, holds that to aesthetically appreciate an object is not merely to apprehend its high-order character and content, but also to reflect on how that character and content arise from the lower-level structure or form that determines them. But suppose I do the first but not the second, that is, I apprehend the character and content but do not reflect on how these arise from their determining structure or form. Perhaps I find myself gripped by a novel, or mesmerized by a painting, or bowled over by a song, but do not reflect on the source of the power of each. According to bare formalism, I am not aesthetically appreciating the novel, painting, or song, no matter how gripped, mesmerized, or bowled over I am by their character and content. But how else should we characterize my appreciation in each of these cases if not as aesthetic? Obviously to say that I need not reflect on how the character and content of a work arise from the lower-level formal base that determines them is not to say that the lower-level formal base that determines them does not determine them. Nor is it to say that when I do reflect on how the character and content of a work arise from its lower-level formal base that those reflections play no role in aesthetic appreciation. It is only to say that reflection on how lower-level structure or form gives rise to content and character is not necessary to aesthetic appreciation.[[6]](#footnote-7)

If Budd is right, then bare formalism—the position we have embraced in the name of extensional adequacy and for whose sake we have sacrificed the connection between the aesthetic and the perceptual—is itself extensionally inadequate, failing to account for those cases of aesthetic appreciation in which reflection on how a thing’s lower-level form determines its character and content plays no role. If I am right, we have arrived at this impasse because of the point from which we set out. The real problem with strict perceptual formalism is not that it is strict or perceptual but that it is formalism and as such has us focused on the wrong thing. Suppose that, instead of looking downward to what Levinson calls the object’s lower-level structural base, we look upward to what he calls the object's ‘resultant, high-order qualities’ for an answer to the aesthetic question. Strict perceptual formalism seemed a good starting point because of the connection it asserts between the perceptual and the aesthetic. If this connection cannot be sustained at the lower formal-level, then perhaps it can at the upper. To some this will seem a hopeless idea.[[7]](#footnote-8) Perceptual qualities, some will think, are qualities that by their nature belong to an object’s lower-level—to them it will seem that the very idea of an upper-level perceptual quality is a contradiction in terms. I grant this is so given a narrow conception of the perceptual, but a narrow conception is not the only conception. There is a broader conception available and no good reason to think the narrow conception the aesthetically relevant one.

Articulating that broader conception—let alone defending its aesthetic relevance—is beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say that the broader notion of perception flourished throughout the eighteenth century; that it was the operative notion in many of the great British theories of taste, including those of Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Hume, and Reid; that it fell from favor, in part, because certain critics—Hanslick, Bell, and Greenberg, for example—mistakenly thought that championing certain artists—Brahms, Cezanne, and Pollock, for example—meant espousing formalist theories of the arts that presuppose the aesthetic relevance of the narrow conception. By the mid-twentieth century the broad conception had been all but abandoned by aestheticians, the notable exception being Frank Sibley, that most eighteenth-century of twentieth-century aestheticians. ‘It is important to note,’ Sibley tells us in an oft-quoted yet under-appreciated passage,

that, broadly speaking, aesthetics deals with a kind of perception. People have to see the grace or unity of a work, hear the plaintiveness or frenzy in the music, notice the gaudiness of color scheme, feel the power of a novel, its mood, or its uncertainty of tone. They may be struck by these qualities all at once, or they may come to perceive them only after repeated viewings, hearings, or readings, and with the help of critics.[[8]](#footnote-9)

The kind of perception with which aesthetics deals, in Sibley’s view, is a kind by which we perceive resultant, high-order qualities—qualities such as grace, unity, plaintiveness, frenzy, gaudiness, power, mood, and uncertainty of tone. What makes these qualities perceptual in the aesthetically relevant sense is not that the lower-level qualities from which they result are strictly perceptual.[[9]](#footnote-10) You will not get very far explaining a novel’s power, mood, or uncertainty of tone by appeal to the sonic qualities of its words and sentences. What makes the resultant, high-order qualities broadly speaking perceptual is that we do not establish their presence by reasoning it out, but are rather struck by it, whether ‘all at once’ or only ‘after repeated viewings, hearings, or readings, and with the help of critics.’ This, as Sibley points out elsewhere, is what justifies grouping aesthetic qualities, such as plaintiveness or uncertainty of tone, with narrowly perceptual properties such as redness or sweetness:

We do not apply simple colour words by following rules in accordance with principles. We see that the book is red by looking, just as we tell that the tea is sweet by tasting it. So too, it might be said, we just see (or fail to see) that things are delicate, balanced, and the like. This kind of comparison between the exercise of taste and the use of the five senses is indeed familiar; our use of the word ‘taste’ itself shows that the comparison is age-old and very natural.[[10]](#footnote-11)

III. Hedonism

Picasso’s *Guernica* served as a counterexample to strict perceptual formalism. It will serve equally as a counterexample to hedonism, the other tenet of the default theory. The appeal of hedonism, as noted, consists in the admirably clear answer it gives to what we have called the normative question—the question of what makes aesthetic value value, the question of why we pursue things having aesthetic value. Hedonism answers this question by holding aesthetic value to be value an object has in virtue of some pleasure it gives. But surely *Guernica* does not have whatever aesthetic value it has in virtue of any pleasure it gives.

One might take counterexamples of this sort to suggest that there is something fundamentally wrong with the idea that aesthetic value has its basis in pleasure. Undaunted, hedonists push onward and upward. Those who push *upward* complicate hedonism about aesthetic value by defining aesthetic pleasure as a higher-order response to things having aesthetic value. To say that aesthetic pleasure is a higher-order response is to say that it depends on lower-order responses, responses that in some cases include shock, horror, despair, and moral revulsion. Those who push *onward* complicate hedonism about aesthetic value by expanding the field of experiences that may ground aesthetic value. Though pleasure as a rule grounds aesthetic value, in exceptional cases certain non-hedonic yet intrinsically valuable experiences—experiences including horror, shock, despair, and revulsion—may also do so. Hence upward hedonism and onward hedonism differ according to the way each departs from the generic version of hedonism with which we began. Upward hedonism departs by allowing for tiered responses. Onward hedonism departs by allowing for exceptions. Both depart in order to avoid the counter-examples that plague the simple version. To depart, however, is not necessarily to advance.

Let us consider the onward hedonist first. Jerrold Levinson and Robert Stecker both hold to pleasure as the ground of most aesthetic value, then seek out something analogous to pleasure as the ground of the the rest. Levinson, for example, affirms that ‘[t]he arts are intended, as much as anything, to give pleasure and are, by and large, well suited to provide it.’[[11]](#footnote-12) But, he continues,

even if we were to agree that an artwork is valuable, ultimately, only insofar as *experience* of it is in some way worthwhile, it does not follow that an artwork is valuable only insofar as experience of it or engagement with it is *pleasant*, or straightforwardly enjoyable. Rather, an experience or engagement may be *worthwhile*, may be worth having, even while not predominantly pleasant…. Much art is disturbing, dizzying, despairing, disorienting—and it is valuable in virtue of that. We are glad, all told, that we have had the experience of such art, but not, once again, because such experience is, in any natural sense, pleasurable.[[12]](#footnote-13)

Robert Stecker makes essentially the same point when he tells us that

being aesthetically engaged with an object—an artwork, a natural environment, or whatever—is being in a state of mind valued (valuable) for its own sake. Typically, it is a pleasurable state of mind, and this provides a transparent explanation of why it is valuable in itself. However, in the case of some artworks, the state of mind is not aptly characterized as pleasurable. Some artworks shock, unsettle, disturb, or disgust us, but if we are inclined to say that they still offer a positive aesthetic experience, this is because we value the experience of engaging with them.[[13]](#footnote-14)

The general idea, I take it, is that if not all aesthetically valuable objects provide the intrinsically valuable experience of pleasure, then all (or most all) provide some intrinsically valuable experience or other. Just as we can explain the aesthetic value of some objects—take Vermeer’s *View of Delft*—by appeal to the pleasurable experiences they afford, so we can explain the aesthetic value of others—take *Guernica*—by appeal to the shocking, unsettling, disturbing, dizzying, disorienting, despairing experiences they afford.

But can the capacity to afford shocking, unsettling, disturbing, dizzying, disorienting, or despairing experiences explain the value of a work such as *Guernica* in the sense that the capacity to afford pleasurable experiences explains the value of a work such as *View* *of* *Delft*? The onward hedonist should be held to operate under two constraints in her attempt to locate non-hedonic properties of experience that are nevertheless capable of explaining value in way the pleasurability does. One of these—which we may call Dickie’s constraint[[14]](#footnote-15)—is that the property that purports to explain the intrinsic value of the experience to which the empiricist appeals must be a property of the experience itself and not merely a property of the object that affords the experience. To praise a dance for being pleasurable is to praise it for its capacity to produce a pleasurable experience, but to praise a dance for being graceful is not to praise it for its capacity to produce a graceful experience, whatever that could be. Gracefulness is a value we experience a graceful dance as having, not a value of the experience that a graceful dance affords. The other constraint—which we may call Sibley’s constraint[[15]](#footnote-16)—is that the property that purports to explain the intrinsic value of the experience to which the empiricist appeals must be capable of explaining intrinsic value, that is, it must be a property whose *tout court* attribution implies value. Although there may be cases in which pleasurable experiences are not valuable, the tout court attribution of pleasurability to an experience suffices to explain some value it has. If I tell you that I value exercise because exercising gives me pleasure, you may well wonder at my taking pleasure in exercise, but you can hardly wonder at my valuing what gives me pleasure. Perhaps we can sum up the difference between the two constraints by saying that whereas Dickie’s requires that the value of the experience be a value of *the experience*, Sibley’s requires that the value of the experience be a *value* of the experience.

So can the capacity to afford shocking, unsettling, disturbing, dizzying, disorienting, or despairing experiences explain the value of a work such as *Guernica* in the sense that the capacity to afford pleasurable experiences explains the value of a work such as *View of Delft*? Though I see no reason to think the onward hedonist violates Dickie’s constraint in asserting *Guernica* to be valuable in virtue of affording shocking, unsettling, disturbing, dizzying, disorienting, or despairing experiences, I think she obviously does violate Sibley’s. Indeed Stecker all but acknowledges this in allowing that the value of shocking, unsettling, disturbing, and disgusting experiences is not ‘transparent’ in the way that the value of a pleasant experience is. Suppose you want to know what makes *Guernica* valuable. Its value is opaque to you, in other words, and you want to have it made transparent. Suppose I reply that *Guernica* is valuable because it affords an experience whose value is as opaque as is *Guernica’s*. In what sense have I explained *Guernica’s* value?

I don’t mean to be saying that *Guernica’s* capacity for affording shocking, unsettling, dizzying, and despairing experiences cannot figure in an explanation of its value, nor that having my attention drawn to this capacity cannot play a role in my coming to perceive *Guernica’s* value for myself. I mean to be saying that *Guernica’s* capacity to afford such experiences cannot bring to completion an explanation of value in the way that the capacity to afford pleasure can. We might put the point, following Sibley, by saying that whereas one cannot intelligibly say *tout court* ‘*Guernica* is good because unsettling, disturbing, disorienting, and despairing,’ one can intelligibly say ‘*Guernica* is good because unsettling, disturbing, disorienting, and despairing,’ so long one goes on to offer an explanation linking these properties to others of *Guernica* whose *tout court* attribution does imply value.[[16]](#footnote-17) Which properties these others are—which properties of *Guernica* can bring an explanation of its value to completion—is ultimately a matter for art criticism to sort out, but we may canvas some possibilities. *Guernica* merits praise for its fiery moral eloquence, for the timelessness of its vision of human suffering, for the power and fearlessness with which it summons up that vision. None of these properties are of any use to the onward hedonist, however, not because appeal to them violates Sibley’s constraint but because it violates Dickie’s. To be pleasurable is to be valuable in virtue of affording pleasurable experiences. But to be eloquent, powerful, timeless, or fearless is surely not to be valuable in virtue of affording eloquent, powerful, timeless, or fearless experiences, whatever these could be. To think otherwise is to confuse the experience of value with the value of experience.

I therefore think that onward hedonism does not improve upon the generic variety with which we began. If generic hedonism cannot explain the aesthetic value of *Guernica* because *Guernica* does not give pleasure, onward hedonism cannot explain the aesthetic value of *Guernica* because horror, shock, disorientation, disgust, and revulsion are not themselves valuable. These considerations seem to tell in favor of upward hedonism. Unlike its onward counterpart, upward hedonism does not allow for non-hedonic exceptions in order to explain *Guernica’s* aesthetic value. Unlike its generic counterpart, it explains how *Guernica* pleases. Not only may *Guernica* please while horrifying, shocking, disorienting, disgusting, and revolting, its very capacity to please may depend on its capacity to horrify, shock, disorient, disgust, and revolt.

Kendall Walton is perhaps the preeminent upward hedonist. Initially he defines aesthetic value as most any hedonist about aesthetic value does, holding aesthetic value to consist in the capacity to give aesthetic pleasure when appropriate[[17]](#footnote-18). It is his definition of aesthetic pleasure that sets his theory apart. Aesthetic pleasure, he holds, consists in pleasure paradigmatically having, “as a component, pleasure taken in one's admiration or positive evaluation of something; to be pleased aesthetically is to note something's value with pleasure.”[[18]](#footnote-19) Thus aesthetic value is a higher-order value, possessed only by things already possessing more basic, ultimately non-aesthetic values, which we note with pleasure. Since it is possible to note with pleasure a very wide variety of non-aesthetic values, Walton’s theory is able to unify the very wide variety of things to which we attribute aesthetic value:

The [common] thread is the pleasure taken in admiring things. The diversity lies in what we admire things for. We may admire a work for the way it soothes us, or excites us, or provokes us, for the intellectual pleasures it affords, or the emotional ones, for the insight it provides or the manner it which it does so, for the way it enables us to escape from everyday life, or the way it helps us to face life, and so on and on.[[19]](#footnote-20)

And we may even admire works such as *Guernica* for their capacity to horrify, irritate, shock, or disgust us:

If we understand the artist's objective to be to disgust the appreciator or to provoke negative judgments, we may admire with pleasure his achievement in accomplishing this end. The kind of aesthetic value that consists in a capacity to elicit pleasurable admiration—what I am inclined to regard as the central or paradigmatic variety of aesthetic value—can thus coexist with, and indeed depend on, a capacity to disgust or irritate or evoke negative judgments.[[20]](#footnote-21)

The ability to explain a lot is a theoretical virtue. But the ability to explain too much isn’t, and there is room to wonder whether Walton’s theory explains aesthetic value where there is none to explain. All aesthetic achievements may be admired with pleasure, but not all achievements that may be admired with pleasure are aesthetic. You may take pleasure admiring Jane Addams for her social activism, or Tensing Norgay and Edmund Hillary for being the first to summit Mount Everest, or Serena Williams for winning a record thirty-nine Grand Slam titles. Does it follow that any of these is an aesthetic achievement? I am not saying that we *could not* regard any of them as aesthetic achievements, though doing so would require attending less to the fact of their achievement than to their manner. I am saying that we *need not* regard them as aesthetic achievements in order to take pleasure in admiring them. To insist otherwise—to insist that all such achievements, and any pleasures taken in admiring them, must be regarded as aesthetic—is to stretch the notion of the aesthetic beyond recognition.

Hence saving Walton's theory requires some way of sorting out those achievements we admire with aesthetic pleasure from those we admire with pleasure of some other kind. And there is a way, just not one that will save Walton’s theory. People take pleasure admiring Joe DiMaggio for the grace with which he roamed center field and for the beauty with which we swung the bat. They also take pleasure admiring him for his fifty-six game hitting streak. If we ask makes the former pleasures aesthetic and the latter not, the obvious answer is that the former are pleasures taken in things having aesthetic value, grace in one case and beauty in the other, whereas the latter pleasure is not. But if pleasure is aesthetic insofar as it is taken in things having aesthetic value, then things do not have aesthetic value because they give aesthetic pleasure. Things give aesthetic pleasure because they have aesthetic value.

Perhaps it will be thought there must be some other way of sorting out aesthetic from non-aesthetic pleasures. There is, but it is formalism, a doctrine we have found reason to doubt and whose truth would not help the upward hedonist in any case. I have been arguing that both the onward and upward hedonist struggle to explain the aesthetic value of difficult cases such as *Guernica*. But by now it should be clear that all forms of hedonism struggle equally to explain the aesthetic value of easy cases, such as *View of Delft*. All sides agree, let’s presume, that *View of Delft* affords pleasurable experiences and that it does so because it is beautiful. The hedonist takes things one step further. She holds that the value *View of Delft* has in virtue of affording pleasurable experiences explains the value it has in virtue of being beautiful.[[21]](#footnote-22) But why suppose the value of being beautiful needs explaining anymore than does the value of being pleasurable? The value of pleasure does not need explaining. The *tout court* attribution of pleasurability implies value. But surely the same is true of the value of beauty. If I tell you that I value Bosch's *Last Judgment* because it is beautiful, you may well wonder at my finding it beautiful, but you can hardly wonder at my valuing what I so find. And what goes for the beautiful goes for anything possessing any aesthetic value. To possess aesthetic value is, minimally, to possess some aesthetic property whose *tout court* attribution implies value,[[22]](#footnote-23) whether that property be beauty, sublimity, moral eloquence, elegance, or what have you.[[23]](#footnote-24)

Earlier I concluded that the onward hedonist, seeing no need to explain the value of *Guernica’s* being unsettling, disorienting, dizzying, and despairing, fails to explain what needs explaining. Now I am concluding that every hedonist makes a complementary mistake. Seeing the need to explain the value of *View of Delft’s* being beautiful, the hedonist gives an explanation where there is nothing to explain.

IV. Conclusion

What makes aesthetic value aesthetic? What makes aesthetic value value? I have not attempted answers to these questions. I have merely cautioned against developing answers to them from either component of the default theory of aesthetic value. The errors of the default theory are well known. The errors that result from trying to patch up those errors are not so well known, but they are errors all the same. We need a new point of departure in our thinking about aesthetic value. We do not need to hit the reset button. We need new settings.

1. Since the default theory of aesthetic value is the conjunction of two theses, we may say that a theory of aesthetic of value that takes only one thesis as its point of departure is standard with respect to that thesis but not the other. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Jerrold Levinson, ‘What is Aesthetic Pleasure?’, in his The Pleasures of Aesthetics (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 3-10, at 6-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Levinson, ‘What is Aesthetic Pleasure?’, 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Ibid., 6, footnote 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Ibid., 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Malcolm Budd, ‘Aesthetic Essence’, in his *Aesthetic Essays* (Oxford: OUP, 2008), 31-47, at 40-42. Levinson has replied to Budd with further qualification. Instead of holding aesthetic appreciation *necessarily* to involve reflection on how thing’s lower-level form determines its upper-level character, he now holds it *centrally* to involve such reflection (Jerrold Levinson, ‘Aesthetic Pleasure’, in Stephen Davies et al. (eds) *A Companion to Aesthetics*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 121-124 at 122). Suppose we grant, for the sake of argument know that *most* cases of aesthetic appreciation involve the kind of reflection Levinson has in mind. It follows is that non-reflective cases are in the *minority*, but not in the *periphery*, and I can see no reason to regard the non-reflective cases given above as in any way peripheral. Moreover, the newly qualified view fails to restore any connection between the perceptual and the aesthetic, and so leaves us with no reason to regard the appreciation it specifies as aesthetic, except that such appreciation may claim strict perceptual formalism as a distant ancestor. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Levinson is not himself among those to whom this idea seems hopeless. As an anonymous referee helpfully points outs, Levinson himself holds aesthetic properties to be higher-order perceptual properties (Jerrold Levinson, ‘What Are Aesthetic Properties?’ in his *Contemplating Art: Essays in Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 336-351 at 342-343). Were Levinson willing to answer the aesthetic question simply by appeal to the higher-order perceptuality of aesthetic properties, I would agree. Insofar as he holds that we cannot answer that question without some sort of appeal, however qualified, to reflection on how lower-order properties determine higher-order properties, I do not agree. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Frank Sibley, ‘Aesthetic and Non-aesthetic’, in John Benson, Emily Redfern, and Jeremy Roxbee Cox (eds), *Approach to Aesthetics: Collected Papers on Philosophical Aesthetics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 33-51, at 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Though some have read this view into Sibley. See Timothy Binkley, ‘Piece: Contra Aesthetics’, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 35 (1977), 265-277, at 268. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Frank Sibley, ‘Aesthetic Concepts, in John Benson, Emily Redfern, and Jeremy Roxbee Cox (eds), *Approach to Aesthetics: Collected Papers on Philosophical Aesthetics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 1-23, at 13-14. As age-old and natural as this comparison may be, Sibley insists that a crucial difference remains between the qualities we perceive by the exercise of the five senses and those we perceive by the exercise of taste: whereas the latter depend on qualities of which we are conscious, the former do not. See Sibley, ‘Aesthetic and Non-aesthetic’, at 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Jerrold Levinson, ‘Pleasure and the Value of Works of Art’, in his The Pleasures of Aesthetics (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 11-24, at 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Ibid., 12. Italics in original. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. Robert Stecker, Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, (2005), 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. George Dickie, ‘Beardsley’s Phantom Experience, *Journal of Philosophy* 62, (1965) 129-136. Dickie argues that to claim, as Monroe Beardsley does, that aesthetic experience is coherent and complete is to mistake the coherence and completeness of the object of such experience for the coherence and completeness of the experience itself. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. Frank Sibley, ‘General Criteria and Reasons in Aesthetics’, in John Benson, Emily Redfern, and Jeremy Roxbee Cox (eds), *Approach to Aesthetics: Collected Papers on Philosophical Aesthetics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 104-118, at 105-110. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. Ibid,. 105-106. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. Kendall Walton, ‘How Marvelous! Toward a Theory of Aesthetic Value’, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 51 (1993), 499-510, at 506. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. Ibid., 505. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. Ibid., 506. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. Ibid., 508. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. Though I am neither affirming nor denying that beautiful things necessarily give pleasure, let’s suppose, for the sake of argument, that they do. From this it does not follow that the value of a beautiful thing as such just is the value of the pleasure it gives, since it may be that we take pleasure in beautiful things because we regard them as antecedently valuable. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. Strictly speaking, to possess aesthetic value an object must not merely possess some property whose *tout court* attribution implies value. To possess aesthetic value the object must in fact possess the value that property’s *tout court* attribution implies. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. To the committed hedonist, it may seem as if I claiming that beauty, sublimity, moral eloquence, and elegance and the like are just somehow *valuable*—valuable, that is, without any further explanation such as that they afford pleasure. This is not my claim. My claim is that beauty, sublimity, moral eloquence, and elegance and the like are *values*—that appeal to them can suffice to explain, all by itself, the value of their bearers. That this is so shows itself in our practice of accepting as complete value-explanations that make *tout court* appeal to such values.

    appeal to beauty, sublimity, etc., as explanations of the value of their bearers. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)