Bias Reduction as an Aesthetic Norm[1]

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Abstract: Traditional aesthetic theories emphasize pleasure, while recent non-hedonistic approaches prioritize "getting it right" in aesthetic engagement. This paper critiques Dominic McIver Lopes's and C. Thi Nguyen's theories by arguing that correctness is neither the necessary guiding norm nor the constitutive or right motivator. Instead, I propose bias reduction—minimizing the improper influence of prior outlooks. This shift from correctness to minimizing distortion better captures aesthetic agency and allows for pluralism and radical disagreement.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, aesthetics has witnessed a vibrant shift away from traditional hedonistic theories of aesthetic value, engagement, and normativity. These are exciting times because, for so long, hedonism has dominated the field. The core of hedonistic theories revolves around one question: what makes something aesthetically valuable? According to these theories, the answer lies in pleasure (see especially Beardsley (1970, 1979); Mothersill (1984); Levinson (1996,

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2016); Matthen (2015, 2017); and for a more comprehensive list of hedonists, see Lopes (2018, 9)). A painting, a piece of music, or even a mathematical proof is aesthetically valuable if it brings us pleasure. The more pleasurable the experience, the more valuable the object. Engaging with art or beauty, then, is seen as valuable primarily because it feels good.

But here is where things get interesting: the pleasure we derive from an aesthetic experience is not just a passive feeling—it is seen as a reason for action. Imagine you are captivated by a beautiful garden or a complex symphony. According to the hedonistic view, the pleasure you feel motivates you to return to that garden, preserve that piece of music, or share it with others. In this framework, pleasure is the ultimate good. An object is valuable because it provides intrinsic pleasure, and the anticipation of such pleasure gives us reasons for action—for instance, engaging with the object. Similarly, the pleasure we experience can drive us to continue engaging with it.

However, this story is beginning to change. Non-hedonistic theories argue that aesthetic value extends beyond mere pleasure; indeed, a key criticism of hedonic theories is that they overlook the types of engagement we have with art that is not simply enjoyable (see especially Shelley (2019) and Van Der Berg (2020)). Think of how you might admire a piece of art not because it makes you feel good, but because it challenges you, makes you think, or stirs up deep emotions—even discomfort. Take Patty Chang's *Melons (At a Loss)*, where she uses cantaloupes as stand-ins for breasts, cutting and eating them while recounting a story of loss and grief. Or consider *Sun & Sea (Marina)*, an indoor beach opera where relaxed performers, basking in a sunny setting, sing about environmental decay and personal despair. These experiences may not always be "pleasurable" in the simple sense, yet they still draw us in and demand engagement. The non-hedonistic shift suggests that aesthetic value could lie in how these objects make us reflect, connect, or understand ourselves, others, and the world, and/or that aesthetic value is something we uncover by investigating and inquiring into what these objects are and their role within the aesthetic practices they belong to, rather than in how they make us feel.

This surge of new ideas opens up fresh perspectives on why we care about art and beauty: perhaps it is not just about pleasure, but about growth, fostering connections, and how aesthetic objects stimulate our intellect and

creativity, ultimately enhancing our well-being and enriching our lives both individually and collectively. These are the kinds of exciting questions that are reshaping the conversation today. I do not want to be a buzz kill, but there is a trend in some of these new theories that gives me pause: while pleasure is not entirely dismissed, aesthetic judgments can no longer be understood as simple reflections on our pleasurable experiences. Instead, these theories often lean toward a distinct form of aesthetic cognitivism, which argues not only that aesthetic judgments are cognitive and thus truth-apt, but that the goal in making these judgments should be accuracy. The expectation is that we should "get it right"—whether we're evaluating a poem as elegant, a painting as evocative, a musical composition as harmonious, or a sculpture as balanced. For instance, we should recognize that Patty Chang's *Melons (At a Loss)* does not have mere shock value and rely on provocative imagery without deeper significance, but instead presents a hauntingly intimate performance characterized by visceral immediacy, unsettling depth, and a striking blend of raw vulnerability and quiet defiance. Similarly, we should see that *Sun & Sea (Marina)* is not just a playful depiction of a sunny beach day, but a serene yet poignant performance that is defined by its graceful composition, immersive vividness, and a delicate balance of beauty and unease.

To explore these aspects of non-hedonistic theories further, I will examine two accounts: Dominic McIver Lopes's Network Theory and C. Thi Nguyen's Engagement Account. Both emphasize accuracy as a norm we must follow, with Nguyen also identifying it as the right motivator for aesthetic engagement. My choice of these two theories is deliberate, as they lie at opposite ends of a spectrum—Lopes highlighting achievement and Nguyen emphasizing striving—yet they share a crucial feature: the belief that being a good aesthetic agent involves adhering to the norm of "getting it right." First, I will argue that granting center stage to "getting it right" does not accurately reflect our aesthetic lives. I contend that this norm is neither the necessary guiding norm nor the constitutive or right motivator of our aesthetic engagements. Second, I propose that the central norm we should follow if we want to be good aesthetic agents is to minimize the bad influences of our existing outlooks—such as expertise, beliefs, desires, fears, preferences, or attitudes—on our aesthetic perception, evaluation, and actions. In other words, reducing bias should be our

guiding norm. I agree with Nguyen that engagement is where the value lies but I challenge the assumption that we reap this value best through the pursuit of accuracy. Instead, bias reduction is the key. This alternative presents a more democratic and pluralistic approach than Lopes's expertise-centered view, demonstrating that one can be a good aesthetic agent even as a novice—without aspiring to be like experts or even recognizing a need to emulate experts.

2. LOPES'S NETWORK THEORY

There are two distinct but interconnected ways of discussing normativity in aesthetics. The first concerns what we might call the normativity question proper: under what conditions does aesthetic value provide reasons for action? For instance, when does the *visceral intensity* of a modern dance performance give someone like Ayşe, an experienced dance critic, a reason to engage in specific aesthetic acts, such as writing a detailed review, attending additional performances by the same choreographer, recommending the work to others, or incorporating it into a broader discussion of contemporary dance trends? Dominic McIver Lopes, in *Being for Beauty*, offers a compelling answer by grounding aesthetic normativity in what he terms the "plain vanilla normativity of achievement": "whatever you do, do it well" (2018, 135). He argues that if the fact that the dance performance is viscerally gripping lends weight to the proposition that it would be an aesthetic achievement for Ayşe to appreciate it or to write a review, this visceral intensity provides Ayşe with a reason to appreciate it or to write a review (127; 135–136). According to this view, aesthetic value is reason-giving because correctly recognizing and engaging with it facilitate achievement within the aesthetic domain. One thing to notice is that Lopes divorces aesthetic evaluation from aesthetic appreciation and renders appreciation as one of the many aesthetic acts, such as writing a review or recommending a work to others (see Lopes (2018, 32–36; 105–106)). In this framework, aesthetic evaluation does not require appreciation. For instance, Ayşe could write a review of the dance performance without attempting to connect with it appreciatively, just like Ernst Gombrich, who, as Lopes notes, despite feeling unmoved by art in his later years, continued to excel in advising

important galleries on acquisitions because he remained skilled at making correct aesthetic evaluations (see 149–150). Although appreciation and evaluation are distinct acts and evaluation does not require appreciation, successful appreciation—a form of aesthetic achievement—must be grounded in correct aesthetic evaluation. To excel in appreciation, one must first excel in evaluation.

Another key feature of Lopes' theory, which becomes clear here, is the connection between the reason-giving force of aesthetic qualities, such as visceral intensity, and the notion of expertise. Lopes defines aesthetic achievement as success in an aesthetic act out of competence (98). Experts routinely achieve in the aesthetic domain by exercising their core competence, namely by making correct aesthetic evaluations (101). What differentiates experts from non-experts is that while non-experts may not consistently act on aesthetic reasons—understood not as the motivations of the agent but as aesthetic value facts, such as "this performance is viscerally gripping"—experts habitually do so (71). Experts consistently get these aesthetic facts right and act in alignment with them. Thus, the source of aesthetic reasons' force lies in their role as the foundation of experts' actions, which are successful precisely because they are guided by these reasons.

This brings us to the second normative issue: what norms should guide us if we wish to become good aesthetic agents? Are there principles or rules that we should follow to act well within the realm of aesthetics? Lopes introduces a set of guiding norms, which he calls the "core aesthetic norms": "get the object right" and "get the practice right" (133–135). According to his network theory, these norms derive from the goal of emulating experts—those who excel in the aesthetic realm. As he puts it:

> Aesthetic values do not have practical significance for just anyone. For any aesthetic value, the achievement of an agent in an aesthetic practice lies in doing what would be done by an expert in the practice (136).

Central to being an expert is competence in aesthetic evaluation. Expertise in aesthetics is characterized by the ability to make correct aesthetic evaluations and to engage in aesthetic activities befitting these evaluations. However, these evaluations are also shaped by the aesthetic profiles of specific practices, which

establish patterns of correlation between aesthetic value properties (such as elegance or intensity) and non-aesthetic properties (such as movement style, speed, or spatial arrangement). For instance, the visceral intensity of Pina Bausch's *Café Müller* is relative to the aesthetic practice of Tanztheater. The work's fragmented movements, raw emotional expressions, and sparse staging create an overwhelming and immersive effect, qualities highly valued within the Tanztheater tradition. Yet these same features—such as emotional rawness and physical tension—might not carry the same weight in classical ballet, where visceral intensity is often achieved through precise technique, elaborate costuming, and intricate narrative choreography. Within the aesthetic profile of classical ballet, these same movements might instead be associated with being disjointed or unrefined and fail to meet the expectations of seamless elegance and technical precision that define the practice. The non-aesthetic properties of the performance thus take on different significance depending on the aesthetic profile of the aesthetic practice. Thus, two core aesthetic norms emerge: get the object right and get the practice right. To get the object right, one must evaluate an object according to the aesthetic profile of the practice to which it belongs, which requires the correct identification of the object as part of the relevant practice. To get the practice right, one must ensure that one's evaluations align with the true aesthetic profile of that practice. These two norms are deeply interdependent (134): Failing to get the object right can distort one's understanding of the practice, and misunderstanding the practice can lead to misjudging individual objects. Together, these norms establish the standard for being a good aesthetic agent.

3. NGUYEN'S ENGAGEMENT ACCOUNT

In his "Autonomy and Aesthetic Engagement," Nguyen frames aesthetic judgments as cognitive judgments that can be straightforwardly correct or incorrect (2020, 1129). These judgments attribute particular aesthetic properties to an object—such as sensuousness, delicacy—or involve overall evaluative judgments, like determining whether a Jackson Pollock painting is profound or whether Thelonious Monk's music features bizarre angles or sensuous textures (1130). According to Nguyen, these judgments are not

based on subjective pleasure but are instead grounded in an objective assessment of the work.

Nguyen's theory of aesthetic value, the Engagement Account, emphasizes that the primary value of aesthetic appreciation comes from the process of generating these judgments, rather than from the issuance of the judgments themselves (1137–1138).[2] He likens aesthetic engagement to striving games, where the goal (winning) motivates participation, but the true value lies in the effort and activity of striving (1142–1143). Similarly, in aesthetic appreciation, we strive to make correct judgments, but the true value lies in the process of engaging with the object—figuring it out, analyzing its properties, and striving for the right evaluation. Nguyen elaborates on this idea through the concept of motivational inversion (1143): in everyday life, we pursue means to achieve specific ends, such as studying to pass an exam or assembling IKEA furniture for its utility. In striving play, however, we choose ends in order to experience the means they require—for instance, climbing a mountain to test one's physical and mental endurance or playing chess for the intellectual challenge. Likewise, Nguyen argues that "[i]n aesthetic appreciation we aim at correctness, but correctness is not the purpose. It is only the right goal to adopt in order to become engaged in a desirable form of activity" (1143). Ultimately, what we truly value is the engagement itself, not simply the end product of the judgment.

Even though these judgments are not the main purpose of the activity, Nguyen insists that we must still aim to make correct judgments. In his model of aesthetic appreciation (as in striving play), we need a goal to strive toward in order to engage fully in the process. Just as a player needs the goal of winning to focus their efforts we need the aim of making correct aesthetic judgments to motivate our deep engagement with the object. The norm of correctness compels us to attend closely to the details of the work and to make judgments that accurately reflect its aesthetic properties. For Nguyen, correctness is not merely a norm to follow, as it is for Lopes, but also a necessary motivator for engagement. This marks a key difference between Nguyen's account and Lopes's pluralistic approach, which allows for multiple motivators in aesthetic

[2] For another formulation of the engagement account of aesthetic value, see Strohl (2022).

acts (see Lopes (2018, 147–163)). Nguyen offers several reasons for why correctness must be a norm but also the main motivator in aesthetic appreciation. He suggests that if we were not oriented toward getting it right, we would be free to indulge in imaginative flights or impose whatever interpretation we pleased, which would lead to a superficial or careless engagement with the object (1145–1146). The aim of getting the judgment right pushes us to refine our sensitivity, care, and responsiveness to the work's complexities. Without this drive, we might stop as soon as we find a pleasing interpretation, rather than continuing to study the object attentively.

Despite its emphasis on engagement, Nguyen's account underscores that we remain bound by the norm of getting it right. While the process holds the primary value, the aim of making correct judgments drives our initial approach to aesthetic objects. This striving for correctness shapes our engagement, ensuring that aesthetic appreciation stays focused and sensitive to the details of the work. Hence, in Nguyen's account, correctness is not merely a norm we should follow if we want to be good aesthetic agents but the very motivator that propels us to delve into the process in the first place and sustain it. Thus, even within the Engagement Account, the norm of correctness remains central to how we experience and evaluate aesthetic objects.

4. BEYOND ACCURACY AND EXPERTISE: BIAS-REDUCTION MODEL

In this section, I argue that "getting it right" is neither the necessary guiding norm nor the right motivator of our aesthetic engagements. First, I contend that aesthetic motivations are diverse, and there is no compelling reason to privilege one over others as the constitutive or right trigger for engagement, contrary to Nguyen's assumption. Second, in response to Lopes's and Nguyen's endorsement of "getting it right" as the essential norm to follow to be a good aesthetic agent, I propose an alternative: "Do not let your prior outlooks—such as expertise, beliefs, desires, fears, preferences, or attitudes—unduly influence your aesthetic perception, evaluation, or actions." In simpler terms: "Don't be biased."

To begin, let's consider the issue of motivation. It is overly reductive to view "getting it right" as the primary and constitutive motivator of aesthetic

engagement. Aesthetic engagement is far more varied—comes in different intensities and comes in various commitments—and we have numerous reasons for aesthetically engaging with objects that go beyond merely getting them "right." For example, even within the narrow scope of art appreciation, individuals engage with art for many purposes, some of which have little or nothing to do with the pursuit of correctness. Consider the following motivations: (1) *Pleasure and Enjoyment:* A common and deeply human reason for engaging with art is the anticipated pleasure it might bring—a point emphasized by hedonists. Art often captivates through beauty, harmony, or the sublime, evoking emotional responses such as joy, awe, or tranquility. These experiences are valuable as ends in themselves. Take Michelangelo's *Tondo Doni*: its harmonious composition, vibrant colors, and dynamic figures immediately inspire awe and tranquility. In such cases, "getting the artwork right" becomes irrelevant; the focus shifts from making precise judgments to simply being moved by the work. (2) *Cognitive and Emotional Engagement:* Art also engages us intellectually, prompting reflection on complex ideas, narratives, or emotions. This form of engagement can provoke new thoughts, challenge our assumptions, or offer emotional resonance. For instance, *Sun & Sea (Marina)* explores themes of climate change and human complacency. It provokes intellectual reflection on environmental issues and evokes emotional responses ranging from unease to sorrow. Here, the value lies not in making a correct aesthetic judgment but in how the artwork stimulates reflection and emotional insight. The value lies not in forming a "correct" aesthetic judgment but in how the work fosters insight and emotional connection—a point Nguyen rightly emphasizes. However, contrary to Nguyen's claim, the anticipation of such cognitive and emotional engagement, rather than "getting it right," may be the true motivator for approaching these works. (3) *Sense-Making and Understanding:* People often turn to art as a means of making sense of the world. Art can serve as a lens through which we explore deep cultural, historical, or metaphysical questions, leading to insights about human nature, morality, and identity. In *İnce Memed* by Yaşar Kemal, readers are drawn by the story of a young peasant turned outlaw who rebels against oppression in rural Turkey. The novel invites readers to grapple with themes of power, resistance, and resilience. The motivation to engage with such a work often lies in the

anticipation of understanding these complexities, rather than in assigning the "right" aesthetic properties—such as accurately evaluating its narrative structure or adherence to conventions of social realism typical of its genre. (4) *Expression of Identity:* Engaging with art is often motivated by a desire for self-expression because art enables individuals to convey their identity, values, and affiliations (see especially Riggle (2015a, 2015b) and Lopes (2024, 139–159)). Choices in music, fashion, or even home decor serve as ways of aligning oneself with particular values, communities, or subcultures. This engagement is not about making a "correct" aesthetic judgment but about using art as a medium to reflect who we are or who we aspire to be. (5) *Imaginative Exploration and Escape:* Art, particularly literature, invites imaginative engagement by allowing viewers to explore new perspectives, entertain hypothetical situations, and occasionally escape their own reality. Here, making the correct evaluations is irrelevant; the focus is on pushing boundaries, experiencing diverse emotional and intellectual states, and engaging with alternative realities. The goal is not to assign the "correct" aesthetic properties to the work but to embrace the freedom of exploration and discovery or escape it offers. (6) *Self-Reflection and Personal Growth:* Art often prompts introspection; it encourages individuals to reflect on their beliefs, emotions, and experiences. Through this kind of engagement, people may experience personal growth or gain a deeper understanding of themselves. *Sun & Sea (Marina)* invites viewers to think about their own role in the global climate crisis, prompting introspection about their habits, values, and responsibilities. This deeply subjective process prioritizes self-reflection over the pursuit of a "correct" aesthetic judgment, highlighting how art can serve as a space for personal exploration and growth. For many, this opportunity for introspection is a key motivation for engaging with works like *Sun & Sea (Marina)*.
(7) *Transformation:* Many believe that art can profoundly transform how we understand others and the world (see e.g., Nussbaum (1990), Riggle (2016), Aumann (2022)). For instance, literature, some argue, expands our imagination by offering access to "what it is like" experiences and perspectives we might never encounter firsthand (see especially Kind (2020), Peacocke (2021a), and Bailey (2023)). This transformative potential motivates engagement, as individuals seek art that challenges assumptions, fosters empathy, and inspires

change. (8) *Social Connection and Shared Experience:* Aesthetic experiences, such as attending concerts, visiting museums, or discussing art, are often shared activities. Engaging with art socially fosters connections and provides opportunities for collective discussion and critique (see especially Riggle (2024a)). These shared interactions enhance the value of the aesthetic experience, often regardless of whether a "correct" judgment about the artwork is reached. Many are motivated to engage with art for the sense of connection and community it fosters. You might be motivated to go to a movie or a gallery just to have this social connection. (9) *Nostalgia:* Aesthetic engagement is often fueled by a longing to reconnect with personal or cultural memories. Revisiting a childhood movie, re-reading a favorite book, or listening to music from a specific era can evoke powerful emotions tied to past experiences. The motivation here lies in the emotional resonance of familiarity rather than an attempt to evaluate the work anew. Even if your initial evaluation of the work was flawed, you might still hold onto it for the sake of preserving the memory and the emotions it represents.

Given these varied reasons for engaging with art, it's clear that "getting it right" cannot be the primary motivator of aesthetic engagement. Aesthetic engagement serves too many purposes that are not tied to making accurate or expert-driven judgments. Some might challenge the legitimacy of these motivations and argue that by severing the tie between these motivations and the assignment of correct aesthetic properties, I risk stripping the engagement or experience of its aesthetic character altogether. For instance, a person who engages with an artwork purely out of nostalgia—simply to evoke a past memory, time, or place—might be viewed as treating it no differently than using the same item—say, a book—as a makeshift prop to stabilize a wobbly table. Critics may argue that in these types of engagement, the artworks are not valued for their own sake but are merely treated as instruments for external ends—such as evoking a memory, fostering social connections, enabling self-transformation, or simply providing pleasure. I do not intend to provide a comprehensive account of what makes an engagement aesthetic in this paper. However, I propose the following, which I believe is inclusive enough to resonate with a broad audience while encompassing the wide range of experiences we encounter: the aesthetic nature of engagement can be determined not only by

the assignment of aesthetic properties to objects but also by the engagement or experience itself, which carries a distinct aesthetic character. Aesthetic experience involves attending to the sensory or imaginary features of an object, along with affective responses to or reflections on these features and/or their organization and interaction.[3] While similar cognitive processes may occur when we are simply perceiving or analyzing an object, aesthetic experience is marked by a distinctive quality that transcends mere cognition. This elusive quality, what Leibniz referred to as *je ne sais quoi*, underscores the ineffable but unmistakable character of aesthetic engagement (1989 [1684], 291).

The response I am formulating to the objection that my view strips engagement or experience of its aesthetic character is informed by the two primary approaches in the literature to the demarcation question in aesthetics—namely, what makes aesthetic value distinctively aesthetic (see Stecker 2006). This dependency can be mediated and explained in various ways; for example, as discussed in the first section, in Lopes' account, aesthetic profiles coordinate the relationship between aesthetic and non-aesthetic properties. The alternative approach focuses on aesthetic experience, positing that aesthetic value arises from the unique qualities of the experience itself. I believe these two perspectives are not mutually exclusive (see Stecker, 2006, for an

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[3] This definition is a revised version of Levinson's (1996, 6) definition of aesthetic appreciation and Stecker's (2006, 4) minimal definition of aesthetic experience. The most significant adjustment is that my definition does not require attending to an object for its own sake or for the sake of the experience itself. In referring to "sensory features," I adopt Peacocke's broad conception (2021, 165–166). According to Peacocke, sensory features include not only classical sensible qualities like shape, color, texture, taste, and timbre but also representational features (e.g., a picture depicting the Virgin Mary), affinities (e.g., a tune being in the style of Britten), and some relational features (e.g., a monument being located in Rio). For literature, sensory features encompass the phonetics, prosody, rhyme, and other qualities of the words themselves, as well as the sensory aspects of scenes and events evoked through correct and complete imaginative engagement with the work. In my definition, I have also included "imaginary features" to account for cases where aesthetic experience arises from descriptions rather than direct sensory interaction. For example, in the case of John Cage's *4'33"*, one does not need to attend a live performance to appreciate the work. By imagining the types of sounds the audience might make during the silence, one can engage with the work's aesthetic character. The specific set of sounds produced is not central to the work itself—merely imagined qualities suffice. This approach is particularly applicable to many forms of conceptual art, where aesthetic appreciation often relies on imagination rather than direct sensory experience.

opposing view). One can argue that the source of aesthetic value lies in the experience itself, which is distinctively aesthetic, while aesthetic property terms serve as descriptors of this distinctive kind of experience. To be clear, I do not claim that a single, uniform experiential quality applies to all aesthetic encounters with art, nature, or everyday objects. Nor do I endorse a monistic view that treats aesthetic value as one uniform property underlying every aesthetic experience—a stance on which I agree with Lopes. Instead, I maintain that there are multiple ways of being aesthetically valuable—haunting, vibrant, sublime, comforting, disturbing, and so forth—each constituting its own form of aesthetic goodness (see also Lopes (2018, 127–129)). Accordingly, the term "aesthetic" encompasses a wide spectrum of experiences, which we can only account for by drawing on a diverse set of aesthetic value terms.

To address the objection, I claim the following: the aesthetic quality of the engagements I described earlier—such as engaging with an object out of nostalgia—is rooted in the experience itself. For instance, when we re-read a childhood book to reconnect with our past, the act involves more than mere remembrance. We engage with sensory features like the rhythm and rhyme of the text, vivid imagery, and humorous elements of the plot, while responding emotionally with joy, empathy, or curiosity. These interactions combine to create an experience that is inherently aesthetic. Even if the primary motivation for the engagement is external—such as revisiting a memory—the aesthetic quality of the experience remains central to the act. This alignment between remembering and aesthetic experience is far from accidental. The original encounter we are seeking to revisit was itself an aesthetic experience, one that shaped and enriched our memory. A similar reasoning applies across the other cases I have discussed. For example, when engaging with a work of fiction for cognitive or emotional insight, personal growth, or imaginative exploration, it is the aesthetic character of the work that uniquely supports these ends. Fiction, with its richness of sensory detail, emotional nuance, and imaginative possibilities, provides a fertile ground for these goals in ways that, say, reading a factual newspaper article simply cannot replicate. It is no coincidence, then, that we turn to artworks for such purposes. The aesthetic character of the engagement facilitates the achievement of these broader goals. Art's capacity to evoke complex responses, stimulate reflection, and deepen emotional

resonance ensures that its aesthetic value is not merely incidental but central to why it is so uniquely suited to these engagements that are brought about for various reasons.

To address the second part of the objection—namely, that aesthetic engagements motivated by external reasons fail to value the object for its own sake—I concede that such engagements are not solely about valuing the object for its own sake. However, I argue that this does not undermine their aesthetic character. These are distinctive aesthetic experiences that arise in tandem with, and are enriched by, other ends artworks serve.

Just as it is overly reductive to view "getting it right" as the primary or constitutive motivator of aesthetic engagement, it is equally reductive to assume that "getting it right" serves the general norm that we should follow if we want to be good aesthetic agents. The diversity in reasons for aesthetic engagement highlights that while correctness may be a local norm in certain contexts, it cannot be the overarching norm guiding all aesthetic activity (see especially Kubala (2020) on local, practice-internal norms). There are, of course, contexts where correctness may play a significant role—particularly in professional settings. In curation or preservation, for example, a curator might aim to accurately represent an artist's intent or ensure that a work is preserved according to specific historical standards. Here, correctness might serve as a local norm, guiding the professional's decisions. However, even in these cases, the aim is not always accuracy in the traditional sense. A curator might seek to facilitate diverse interactions with a work of art, allowing for multiple interpretations rather than pushing for a single, correct reading. Moreover, artists themselves often leave their works open to interpretation, which complicates any straightforward notion of "getting it right." Nguyen and Lopes might argue that in these contexts, "getting it right" means appreciating the plurality of valid interpretations and recognizing that an object can bear various aesthetic properties. They might be right in some cases, but it is not clear that the notion of right or wrong applies in all instances where the artist invites multiple interpretations or allows for the assignment of diverse aesthetic properties. Consider Ilya Kabakov's *The Man Who Flew into Space from His Apartment* (1985). This immersive installation invites visitors to explore a meticulously constructed space filled with personal objects, such as posters,

coat racks, and a makeshift launchpad, and to reconstruct the story of a man who attempted to escape Soviet life by launching himself into space. Each visitor brings their own life experiences, memories, and associations to the encounter, shaping their interpretation of the flying man's motivations, the tone of the narrative, and the meaning of his departure. For one visitor, the work might evoke feelings of hope and liberation, portraying the flying man as an imaginative dreamer transcending oppressive conditions. They might see the installation as a celebration of creativity and the human spirit. For another visitor, the work could feel tragic and futile, emphasizing the absurdity or delusion of the flying man's actions in a bleak commentary on escapism. A third viewer might interpret the work as humorous and satirical, highlighting the contrast between the grandiosity of space travel and the mundane, shabby details of the apartment. These interpretations assign conflicting aesthetic properties to the work—hopeful versus tragic versus humorous—that reflect radically different emotional and conceptual responses. These divergent aesthetic properties assigned to the work highlight the role of the viewer's psychological make-up and prior outlook in shaping their engagement, making it difficult to declare any single assignment as definitively "right" or "wrong." In such cases, fostering open engagement or new perspectives might be more important than "getting it right".

Similarly, in academic or critical contexts, such as writing a review or passing an exam, correctness might be necessary to meet certain practical requirements. However, this correctness is often tied to fulfilling professional duties rather than a genuine aesthetic aim. The critic might need to align their judgments with historical consensus or art-historical standards to demonstrate competence, but this is different from the kind of engagement that seeks pleasure, understanding, or self-expression.

Maybe one of the cases where "getting it right" functions as a local norm is with an aesthetic agent who is a snob. For the snob, correctness might be central to their motivation because it serves as a means of proving their expertise and acquiring the social status they desire. As Lopes explains, snobs aim to align their judgments with recognized aesthetic standards, not out of genuine appreciation, but to impress peers, gain acceptance, or reinforce their position within a cultural elite—especially concerning works they associate with

high-class status, often neglecting or misjudging works linked to lower-class culture (Lopes (2018, 153–155); see also Kieran (2009); Patridge (2018, 2023); Johnson King (2023)). In this context, "getting it right" becomes a way to demonstrate competence and avoid being unmasked as ignorant or superficial. While their engagement is shaped by extrinsic motivations, the pursuit of correctness remains a crucial part of their strategy to achieve the social validation they value. This highlights that even when correctness is a local norm, its significance can vary greatly depending on the motivations and contexts of the agents involved.

Nguyen might respond to my criticisms by arguing that "getting it right" is the right motivator and the necessary norm of aesthetic engagement because only when we aim to get it right do we appropriately engage with the object. In all other instances, he might claim, our appreciation falls short in some way. However, as Riggle (2024b, 396) points out, Nguyen does not provide a clear account of what constitutes "appropriate engagement." The closest we get is his emphasis on terms like "greater engagement" (1148), "sensitive engagement" (1141), "deep and lasting engagement" (1141), and engagement "oriented around sensitivity, refinement, care, and responsiveness to detail" (1145). I think, for Nguyen, "getting it right" regulates and sustains this kind of engagement, making it not only the right motivator but also the general norm for aesthetic appreciation. Yet, not all aesthetic occasions demand deep, immersive engagement. Claire Bishop, in her brilliant book, *Disordered Attention: How We Look at Art Now*, highlights how works like *Sun & Sea (Marina)* deliberately encourage what she describes as "disordered attention." She notes that the performance "grants us the space to be mobile and social, to react, chat, share, and archive as we watch" (2024, 4). Unlike traditional immersive models requiring focused reverence, *Sun & Sea* embraces a fragmented and hybrid engagement, allowing viewers to experience the performance while connecting physically and digitally with others. Bishop also explains how new practices like "skimming and sampling" have emerged in response to the overwhelming volume of material presented in research-based art (e.g., Wolfgang Tillmans' *Truth Study Center*) and large-scale exhibitions (Documenta 11 in 2002, which included over 600 hours of video) (see 2004, 37–75). Rather than attempting comprehensive engagement, viewers browse

and selectively engage with fragments. In such contexts, it is unclear what deep engagement would even mean. Would a Documenta 11 attendee need to stay for the entire 100-day exhibition and watch all 600 hours of video to achieve "full" engagement, or does skimming and sampling suffice to meaningfully interact with the material? These examples suggest that the demands of deep engagement, often idealized by Nguyen, may not be appropriate or achievable for every aesthetic experience.

If correctness is not the overarching norm of aesthetic engagement, what is? I argue that the key to successful aesthetic engagement, evaluation, and action lies in bias reduction. This is not an entirely new idea; many philosophers have recognized it as essential to the integrity of aesthetic engagement or included it as part of the criteria for a good aesthetic agent. For instance, one of Hume's five characteristics of a true judge is freedom from bias (see Hume (1987 [1777], 239–240)). Similarly, Kant identifies disinterestedness as a central requirement for genuine aesthetic judgment: to form a proper aesthetic judgment, we should have no vested interest in the object's existence—no biases for or against it (2000 [1790], 90–96). Historically, however, bias reduction has often been understood as turning oneself into a blank slate, suspending prior knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, desires, fears, and wishes. I believe this approach is misguided. Our prior outlooks are integral to who we are; shedding them entirely is not only impossible but also unnecessary and undesirable. Prior outlooks are always present and often beneficial. Expertise can illuminate subtle aesthetic features, enriching our perception. As noted earlier, for instance, properly engaging with Ilya Kabakov's *The Man Who Flew into Space from His Apartment* (1985) requires us to draw on our existing background cognitive states. Hence, the goal should be to distinguish and minimize the bad influences of our outlooks rather than eliminate them altogether. Octavian Ion and I (2024) explore this norm in the context of aesthetic perception in our article, "Apt Perception, Aesthetic Engagement, and Curatorial Practices." Drawing on Susanna Siegel's (2017) framework in *The Rationality of Perception*, we propose that the guiding norm for aesthetic perception is not achieving correctness but minimizing the improper influence of prior outlooks.

Siegel's concept of perceptual hijacking—which examines how prior outlooks can distort perception in epistemic contexts—provides a useful framework for understanding bias in both epistemic and aesthetic contexts. Siegel argues that perception can be rational or irrational, depending on whether prior outlooks exert improper weight and distort one's perception. For example, Siegel describes Vivek, a performer whose vanity hijacks his perception. Vivek sees the neutral faces in his audience as pleased. This distortion does not stem from external factors but from Vivek's internal outlook. His vanity improperly influences his perception, leading him to genuinely perceive that no one in the audience is dissatisfied or indifferent. If perception is always considered "innocent," we lack the means to challenge Vivek's perceptual experience. Siegel's solution is to recognize that perception is cognitively permeated and can be evaluated as rational or irrational. In the aesthetic domain, Ion and I extend Siegel's concept of perceptual hijacking through the case of Christian Nicholai Mustad and *Sunset at Montmajour,* a painting by Vincent van Gogh. Initially, Mustad saw the painting as vibrant, expressive, and beautiful, proudly displaying it as the centerpiece of his home. However, after a rival cast doubt on its authenticity, Mustad's perception of the painting changed dramatically and he abandoned it in his attic. The warm yellows now appeared hollow, the wild brushstrokes seemed studied, and the overall composition no longer struck him as beautiful. This shift illustrates how improper weight from Mustad's prior outlook—his belief in the painting's inauthenticity and his resentment toward the rival who challenged him—hijacked his aesthetic perception. Without the concept of aesthetic aptness, we cannot explain why Mustad's altered perception is problematic. His prior outlook distorted his perception, undermining his ability to engage with the painting's aesthetic properties in an unbiased way. This case study illustrates that the norm that should guide aesthetic perception is not to eliminate prior outlooks entirely but to reduce or eliminate their improper influence, ensuring open and responsive engagement with a work itself. While Ion's and my earlier focus was on aesthetic perception, I now extend this claim to evaluations and acts, arguing that the norm of bias reduction applies to all aspects of aesthetic engagement.

One might claim that Mustad's error lay in failing to "get it right," but this overlooks how bias itself can produce the very misjudgments we label as

"incorrect." Rather than accuracy functioning as the safeguard against overvaluation or undervaluation, it is bias reduction that truly fosters open, apt engagement, which in turn may lead to more balanced assessments. In other words, the order should be reversed: eliminating—or at least minimizing—bias is what enables us to see a work more clearly, not the other way around. Over- or undervaluation, on its own, need not be improper (a view that sets me apart from most current scholarship in aesthetics); it becomes problematic only when it stems from our blind spots, prejudices, or entrenched beliefs. In my account, unlike Lopes' and Nguyen's accounts, an agreement with art-historical consensus or expert opinion does not necessarily make a judgment immune to criticism; if the judgment is biased, it may still be flawed. Nguyen's "Inductive Kate" provides a clear illustration (2020, 1133). Kate offers strong, personal judgments based on films she has actually seen. But over time, she starts making pronouncements about works she has not seen, assuming they share qualities with other films from the same director or studio. For instance, she deems *The Hateful Eight* "clever, perverse, and postmodern" based solely on familiarity with Tarantino's oeuvre, and dismisses *Justice League* as "boring, corporate, and ponderous" based on earlier Warner Bros. adaptations of DC comics (1133). Here, Kate's expertise, self-assurance, vanity, and belief in her own abilities badly influence her engagement and overshadow the need for direct, first-hand engagement. To adhere to the bias-reduction norm, she should experience the works themselves before forming judgments—however "correct" her predictions might seem—so that her evaluations are not skewed by presumption or unexamined assumptions.[4]

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[4] Another example Nguyen discusses is "Audio Tour Brandon" (2020, 1132). At first glance, it may not be obvious how Brandon's aesthetic shortcomings violate the bias-reduction norm. However, Brandon defers entirely to museum audio tours, basing his judgments on what the tour tells him to notice and how to evaluate each piece. Nguyen (2020, 1134) argues that Brandon's aesthetic life is impoverished because he relies solely on external guidance, never meaningfully engaging his own faculties. From a bias-reduction perspective, what's really at play here is that Brandon allows his insecurities to influence his aesthetic engagement. He is biased against himself, consistently undervaluing his own perspective and thus refusing to use his own capacities. Scholars describe this pattern in various ways: as intellectual servility stemming from oppression (Tanesini 2018), as self-handicapping linked to an external locus of control (Rotter 1966), or as learned helplessness arising from repeated experiences of failure (Seligman 1972). In more neutral terms, it is self-directed bias: because Brandon distrusts his own abilities as an

Conversely, a judgment that deviates from expert consensus is not necessarily blameworthy if it stems from sincere, unbiased engagement. Consider Ali, a novice to modern dance, who watches a modern dance performance and says, ”I love the jerky, chaotic movements; they make the performance feel so unpolished and raw.” He assigns the aesthetic property of rawness to the dance and likes it for that reason. However, the choreographer intended the movements to be precise and meticulously synchronized—a display of technical perfection rather than chaos. In this case, the aesthetic property Ali admires (rawness) may not be considered a good-making property by the choreographer or informed audiences familiar with the choreographer’s oeuvre or the conventions of avant-garde dance, where angular patterns often signify intentional disruption or precision rather than disorder. Ali’s evaluation deviates from expert consensus, but it reflects sincere and meaningful engagement. He pays close attention to the sensory and expressive features of the performance, finds personal value in them, and responds emotionally to the experience. His admiration for the piece prompts further engagement: he recommends it to friends, attends other performances by the same company, and begins exploring the genre more broadly. Far from diminishing his engagement, his initial misunderstanding serves as a catalyst for aesthetic growth and deeper appreciation. From Lopes’s perspective, Ali is aesthetically in the wrong because he gets the object wrong. From bias reduction perspective, Ali is a good aesthetic agent precisely because his judgment is free of bias. This analysis suggests that the standard for meaningful aesthetic engagement is not correctness but rather the absence of bias. But don’t get me wrong: Even if Ali had decided not to engage further or had ultimately disliked the performance, he would not thereby become a “bad

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aesthetic agent for whatever reason, he becomes overly reliant on external authorities, forfeiting autonomy and thus crippling his own aesthetic agency. As a result, his judgments, despite being academically correct, are flawed. Ultimately, this self-directed bias skews his perception of the artworks themselves. By constantly deferring to the audio guide, Brandon filters each piece through someone else’s lens rather than his own. He never cultivates a personal response or challenges the guided script, so he cannot fully appreciate or critique the works on their own terms. In this way, his bias against himself translates into a bias against the artworks and confine them to someone else’s framework instead of letting them reveal their value to him directly.

aesthetic agent" because his judgment was formed without bias. What matters is the process of engagement: if someone assesses a work of art without letting their prior outlooks dominate their evaluation, even an inaccurate judgment can still be considered apt. This is a pluralistic approach to aesthetic engagement that allows for radical aesthetic disagreements without reducing taste to subjectivity. Aesthetic agents can disagree profoundly on the value or interpretation of a work, but as long as they approach it without bias, their judgments remain apt.

Ali's case illustrates a central aspect of the bias-reduction norm: aesthetic engagement can "go right" for a range of reasons—including curiosity, emotional resonance, or personal meaning (that is, how a work speaks to an individual's unique experiences and/or values). The bias-reduction norm does not prescribe a single, correct way of engaging; rather, it explains what goes wrong when biases—problematic influences from our prior outlooks—"hijack" our perception, evaluation, or actions (much like Siegel's concept of perceptual hijacking). Once such biases take over, our responses no longer flow from a genuine encounter with the artwork; instead, they become distorted reflections of our prejudices, fears, or unwarranted assumptions. To see how this applies in practice, consider the earlier motivations for engaging with art and note how biases can undermine the goods of aesthetic engagement: if we approach art for pleasure, intellectual stimulation, sense-making, personal growth, or transformation, our ingrained associations about what counts as "real" or "deep" art may skew our openness to different forms of aesthetic value and undermine these aims. For instance, someone who equates artistic talent and depth with detailed realism might dismiss Ilya Kabakov's *The Man Who Flew into Space from His Apartment* as mere clutter rather than a significant conceptual work. Similarly, the motivation to use art for self-expression can be compromised when aesthetic choices are driven not by genuine resonance but by social performance—such as adopting a music style solely to cultivate an "edgy" persona. In such cases, the engagement reflects not self-expression but a They-self-expression and is shaped more by desire for external validation than personal affinity. Engaging with art for its nostalgic value can also backfire if a rigid attachment to prior beliefs about a cherished work prevents fresh engagement and retrial of the experienced content. Someone deeply connected

to a childhood film, for instance, might resist reevaluating it in light of new insights, dismissing any critique that challenges their early impressions. While nostalgia is one of the main reasons why we seek aesthetic experiences, unchecked, it may also freeze one's perspective, preventing further engagement. In all these cases, prior outlooks limit rather than enhance aesthetic experience. The bias-reduction norm does not demand the wholesale abandonment of our background cognitive or conative states but calls for awareness of when these states distort rather than support aesthetic encounters. By minimizing such hijacking, we can engage more freely and responsively with an artwork's sensory, expressive, and conceptual features—guided by local, practice-specific norms if we choose.

5. CONCLUDING BY ADDRESSING POSSIBLE MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT THE BIAS-REDUCTION MODEL

One might worry that the bias-reduction model imposes an onerous duty to self-scan for bias at every moment of aesthetic engagement—a task few would find feasible. The bias reduction norm does not need to be consciously at the forefront of our minds during every aesthetic engagement. Much like Mill's analogy with the principle of utility, which regulates moral behavior through derived secondary principles rather than constant conscious application, bias reduction operates as a background guide. As Mill observes, "To inform a traveler respecting the place of his ultimate destination, is not to forbid the use of landmarks and direction-posts on the way" (2001, 17). Similarly, in the aesthetic domain, we rely on *pro tanto* rules—such as "judge for yourself; do not defer to others" or "experience the object firsthand to form an aesthetic judgment"—as landmarks and direction-posts. Additional prescriptions, such as "be aesthetically humble" may also play a role (see Matherne (2023)).

Consider Inductive Kate, who makes aesthetic judgments based on inductive generalizations, or Audio Tour Brandon, who defers entirely to a museum's audio guide. In their cases, invoking principles like autonomy ("judge for yourself") and acquaintance ("experience the object firsthand") can help recalibrate their engagement. Importantly, it is the overarching goal of bias reduction that gives these principles their normative weight. Rather than

demanding constant vigilance, the bias-reduction norm operates through these intermediary principles. These intermediary principles, rules, and advices shape our aesthetic practices and foster openness and thoughtful engagement without requiring constant reference to the overarching norm. The norm becomes explicitly relevant in moments of conflict, particularly when tensions arise between competing judgments, motivations, or local norms of aesthetic practices.

A second misconception could be that a bias-reduction obligates us to be maximally open to absolutely everything—a duty to sample every form, style, or genre of art. But this expectation is neither implied nor practical. We are finite beings with limited time and attention, while the range of possible aesthetic experiences is effectively infinite. Selecting which experiences to pursue or forego is a central activity in the aesthetic domain. What matters, on this model, is how we make these selections. If you simply say, "I refuse to watch horror movies because they are never intellectually stimulating," you may be acting out of a caricatured assumption—an improper influence of your preconceptions about horror movies. Your blanket dismissal might be fueled by hearsay, prejudice, or a narrow prior experience. In that case, bias is shaping your aesthetic curation. By contrast, you could arrive at the same choice—not watching horror—without indulging in any bias. You might acknowledge that plenty of horror films are engaging and complex, but still decide, "They're just not what I personally gravitate toward, and I prefer to invest my limited leisure time elsewhere." Or you might say, "I recognize people rave about psychological horror, but I derive more lasting satisfaction from slow-paced art films or romantic comedies." In these scenarios, the decision to avoid horror arises from an honest assessment of your preferences, not from a reflexive, dismissive stance. Thus, far from demanding that we be all-encompassingly open, bias reduction merely insists that our acceptance or refusal of particular aesthetic practices or objects not be governed by unwarranted negative assumptions. We curate our aesthetic lives constantly—deciding which exhibitions, films, or performances we find appealing or unappealing—yet we can do so thoughtfully, guided by preference or informed opinion rather than prejudice.

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