

**THE AESTHETIC VALUE OF
THE WORLD**

TOM COCHRANE

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Preface

Aesthetic value makes the world worthwhile. This is because the entire world is aesthetically valuable, while it is fairly wretched in other respects. So without aesthetic value, we cannot properly value the world. And if we cannot value the world, our lives are immeasurably poorer.

With some historical precedent, we can call this view 'Aestheticism'. Note that it is not to be confused with another view sometimes called Aestheticism, which claims that the aesthetic value of an artwork is independent from its ethical value (better called 'aesthetic autonomism'). The views are somewhat related. Both emphasise valuing things for their own sake, sometimes in the teeth of ethical disvalue. But Aestheticism is only partially concerned with artworks; it is more wholly concerned with the world.

Aestheticism should also not be confused with 'positive aesthetics'. Positive aesthetics is the view that all pristine nature is aesthetically good. In so far as both views find aesthetic value in nature, positive aesthetics overlaps with Aestheticism. But Aestheticism is far broader. It is claiming that not just pristine nature, but *everything* is aesthetically valuable, even the rotting, polluted, disgusting parts.

Thus Aestheticism is quite a strong view. I think that most people, when they understand what aesthetic value is, will acknowledge that it makes a significant contribution to their lives. Yet aesthetic value is hardly ever articulated in the comprehensive way I am aiming for here. I even think that the pursuit of aesthetic value can be a genuine philosophy of life on a par with philosophies such as Stoicism, Epicureanism, or Existentialism.

How do I hope to justify such a view? My strategy is in an important sense pluralist. There is not just one aesthetic value, but many. In particular, I am not trying to claim that everything is beautiful. Beauty is a major aesthetic value, but if we try to pile too many things into this category, we end up with a thin concept about which very little of substance can be said. Instead, my strategy is to give rich accounts of as many aesthetic values as I can bear, wherever I think that some distinctive psychological receptivity can be identified. It is the sum total of these psychological resources that allows us to aesthetically value everything.

Thus the main body of this work is concerned with understanding the various aesthetic values. This will generally be a matter of analysing the psychological processes that allow us to experience them (i.e. they will be response-based analyses). These analyses are hopefully of independent interest and plausibility. However, the main significance they have for me is that they allow me to flesh out the aesthetic world view. By systematically investigating these different aesthetic values, the reader should gradually come to see how everything can be aesthetically appreciated.

The plan of the book is as follows: In the Introduction, I outline why we need to find value in the world, and why aesthetic value is the best candidate. Basically, when our lives are going badly, the value of the world offers solace and the grounds to rebuild. Meanwhile aesthetic value, unlike moral value, identifies a definite positive value.

My first chapter then develops a foundational account of aesthetic value in general. I analyse aesthetic value as ‘objectified final value’. It’s not only that we *can* aesthetically value the world, but that we only really value the world *in its own right* by means of aesthetic value. I then underwrite this analysis with a key psychological claim; that aesthetic values are ‘distal versions’ of practical values (section 1.4). Moreover, the intensity of each aesthetic value rests on an ‘essential tension’ (1.5) where a psychological reward is balanced against a challenge. Finally I argue that my characterisation demands a realist, object-focused (rather than experience-focused) model of aesthetic value.

The following five chapters develop detailed accounts of what I take to be the most significant aesthetic values. In the Appendix I offer brief accounts of some minor aesthetic values (plus erotic value, which is really a major aesthetic value but which I’m too prudish to write an entire chapter about). These accounts are designed to fit with the general characterisation of aesthetic value offered in Chapter One. In particular, I systematically apply the idea that aesthetic values are distal versions of practical values.

I start, in Chapter Two, with beauty. My main idea here is to link the value we take in beauty with our practical drive for knowledge. I develop this as an alternative to the contemporary ‘processing fluency’ account of aesthetic pleasure. I then consider the nature of ugliness. On the face of it, ugliness presents a significant problem for Aestheticism, for how can everything

be aesthetically valuable if some of it is ugly? As an initial (but certainly not final) response, I appeal to the notion of ‘difficult beauty’.

In Chapter Three I move onto the sublime, traditionally classed as the second major source of aesthetic value. Making sense of our appreciation of the sublime requires that we recognize our psychological capacity to empathise with objects. I argue that by means of our empathic engagements, we are enthralled by the power of sublime objects. In service of Aestheticism, the sublime gives us a way to become reconciled to hostile or indifferent nature.

In Chapter Four I discuss dramatic value. Here the major issue, particularly when we focus on real life cases, is whether drama counts as an aesthetic value in its own right or is at best a conduit for other values. I argue that the value of drama is to be found in the excitement of stretching an agent’s capacities. Experiencing dramatic value, especially with respect to our own lives, is an important way to embrace struggle.

In Chapter Five I examine the value of tragedy. Here is where I most directly address the problem of suffering, particularly the suffering of other people. I suggest that tragic works of art are attempts to tackle this very problem. While there are several things going on in these works, I argue that their key function is to make vivid the aesthetic value we take in other living beings; what I call sympathetic value.

In Chapter Six I turn to comedy, often under-recognized as a major source of aesthetic value. I argue that comic value lies in the appreciation of ‘non-serious norm-violations’ and moreover that it has the power to reconcile us with our vulnerability. When all else fails, when our lives seem hopelessly insignificant, we at least have comic value.

Chapter Seven draws together the various sources of aesthetic value presented in earlier chapters and articulates how together they allow us to experience the entire world as aesthetically valuable. This chapter is intended as a consolidated defence of the core aestheticist position, and can be read relatively independently of the rest of the book. Various criticisms of Aestheticism that have come up over the course of the book are addressed. In addition to the intrinsic benefits of Aestheticism, I also note that it has practical benefits. Most of all, it motivates us to understand the world better. In this way, Aestheticism is an important stimulus to science and philosophy.

Chapter Eight is where I consider Aestheticism as a general approach to life. I argue that a dedicated aestheticist will be inspired to create works of art, and that the way an artist creatively responds to the value of the world is an ideal of living well. Though there are other such ideals, the artistic paradigm can apply to a variety of human activities, including the pursuit and expression of one's understanding (as in philosophy). In the latter part of the chapter I then argue that, in distilling aesthetic values, the artist has an important social role to play. Artworks help us to discern value ideals, and our capacity to discern values is a vital component of virtue.

Overall, this book defends Aestheticism as a robust sense of the value of the world and consequently as playing a necessary role in the good life. Moreover, while a basic sense of aesthetic value is necessary for a good life, a thoroughgoing dedication to aesthetic value can characterise some of the best lives. This is a significant conclusion. Aesthetic value is often regarded as the most useless of all values, and the dedication towards aesthetic value as practically a vice, resulting in the most useless, self-indulgent of all human beings. Yet there is a strong case to be made that a society dedicated to the pursuit of aesthetic value would be happier and more resilient than most.

Related to this, I must acknowledge that there is another motivation underlying this work: a desire to defend aesthetics. It is no secret that aesthetics has low status within the philosophical profession. Yet it is a great mistake to regard aesthetics as peripheral, particularly in value theory. No other study focuses so deeply on final value, and final value is the very heart of value itself. Indeed, Aestheticism allows us to articulate the final value of philosophy. So I believe that all philosophers have something to gain from engaging with these issues. It is perhaps the consequence of being made so conscious of the charge that aesthetics is useless, and so forced to defend its worth at every turn, that I now offer such a resolute defence of its importance.

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