

# Non-Monotonic Theories of Aesthetic Value

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Theorists of aesthetic value since Hume have traditionally aimed to justify at least some comparative judgments of aesthetic value and to explain why we thereby have more reason to appreciate some aesthetic objects than others. I argue that three recent theories of aesthetic value—Thi Nguyen’s and Matthew Strohl’s engagement theories, Nick Riggle’s communitarian theory, and Dominic McIver Lopes’ network theory—face a challenge to carry out this explanatory task in a satisfactory way. I defend a monotonicity principle according to which the strength of our aesthetic reasons to appreciate varies monotonically with aesthetic value and claim that these theories, because they do not respect the principle, are non-monotonic. If they cannot find a plausible way to preserve the link between the aesthetic goodness of an object and our aesthetic reasons to appreciate it, these non-monotonic theories should be rejected.

**Keywords:** aesthetic reasons, aesthetic value, appreciation, artistic merit

## 1. Introduction

A surprising feature of recent theories of aesthetic value is their neglect of the comparative value of aesthetic objects: works of art and items of natural beauty. At least since Hume’s essay ‘Of the Standard of Taste’, one thing many have wanted from a theory of aesthetic value is a justification for some comparative judgments: one work of art is better than another, one landscape more beautiful than another. These judgments are comparisons of artworks’ overall artistic merit, on the one hand, or natural objects’ overall aesthetic merit,

on the other. I will use the generic term ‘aesthetic value’ to pick out the disjunction of the two.<sup>1</sup> Whatever else a theory says, aesthetic value looks to depend at least in part on features of an object, whether artifactual or natural.<sup>2</sup>

The theories of aesthetic value I will target here are all quite recent: the network theory advocated by Dominic McIver Lopes (2018), the engagement theory promoted, in different ways, by Thi Nguyen (2020a) and by Matthew Strohl (2021), and the communitarian theory developed by Nick Riggle (2022). My main charge in this paper will be that all three theories face a challenge to explain the comparative value of aesthetic objects in a satisfactory way, because they do not respect a certain principle linking aesthetic value with reasons. This is the principle that, other things being equal—although I will shortly discuss ways in which things are not always equal—we have more reason to appreciate what is more aesthetically valuable. I call this a *monotonicity* principle and claim that all three theories are, because they violate such principles, *non-monotonic*.

After explaining and motivating monotonicity principles in more detail (§2), I show that hedonism, the previously dominant theory of aesthetic value, can be monotonic (§3), then argue that each of these three rival non-hedonic theories is, in its current form, non-monotonic (§§4-6). Along the way, I suggest how these theories could preserve monotonicity and conclude by raising a final challenge questioning their ability to do so consistently with their other commitments (§7). Although I agree with these theorists in rejecting hedonism about aesthetic value, I will ultimately urge that, in exploring the possibilities for non-hedonic theories, we should not lose sight of the fact that some objects really are aesthetically better, and give us more reason to appreciate them, than others. After all, Hume’s aim in seeking a standard of taste was not merely to justify a list of true comparative

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<sup>1</sup> As those familiar with recent aesthetics will be quick to observe, this is a non-standard usage, given that it is a debated question whether the artistic merit of an artwork consists in anything other than its aesthetic value (Lopes 2011; Huddleston 2012; Hanson 2017; Stecker 2019). I do not mean to take a stand on this question, but simply want a term to pick out the kind of overall value, common to artworks and natural objects, that is the subject of the theories considered in this paper.

<sup>2</sup> This is not meant to beg any questions about the metaphysics of aesthetic value. Perhaps ultimately we should hold that, as Hume (1757) puts it, beauty is ‘no quality in things themselves’. Even according to that ‘species of philosophy’, however, features of the object would partially explain the object’s beauty, together with features of the subject appreciating it.

aesthetic judgments, but to guide our appreciative responses, and to do the latter by means of the former.

Before turning to the main argumentative work of the paper, I amplify my opening claims about comparative judgments. We can start by observing that theories of other kinds of value do not appear to neglect this topic. Among the standard—although not universally accepted—ambitions of moral philosophy is to provide, at least in principle, a ranking of actions in terms of their moral choiceworthiness, and to say what it is for an action to be morally choiceworthy. Even non-consequentialists, who deny that the moral value of an action is fully grounded in the value of its consequences, can endorse the aspiration to explain, say, which duties are weightier, or more important to carry out, than others. And among the standard ambitions of epistemology is to explain, at least in principle, which beliefs are better supported by the evidence, and to say what it is for a belief to be well supported by the evidence. Even non-Lockeans, who operate with a primary notion of full belief rather than degrees of credence, will happily countenance at least some comparative judgments of belief-worthiness.

These rankings, whether aesthetic, moral, or epistemic, need not be complete or fully determinate. Indeed, to return to our topic, one might think that an important lesson of recent aesthetics, given the diversity of aesthetic traditions, is that we should be hesitant about making comparative judgments. This hesitancy is partly epistemic, due to our unfamiliarity with all aesthetic traditions. But even the ideal, fully informed, cosmopolitan aesthetic agent may be chary about some comparisons: perhaps we can compare aesthetic objects only if they belong to the same category or practice; perhaps some objects even within the same category are incomparable. Could the aesthetic value of Artemisia Gentileschi's self-portrait really be compared to Adrian Piper's *Everything* series? Could Beethoven's final piano sonata really be compared to Schubert's? The answer may well be no. But that, in itself, would be no reason to deny the following:

**Gradability Constraint:** Aesthetic value is gradable.

To deny that Beethoven's piano sonata cannot be compared with Schubert's, in terms of their overall aesthetic value, would be to deny only that we possess a full, non-partial evaluative ordering, not that aesthetic value is ever gradable.<sup>3</sup> And as a form or species of value, aesthetic value is gradable in principle. As Selim Berker (2022) observes, being *good* and being *bad* are gradable in that they have comparative forms (*better than*, *worse than*), they have superlative forms (*best*, *worse*), and they can be acted on by grading modifiers (*very good*, *somewhat bad*). Gradability does not entail degressedness: if there are a large number of cases in which some  $x$  is neither more than, nor less than, nor equally aesthetically valuable to  $y$ , then it may not make sense to model aesthetic value in terms of degrees.

Aesthetic value is gradable in our practice as well: contrary to what some radical subjectivists would claim, we do allow that at least some comparisons can be made. Artistic masterpieces are better than amateurish attempts in the same artistic medium. The Grand Canyon is more beautiful than a dilapidated parking lot. More prosaically, artists often judge whether or not some action of theirs (a brushstroke, a *rubato*) will enhance or detract from the merit of their work or performance. These observations are meant simply to motivate the Gradability Constraint and to draw our attention to the pervasiveness of comparative value judgments.

## 2. Monotonicity

It is becoming common, in discussions of aesthetic value, to distinguish the demarcation question, of what makes aesthetic value *aesthetic*, from the value question, of what makes aesthetic value *valuable* (Lopes 2018; McGonigal 2018; Nguyen 2020a; Kubala 2021; Riggle 2022). The standard suggestion, which I will adopt here, is that we can make progress on the value question without a full answer to the demarcation question, by working with

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<sup>3</sup> One way such a view might go is articulated by Ronald Dworkin, who writes that 'artistic achievement can only be measured as a response to artistic situation and tradition and that only order-of-magnitude discriminations can be made across such traditions and genres. So though I do think that Shakespeare was a greater creative artist than Jasper Johns, and Picasso a greater one than Vivaldi, I believe no precise ranking makes sense among evident geniuses at the very highest levels of different genres' (1996: 134).

paradigm cases of aesthetic value in works of art and items of natural beauty (although see Shelley 2021 for a trenchant argument against answering the two questions separately).

It is also increasingly accepted, including by my targets, that among the desiderata for a full answer to the value question is an explanation of how aesthetic value gives us reasons to respond to it, and what kind of reasons those are (Nguyen 2017; Lopes 2018; King 2022; Riggle 2022). In objecting to some recent theories of aesthetic value, I will be focusing on the relation they posit between overall aesthetic value and aesthetic reasons. Here is a *prima facie* plausible principle concerning that relation:

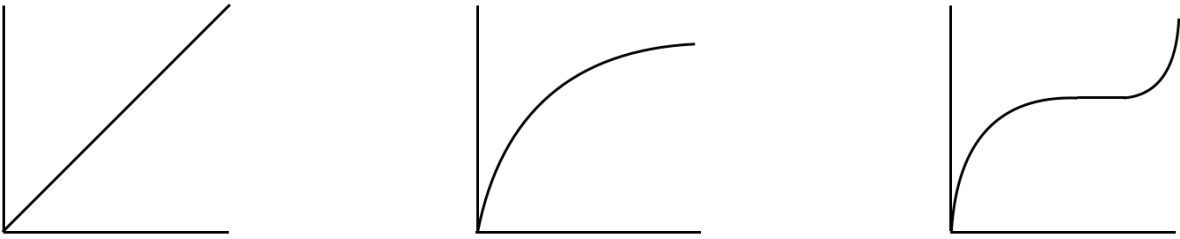
**Monotonicity:** The strength of our aesthetic reasons to  $\phi$  with respect to an object  $O$  varies monotonically with the aesthetic value of  $O$ .

If we imagine a Cartesian grid with aesthetic value along the  $x$ -axis and the strength of aesthetic reasons along the  $y$ -axis, then Monotonicity can be preserved by a wide variety of shapes of the resulting function. The function might be linear, if we could map degrees of aesthetic value and strength of reasons one-to-one. It might be exponential, with our reasons rising in strength at an increasing rate as degree of aesthetic value rises. It might be asymptotic, either because the strength of our aesthetic reasons tends toward a limit as overall aesthetic value increases, or because the strength of our aesthetic reasons rises enormously as we tend toward some limit of overall aesthetic value. Or it might take some other, more complicated shape.<sup>4</sup>

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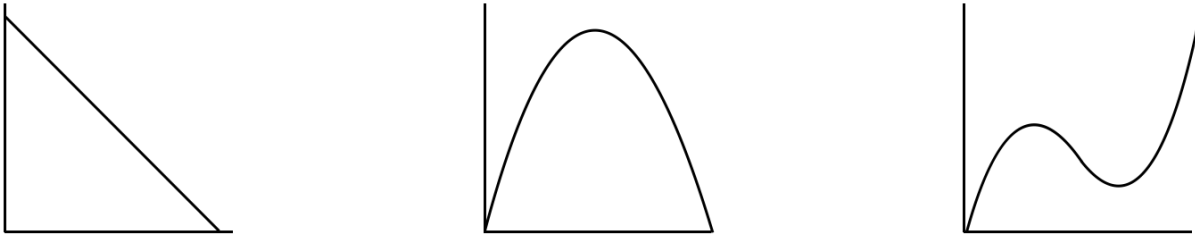
<sup>4</sup> The use of graphs introduces its own complications. One is whether to start the  $x$ -axis at 0 or to allow for degrees of negative aesthetic value. Another is that while a graph records only a correlation, some monotonic theories (e.g., hedonism) attempt to further *explain* that correlation by grounding the  $y$ -axis value in the  $x$ -axis value.

Figure 1: Three graphs illustrating monotonicity



What Monotonicity rules out is that our aesthetic reasons could ever *decrease* in strength as aesthetic value *increases*, other things being equal. Call a theory of aesthetic value *non-monotonic* if and only if it allows that our aesthetic reasons can decrease in strength as aesthetic value alone increases. On this understanding of the principle, if strength of reasons remains constant as aesthetic value increases, then Monotonicity is preserved: only if strength of reasons decreases as aesthetic value alone increases is Monotonicity violated.<sup>5</sup>

Figure 2: Three graphs illustrating non-monotonicity



The possibility that aesthetic value increases while strength of reasons remains constant becomes important when we consider the range of  $\phi$ ing. For some act-types, it is plausible that the strength of our reasons will not vary with a change in aesthetic value. The reasons curators have to preserve certain artworks depend not only on those works’ artistic

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<sup>5</sup> Although I am speaking of degrees of aesthetic value, this is only for the sake of being able to graph the resulting functions easily. Monotonicity requires only that aesthetic value is gradable, in the sense discussed in the main text. Thus, a theory doesn’t have to hold that aesthetic value comes in degrees in order for that theory to be non-monotonic: it might hold that X is less aesthetically valuable than Y, but that we have stronger aesthetic reasons with respect to X than with respect to Y.

merit, but on artistic merit-independent considerations, such as historical value, political value, and perhaps financial value. The reasons that classical music performers have to comply with the score retain whatever strength they have regardless of the aesthetic value of the musical work or performance thereof (Rohrbaugh 2020; Kubala 2021). These facts are in keeping with the letter of Monotonicity, so long as, to stick with the latter example, the reasons to comply with the score do not decrease as the aesthetic value of the work or performance increases. Still, the spirit of the view is that strength of reasons generally increases as aesthetic value increases.

The spirit of the view is more readily captured when we restrict the range of  $\phi$ ing to acts of appreciation. This yields a modified principle:

**Broad Appreciative Monotonicity** (BAM): The strength of our aesthetic reasons to appreciate  $O$  varies monotonically with the aesthetic value of  $O$ .

What BAM rules out is that our aesthetic reasons to appreciate an object could ever decrease in strength as the aesthetic value of that object increases. Remember that ‘aesthetic value’ here refers to an overall notion. One object might possess some determinant of overall merit to a greater degree than a second without there being stronger reason to appreciate the first object. For example, one artwork might be prettier than another in a way that actually detracts from the former’s overall artistic merit; in such a case, the artwork might be called ‘too pretty’.

In assessing BAM, an issue arises regarding the nature of reasons to appreciate. Some have argued that our reasons to appreciate an object can be affected by factors other than an object’s aesthetic value. Call these *subjective* factors: facts about appreciators. There are two kinds of subjective factors: defeaters and modifiers. One kind *defeats* our aesthetic reasons. Consider objects we are not currently in a position to appreciate, such as medieval Japanese literature not in translation. Some argue that our reasons to appreciate these works retain their strength, but are defeated by other, non-aesthetic reasons against appreciation, such as the pragmatic difficulty of doing so for appreciators who cannot read

medieval Japanese (Gorodeisky 2021). Another kind of subjective factor *modifies* the strength of aesthetic reasons themselves. Perhaps a commitment to a certain aesthetic object, or an obligation towards it, or an ongoing relationship with it all intensify the strength of our aesthetic reasons to appreciate the object, but in ways that come apart from its aesthetic value (Cross 2017; Kubala 2018).

BAM is consistent with acknowledging these subjective factors, so long as those factors never *attenuate* the strength of our reasons to appreciate some object as its aesthetic value increases. And this seems to be the case: these subjective factors are never brought into play merely by a change in the aesthetic value of the object. Rather—and this is the point of calling them subjective rather than objective—they are brought into play by facts about the subject, and in particular by facts about their abilities with respect to, and more generally their responses to, the aesthetic object.

I called the subjective *defeaters* given by pragmatic considerations non-aesthetic, because nobody thinks that a consideration given by the difficulty or inaccessibility of appreciating some object is thereby an aesthetic reason. But some do appear to think that subjective *modifiers*, such as facts about our commitments to aesthetic objects, are aesthetic reasons (McGonigal 2018; Cross 2021). I will return to this issue below but for now simply note that BAM may be consistent with holding that aesthetic reasons include these subjective modifiers, so long as subjective modifiers never diminish the strength of our aesthetic reasons to appreciate some object as its aesthetic value increases. Even so, the spirit of the view is that strength of reasons generally increases, rather than remains fixed, as value increases.

Call subjective modifiers *subject-given* aesthetic reasons (as distinct from subjective defeaters, which are subject-given non-aesthetic reasons), and let *object-given* aesthetic reasons to appreciate be just those reasons that are given by the aesthetic value features of an object.<sup>6</sup> Object-given aesthetic reasons are the aesthetic value features of objects that

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<sup>6</sup> Though in the main text I discuss only the first three kinds of reasons to appreciate, my distinctions suggest a fourfold taxonomy:

(i) Subject-given non-aesthetic reasons (subjective defeaters), e.g., the fact that I cannot now read *x* defeats my (object-given) reason to appreciate *x*.



are the canonical subject of art criticism, of much aesthetic thought and talk generally, and of comparative aesthetic value judgments in particular. For instance, in comparing the aesthetic value of *The Da Vinci Code* and *Middlemarch*, Susan Wolf writes, ‘The complexity of the novel’s structure, the quality of the prose, the depth and subtlety of the character development, the insights into civil society, all go into explaining why *Middlemarch* is a better novel’ (2011: 55).<sup>7</sup> Those features, in combination, not only explain why *Middlemarch* is a better novel; they also make it the case that we have more object-given aesthetic reason to appreciate *Middlemarch* than *The Da Vinci Code*.<sup>8</sup>

Such objectual features are not only the subject of much traditional art-critical discourse. They are, more basically, the phenomenological focus of much aesthetic appreciation; although it is also possible to aesthetically appreciate features of our own mental activity, as Nguyen (2020b) has persuasively argued, the typical foci of aesthetic attention are the objectual features of works of art and items of natural beauty: the powerful chords at the close of Sibelius’ Fifth Symphony, the delicate flush of a Duchesse de Brabant rose. Objectual features are also the topic of much deliberation concerning which aesthetic objects to appreciate—the questions of which film or concert to attend, which novel to read, or which national park to visit are all reasonably resolved by appealing to facts about their aesthetic value features—and the ostensible subject of aesthetic disagreement. Finally, objectual features are widely taken to set the standard of responsiveness, at least in part, for correct appreciation generally; as Richard Moran puts it, ‘with regard to beauty the idea

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(ii) Subject-given aesthetic reasons (subjective modifiers), e.g., the fact that I love  $x$  counts in favor of appreciating  $x$ .

(iii) Object-given aesthetic reasons, e.g., the fact that  $x$  is aesthetically valuable counts in favor of appreciating  $x$ .

(iv) Object-given non-aesthetic reasons, e.g., the fact that  $x$  is non-aesthetically (e.g., historically) valuable counts in favor of appreciating  $x$ .

<sup>7</sup> One might deny that *Middlemarch*’s insights are among its aesthetic value features, perhaps because one denies that an artwork’s cognitive value ever contributes to its aesthetic value. In spotlighting object-given aesthetic reasons, I am not committing to any particular theory of aesthetic value. I am suggesting that aesthetic practice, especially critical practice, marks a robust distinction between object-given aesthetic reasons to appreciate and reasons of other kinds.

<sup>8</sup> In other words, the same objectual features both give an object aesthetic value and give us object-given aesthetic reason to appreciate it. Whether aesthetic values or aesthetic reasons (or neither) are metaphysically prior is a further question I take no stand on here.

of the object meriting or calling for a response from us seems to be what is primary' (2012: 305).<sup>9</sup> Much of what I will be arguing, in the later sections of this paper, is that my targets' theories of aesthetic value cannot account in a satisfactory manner for these ways in which our aesthetic practices are object-focused, and that this makes these theories objectionably revisionary.

When restricted to object-given aesthetic reasons, Appreciative Monotonicity becomes even more plausible. To distinguish this final version of the principle from the previous one, I give it the following label:

**Narrow Appreciative Monotonicity (NAM):** The strength of our object-given aesthetic reasons to appreciate O varies monotonically with the aesthetic value of O.

According to NAM, if some object is more aesthetically valuable than another, then we have stronger object-given aesthetic reason to appreciate the first object. In what follows, I will focus on NAM, and return to discussion of BAM, which allows aesthetic reasons to appreciate to include subjective modifiers, in §7. Three further clarifications are in order.

First, I take no stand here on whether aesthetic reasons are enticing or preemptory. Enticing reasons, defended by Jonathan Dancy (2004), never ground oughts; they take us only to 'bests', such that the strongest undefeated enticing object-given aesthetic reasons would tell us only which aesthetic objects it would be *best* to appreciate. Preemptory reasons ground oughts, such that the strongest undefeated preemptory object-given aesthetic reasons would tell us which aesthetic objects we *ought* to appreciate, or perhaps even which aesthetic objects we have an *obligation* to appreciate. (See Dyck 2021 for an argument that all aesthetic reasons are enticing, and see King 2022 for further discussion and references.)

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<sup>9</sup> Object-given aesthetic reasons need not be given by mind-independent properties of an object: a novel's humor, or capacity to amuse more generally, might be among the object-given aesthetic reasons we have to appreciate it. While NAM is compatible with robust realism or primitivism about aesthetic value, it does not entail it. (See also fn. 2.)

Second, in discussing these monotonicity principles, I have so far said little about the notion of appreciation. This is because each of the theories discussed below offer somewhat different substantive accounts of appreciation. But appreciation, minimally, is a rationally assessable response—cognitive, affective, and/or conative—to some object’s aesthetic value.

Third, what varies with aesthetic value, in these monotonicity principles, is the strength of the *reason* to appreciate, not the amount of appreciation itself; it’s not that we should appreciate something more the more aesthetically valuable it is. It is not clear whether appreciation even comes in degrees, although if appreciation just is pleasure, then it is more likely that it does, since pleasure plausibly comes in degrees (Grant 2022).

The aim of this section has been to develop the most plausible version of a monotonicity principle connecting aesthetic value with aesthetic reasons to appreciate. NAM, with its commitment to object-given aesthetic reasons, is meant to be a theory-neutral principle, motivated in advance of any particular theory of aesthetic value, such that a theory’s inability to respect the principle gives us a reason to reject that theory, in virtue of being unable to account for the object-focused features of our aesthetic practices that I have described.

### **3. Hedonism**

What has been called the ‘default theory of aesthetic value’ (Shelley 2019) can respect NAM. The default theory is in part a *hedonic* theory: it states that aesthetic value is value an object has only in virtue of its capacity to produce pleasure. There are various ways to develop hedonism. For instance, the pleasure in question may or may not be distinctively aesthetic. The pleasure may or may not be restricted to the pleasure an object has the capacity to produce when the object is correctly experienced. And there may or may not be a range of experience-types that count as correct: for instance, two experience-types may differ in the degree of understanding of an object they contain while both being correct.

One especially popular form of hedonism, inspired by a reading of Hume’s ‘Of the Standard of Taste’, appeals to the hedonic responses of ‘true judges’ to set the standard of

correct experience of an aesthetic object (Mothersill 1989; Levinson 2002). Whether true judges are actual or ideal, they will be such as to derive more pleasure from aesthetic objects with greater aesthetic value. According to hedonism, this is no accident: the objects with a greater degree of aesthetic value just are those that have a greater capacity to produce pleasure in true judges. If we become like true judges, then, we will derive more pleasure from objects of greater aesthetic value. To *appreciate* an aesthetic object, on this view, is just to grasp the object correctly and in such a way as to derive the pleasure it has the capacity to produce.

Hedonism can be developed as a monotonic theory. Recall that a non-monotonic theory is one such that, for some increase in aesthetic value, there is a *decrease* in the strength of our reasons to appreciate. But hedonism can hold that we have stronger reason to appreciate objects with greater aesthetic value, because we have stronger reason to appreciate objects that give us greater pleasure.

Now, one might question whether pleasure increases monotonically. That it does not is most plausible if we think only about the pleasures of bodily sensations: after incrementing past a certain point, we may experience too much pleasure, such that the valence of the sensation shifts into something painful. But, first, aesthetic pleasures are not, in general, (limited to) bodily sensations (De Clercq 2019: 124), and so far as I can tell no one has claimed that too much intellectual pleasure will, past a certain threshold, shift its valence into intellectual pain. And, second, even for bodily sensations a theorist may deny that an increase in the intensity or amount of some sensation really grounds an increase in *pleasure*, thereby preserving monotonicity.

Hedonism has in recent years been subject to a barrage of objections (van der Berg 2020), and it is not my intention to defend it. Rather, my point is that this once dominant view can preserve NAM, so long as it insists that the pleasures that ground aesthetic value are those constitutively connected to a correct appreciation of the object. Furthermore, it is notable that none of the recent objections to hedonism appear to target its commitment to NAM; in fact—and I return to this in §7 below—one line of objection questions whether hedonism can even motivate the requirement to take pleasure in the object as correctly

experienced (Shelley 2011). The objection is that a consistent hedonism seems as though it should permit incorrect appreciation of an object, so long as incorrect appreciation is more pleasurable than correct appreciation. But many hedonists want to hold on to the plausible claim that, in order to answer the question of what it is about an aesthetically valuable object that makes it aesthetically valuable, one must point to features genuinely possessed by the object that give it that value (Goldman 2006).

In endorsing what might be called a ‘normative rider’, hedonists are, I believe, trying to capture what I have characterized as a commitment to object-given aesthetic reasons.<sup>10</sup> The commitment is necessary because our object-given reasons to appreciate are reasons to appreciate precisely those features of an object that give it overall aesthetic value. Even if we can derive pleasure from aesthetic objects in ways other than by experiencing their object-given aesthetic reasons (for example, by misunderstanding them or overvaluing them), the normative rider restricts the pleasures that are the source of aesthetic value to those that are *merited* by the features that are object-given aesthetic reasons. To show that my targets’ theories, as formulated, violate monotonicity in virtue of lacking this rider—and are thus potentially much more revisionary of actual aesthetic practice than advertised—will be my goal in what follows. I consider them in increasing order of how revisionary they are.

#### **4. Engagement Theories**

In recent work, Thi Nguyen and Matt Strohl have offered, separately, accounts of aspects of the aesthetic domain whose central term is *engagement*. Nguyen invokes engagement as part of an explanation of the autonomy requirement: the norm to make aesthetic judgments on the basis of one’s own faculties and abilities. He argues that engagement is the point of aesthetic life, and that meeting the autonomy norm facilitates engagement. Strohl invokes engagement as part of an explanation of the final value of artworks, focusing primarily on films that are conventionally bad. He argues that some films that are bad according to

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<sup>10</sup> I modify Servaas van der Berg’s similar use of the term ‘cognitive rider’ (2020: 8).

received norms and standards—paradigmatic cases include *Plan 9 from Outer Space* (1957), *Troll 2* (1990), and *The Room* (2003)—are finally valuable in virtue of enabling valuable activities of engagement. I discuss their views in turn.

Nguyen does not give a full account of what engagement is, only that it ‘includes all the perceptual, affective, and cognitive processes we actively deploy on our way to generating an aesthetic judgment’ (2020a: 1137). It is not entirely clear what the engagement account is an account *of*. It seems primarily meant as an account of the value of aesthetic appreciation (and perhaps only of art appreciation, since Nguyen’s examples are all drawn from the arts and not from nature): ‘The engagement account states that the primary value of the activity of aesthetic appreciation comes from the *process* of generating judgments and not the *end-product*—the judgments themselves’ (2020a: 1138).

Yet Nguyen sometimes speaks of his view as an account of aesthetic value itself, rather than of our appreciation of aesthetic objects. His abstract claims that the paper offers ‘a new account of aesthetic value’ (2020a: 1127), and in labeling the view he writes, ‘Let us call this the *engagement account* of aesthetic value’ (2020a: 1138). An account of aesthetic value, however, is not necessarily an account of the value of aesthetic appreciation. And NAM can be consistent with an engagement account of the value of aesthetic appreciation, so long as we deny that the value of aesthetically appreciating some object is an object-given aesthetic reason to appreciate it. Perhaps the value of aesthetically appreciating some object is a subject-given aesthetic reason to appreciate it, or perhaps it is a reason of the wrong kind to appreciate it, or perhaps it is no reason at all to appreciate it. The point is that an engagement account of aesthetic appreciation is not, on its own, in tension with NAM.

But another reading of Nguyen’s proposal—one that is best thought of not as an interpretation but as an *extension* of it—is that an object has aesthetic value in virtue of, and to the extent that, it promotes engagement. This would be the most natural way of turning the engagement account into an account of aesthetic value itself. Although it goes beyond what Nguyen has officially defended, this extension is suggested by his discussion of Alex King’s (2017) view of subtlety as an artistic merit, which he appears to endorse: ‘If aesthetic

engagement is the source of value, then heavy-handedness is the failure of the artwork to promote engagement' (2020a: 1140 fn. 16). On this extension of the view from the value of aesthetic appreciation to the value of aesthetic objects, any feature of an object that promotes engagement is thereby a source of its aesthetic value. Subtlety promotes engagement and is a source of positive aesthetic value; heavy-handedness works against engagement and is a source of negative aesthetic value.

This Nguyen-inspired account of aesthetic value is consequentialist in spirit: rather than speak of what *merits* engagement, it offers a theory of what *promotes* engagement. But features of an object can promote engagement without being object-given aesthetic reasons to appreciate it. An artwork might be fascinating in an aesthetically horrible way, or have the mere appearance, but not the substance, of intellectual depth. Nguyen himself seems to recognize this implication: 'Notice that valuable engagement can arise in the process of rendering either a positive or negative judgment. It can be a valuable form of engagement to critically analyse a movie and to come, after significant consideration, to realize that it is hollow and manipulative' (2020a: 1140). But if an object's capacity to promote valuable engagement is the source of its aesthetic value, this implies that having the appearance of depth, while actually being hollow and manipulative, is one of the film's aesthetic values, since that feature promotes valuable engagement. And it would be highly revisionary of critical practice to insist, on theory-driven grounds, that a film's appearing deep but being hollow and manipulative is one of its merits.

Understood in this way, this extension of Nguyen's account is inconsistent with NAM, because features of an object other than its object-given aesthetic reasons can promote valuable engagement. As such, the strength of our object-given aesthetic reasons will not vary monotonically with what the theory takes to be the aesthetic value of the object. Suppose that the hollow and manipulative film is edited into a new cut. This new cut promotes less engagement, because it is missing the feature that previously promoted engagement, the feature that made one initially believe it not to be hollow and manipulative; hence, the theory says that it has *less* overall aesthetic value. But, in lacking that feature, it is also now a film that we have *more* object-given aesthetic reason to

appreciate; it is now what critics would correctly say is a better film. Nothing in this view rules out this kind of counterexample to monotonicity.

What is plausible in Nguyen's view is that aesthetic *engagement*—the process of arriving at some overall aesthetic judgment—can be valuable whether or not the object it concerns is aesthetically valuable. But if the engagement account is also to be a satisfying account of aesthetic *value*, then it should, like hedonism, adopt a normative rider, and hold that the kind of engagement that ultimately grounds aesthetic value is engagement with object-given reasons: the features that make an object worthy (or not) of appreciation, the identification of which is one of the traditional tasks of criticism.

Matt Strohl, in his recent book, *Why It's OK to Love Bad Movies* (2022), offers an explicit version of the theory of aesthetic value extended from Nguyen's work, and in concentrating on the aesthetic value of films is more clearly object-focused. As the title suggests, the main aim of the book is to defend the view that it's permissible to engage with bad movies, or at least the category of films that are 'so bad they're good': bad in a conventional sense but good in a final sense. For Strohl, not every film that is bad according to received norms counts as a good-bad film. The relevant category consists of films that are both conventionally bad and 'violate received norms in an exciting, interesting, and/or amusing way' (2022: 13). A major contention of Strohl's book is that this category is much wider than many have thought: direct-to-video action films, for instance, reveal subtle gradations in style and emotional expression, especially when appreciated systematically. And his three paradigmatic good-bad films all turn out to be, in their violations of received norms, sincere expressions of valuable directorial sensibilities.

What is Strohl's account of the final goodness attributed in a 'so bad it's good' claim? What he calls his 'final, decisive statement on the matter' states that an artwork 'is *good in the final sense* if it enables valuable activities of engagement, and *bad in the final sense* if it does not enable valuable activities of engagement', and an artwork 'is *good-bad* if it is good in the final sense partly in virtue of being bad in the conventional sense' (2022: 181). And he is admirably clear that an 'activity of engagement is one that engages with an artwork *as* an artwork in the mode of appreciation, such as watching it, discussing it, writing about it, or



curating it' (2022: 176-7). That engagement stands in a constitutive relation to appreciation is much more explicit for Strohl than it is for Nguyen.

But notice that Strohl's 'final, decisive statement' gives only a sufficient condition on final goodness. This is tension with what he writes elsewhere: 'My account passes the buck from the question of the value of art to the question of the value of the activities of engagement that art enables' (2022: 183). If art's value could be explained in some way other than by reference to the value of engagement, as a merely sufficient condition implies, then the account could not accurately be described as a buck-passing one. And again: 'My proposal holds that a work of art has value in its own right to the extent that it enables valuable activities of engagement' (2022: 178). This last claim rightly respects the Gradability Constraint. But unless a work of art has value if, and only if, it enables valuable activities of engagement, then the work could not have value *to the extent that* it does so, since it might have value in some other way (for instance, by possessing some positive degree of artistic merit, characterized independently of the value of an experience of it).

As such, and contrary to what he explicitly says, I will take the last quotation as best representing Strohl's considered position. We are now in a position to see how it, too, is non-monotonic as stated, and for the same reasons as before. As on the Nguyen-inspired consequentialist account, *enabling* engagement is not the same as *meriting* it. Strohl does gesture in the direction of a rider on his theory, because he screens off reasons to appreciate what we might call 'bad-bad' films: films that are bad in a conventional sense and bad in a final sense; such films are neither aesthetically valuable nor yield object-given aesthetic reasons to appreciate them. I suggest that Strohl should explicitly adopt a normative rider and hold that the activities of engagement that are aesthetically valuable are those that are merited by the features that are films' object-given aesthetic reasons. On such a view, the aesthetic value of *Troll 2*, in the end, would lie not in its ludicrous dialogue and wooden acting—even though such objectual features might enable valuable engagement, they are not thereby made into aesthetic merits of the film—but in the director's absurdist sensibility, which is what actually merits aesthetic engagement. This may, in fact, be the view that Strohl ultimately intends. As Dorian Bandy has argued, 'the book's philosophical

arguments do not really amount to a defense of Bad Movie Love. Instead, they defend the love of medium-bad or even kinda-good movies. The artworks Strohl discusses are, in other words, still eminently worth our time' (2022: 391). And monotonicity can be preserved so long as Strohl denies that we ever have *less* object-given aesthetic reason to appreciate the films that are *more* aesthetically valuable.

One might worry that adopting a normative rider would seriously compromise Strohl's view, which does make a place for objectual features but holds that there is no engagement-independent standard of the aesthetic merit of objects.<sup>11</sup> After all, Strohl writes that an artwork 'only enables these valuable activities to the extent that it has features that can support them' (2022: 177), and I have already noted that enabling engagement is distinct from meriting it. My point, however, which is in agreement with Bandy's reading of the book, is that there is language that appears to suggest an engagement-independent standard of merit, for instance in Strohl's suggestions that Claudio Fragasso's directorial sensibility is 'worthy of admiration' (2022: 59) or that 'debating its merits' (2022: 177) is among the valuable ways we can engage an artwork. When we debate the merits of an artwork, we are not debating the extent to which it can enable valuable forms of engagement; rather, we are debating object-given aesthetic reasons.

While these engagement theories can, like hedonism, avail themselves of a normative rider in order to satisfy NAM, matters are less clear when it comes to the next two theories I consider.

## **5. A Communitarian Theory**

A second recent theory of aesthetic value that turns out to be non-monotonic is Nick Riggle's communitarian theory. Riggle offers only 'a sketch of one version of the view' (2022: 28), but the sketch is sufficiently bold to be worth discussing. Riggle begins with the idea of a communal practice of aesthetic valuing: the generic human activity of 'creating objects and engaging with objects and others in ways that cultivate individuality, promote

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<sup>11</sup> Thanks to an anonymous referee for raising this concern.

aesthetic freedom, and generate aesthetic community’ (2022: 26). Unlike the individualist, who centers individual acts and encounters with aesthetic value, the communitarian has collective aesthetic life in view, and takes their paradigm cases of aesthetic value from shared experiences, joint activities, and acts of mutual appreciation. Riggle then suggests a teleological theory of aesthetic value itself, where the idea is that aesthetic value is anything that positively contributes to the flourishing of that communal practice. The thesis of aesthetic communitarianism therefore claims: ‘Something’s being aesthetically good is its being *worthy of the practice of aesthetic valuing*’ (2022: 26).

Even without a complete and non-circular account of the practice of aesthetic valuing, one that defines the practice-structuring goods without reference to aesthetic value itself, we can note some features of this minimal view. First, it can generate an agent-neutral (ordinal) ranking of specific aesthetic practices (2022: 24), thereby respecting the Gradability Constraint, at least for the aesthetic value of *practices*, if not (yet) the aesthetic value of *objects*.<sup>12</sup> Second, and relatedly, Riggle is explicit that aesthetic objects are ‘secondary to and in service of these higher goods’ (2022: 28) of aesthetic freedom, individuality, and aesthetic community. This makes aesthetic objects *fungible*: ‘In some cases, one aesthetic object will be as good as another in sourcing aesthetic value, that is as useful in, or worthy of, the practice of aesthetic valuing (perhaps sneakers, pop songs, fall colors, or creamy sauces fit the bill)’ (2022: 28). Yet this comparability of aesthetic value in Riggle’s sense will not obviously correlate with comparability of object-given aesthetic reasons to appreciate.

Unlike the other theories addressed here, Riggle’s is transparent about the fact that the value of aesthetic *objects* largely drops out of his theory. Riggle recognizes that, ‘traditionally, the locus of aesthetic value is the aesthetic object’, but writes, dramatically, that ‘the communitarian thinks of the object orientation as individualism’s original sin’ (2022: 28). But this is precisely what may make his account non-monotonic. It is not clear

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<sup>12</sup> The gradability of objects’ aesthetic value might be a matter of their degree of worthiness of the practice of aesthetic valuing. The difficulty for a fully teleological account of aesthetic value, as I discuss shortly in the main text, will be to spell out what that worthiness consists in in a way that does not appeal to a prior notion of aesthetic merit.

whether Riggle would even agree that we have object-given aesthetic reasons—the excellence of a pop song, the beauty of a sneaker, the richness of a sauce—to appreciate certain objects. If he doesn't, then he would be committed to denying NAM, for the reason that he would deny that there is anything to play the role that object-given aesthetic reasons play in the formulation of that monotonicity principle. And I have already argued that NAM's plausibility—and its concomitant ability to account for the object-focused features of our aesthetic practices—gives us a reason to reject any theory that denies it.<sup>13</sup>

Some of Riggle's other remarks, however, suggest that he is not so revisionary of critical practice as to deny object-given aesthetic reasons. Elsewhere, Riggle holds that we can 'waste our time on bad art, ugly clothes, sucky bands' (Lopes, Nanay, and Riggle 2022: 90), where the ugliness of a dress or the suckiness of a band are, to use my term, object-given aesthetic reasons against appreciating them. If he does not adopt a normative rider, the challenge for Riggle is to explain how two aesthetic communities—one centered around the appreciation of a 'sucky' band and one centered around the appreciation of an aesthetically better band—differ in the higher goods of aesthetic community, such that members in the former community are wasting their time. Perhaps this challenge can be met without appealing to a prior notion of aesthetic merit, although it is not obvious how to do so. Although Riggle may hold that this is just to wallow in individualism's original sin, it seems to me more compelling to endorse a normative rider, in order to screen off aesthetic communities centered around objects that we have little or no object-given reason to appreciate.

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<sup>13</sup> Violating NAM is, in my view, a *prima facie* decisive reason to reject a theory of aesthetic value. It is decisive because it is distorting of critical practice, which attempts to identify the features of an object that give us aesthetic reason to appreciate it. But it is only *prima facie* decisive if there turn out to be stronger reasons to reject what Riggle calls the 'object orientation' of aesthetics. I myself cannot yet see the benefits of rejecting that orientation, given that it seems so central to our aesthetic practices, in the ways I have described. Furthermore, the individualist/communitarian debate seems orthogonal to the question about object orientation: it also seems possible to develop an object-focused communitarian theory, one centered around shared aesthetic experiences of independently aesthetically valuable objects. Thanks to an anonymous referee for requesting clarification on this point.

## 6. The Network Theory

The first two recent theories of aesthetic value are still being worked out by their proponents, but the third has been more fully developed as the first full-dress rival to hedonism: Dominic McIver Lopes' network theory. The network theory gets its name from the fact that it sees the aesthetic domain as a network of social practices. A social practice is a norm-governed behavioral or attitudinal regularity in a group of agents. Aesthetic practices are individuated by their aesthetic profiles: the pattern of correlations that obtains between the determinate aesthetic value properties of objects in the practice and some of the other properties they have. Tap and ballet are different aesthetic practices because they correlate certain physical movements—indeed, some of the exact same steps, naturalistically described—with different aesthetic value properties. A dance step that is emphatic in ballet might be delicate in tap.

At its core, the network theory is an account of the reason-giving force of aesthetic value, an account that aims to answer what Lopes calls the 'primitive question' of the place of aesthetic value in the good life. Whereas hedonism appeals to the reason-giving force of *pleasure* to explain our aesthetic reasons to appreciate aesthetic objects, the network theory appeals to the reason-giving force of *achievement* to explain our aesthetic reasons to perform all kinds of acts with respect to aesthetic objects. Lopes is explicit that not every aesthetic act is an act of aesthetic appreciation (2018: 35, 160), although he does not deny that appreciation is an aesthetic act (Lopes, Nanay, and Riggle 2022: 66). Still, it takes some care to assess his stance with respect to NAM.

Lopes rightly finds common ground between hedonism and the network theory with respect to aesthetic *evaluation*. An aesthetic evaluation is a mental representation of some object as having some aesthetic value (2018: 34). Both hedonism and the network theory can agree that aesthetic appreciation goes beyond aesthetic evaluation. The difference, according to Lopes, is that '[u]nder aesthetic hedonism, aesthetic appreciation is a savouring of the value—feeling the pleasure to which the value stands in constitutive relation' (2018: 105), whereas under the network theory, aesthetic appreciation is only contingently a source of pleasure.

Lopes' contrast here is somewhat overblown, however, since a hedonism that requires correct experience of the object can agree with his preferred characterization of aesthetic appreciation: 'Successful aesthetic appreciation is successful apprehension of features of an item as features that are responsible for its having the aesthetic values that it has' (2018: 161). This characterizes bakes some degree of aesthetic understanding into the notion of appreciation, and understanding is a success term. Relatedly, Lopes seems to think that hedonism must deny that 'aesthetic appreciation engages distinctive skills that vary from one aesthetic practice to another' (2018: 160), but this is not the case. A plausible hedonism will allow that the skills required to appreciate a piece of Fluxus performance art are distinct from the skills required to appreciate *viennoiserie*, which are distinct from the skills required to appreciate 13th-century Chinese ceramics.

Some such understanding-laden notion of appreciation seems in any case required to motivate NAM. Our object-given aesthetic reasons to appreciate some object are reasons to grasp the aesthetic value that it actually has. Interestingly, the network theory itself is silent about these object-given aesthetic reasons to appreciate. After all, it hasn't given us any account of aesthetic *value*, simply of its reason-giving force.<sup>14</sup> As King puts it in noting this feature of Lopes' view, it's 'somewhat surprising ... that we do not actually need an account of aesthetic *value* to tell us about the place of aesthetic value in the good life' (2020: 100). Lopes does, however, offer what he calls a theory of aesthetic *merit*, detachable from the network theory's views about aesthetic reasons. And this account of aesthetic merit, I will argue, is non-monotonic.

**Merit:** V in an aesthetic merit in x = the fact that x is V is a reason for A to  $\phi$  in C in K, and A's success in  $\phi$ ing in C contributes to promoting V in K. (2018: 132)

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<sup>14</sup> In his 'List of Theses', Lopes provides aesthetic hedonism's account of aesthetic value ('a property of an item that stands in constitutive relation to finally valuable experiences of subjects who correctly understand the item') but no parallel thesis for the network theory (2018: 235).

In this identification,  $x$  denotes an object,  $V$  an aesthetic value property,  $A$  an agent,  $C$  a circumstance, and  $K$  an aesthetic practice. The first part of the right-hand side of the identification is entailed by  $V$ 's being an aesthetic value at all: Lopes holds that, necessarily,  $V$  is an aesthetic *value* only if the fact that  $x$  is  $V$  is a reason for  $A$  to  $\phi$  in  $C$  (2018: 38). And by this stage of the argument, he's introduced the claim that an aesthetic value fact is a reason for an agent to  $\phi$  only within some aesthetic practice  $K$ .

What's crucial is the second part of the right-hand side:  $A$ 's success in  $\phi$ ing in  $C$  contributes to promoting  $V$  in  $K$ . That this is the crucial part is confirmed by a later claim Lopes makes: 'an item has aesthetic merit just when it calls for an act whose successful performance tends to spread the merit among the population of items in the practice' (2018: 133). Notice that  $A$ 's success in  $\phi$ ing does not have to be a success in  $\phi$ ing for the reason that  $V$  is an aesthetic merit, or for the reason that the act will tend to spread  $V$ . And notice that this is compatible with—and may in fact be intended to be read as—the claim that an item has *overall* aesthetic merit just when it calls for an act whose performance tends to spread that overall merit, where an item's overall merit is in some way composed out of its various aesthetic merits, plural.

Does this account of merit respect the Gradability Constraint? Yes. The most natural place to locate a gradable notion, I suggest, is in the degree to which an aesthetic value tends to spread. Lopes writes, 'A value is promoted in a practice just when it tends to spread to a larger fraction of items in the practice, all else being equal' (2018: 132).<sup>15</sup> To modify one of his examples, the quirky surrealism of a photographic shot was, for the American photographer Berenice Abbott, a reason for her to include that shot in a book of photographs. As a result of including that shot, quirkiness tended to spread in the practice of modernist photography; so the quirkiness is an aesthetic merit. If a second shot was more quirky than the first one, and including the second shot in the book would contribute to promoting quirkiness in the practice to a greater degree, then the second shot would be a greater aesthetic merit in the photograph than the first shot.

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<sup>15</sup> One question is what it is for a value to *tend* to spread, rather than *actually* to spread. I will ignore this distinction, since my objection applies either way.

Does this account of merit respect NAM? No. The account does not rule out that an action can contribute to promoting an aesthetic value, which thereby counts as an aesthetic merit, and that that same aesthetic value makes the object such that we have less object-given aesthetic reason to appreciate it. Put bluntly: on Lopes' account, aesthetic merit is whatever propagates itself, and indeed its merit just consists in being such as to propagate itself. He explicitly compares aesthetic merit to the adaptive value of genes (and might have done better to compare it to memes, which are units of cultural transmission). But many so-called 'aesthetic merits' can be propagated in an aesthetic practice, and not all of them give us greater object-given aesthetic reason to appreciate. The fact that a certain artistic style has become wildly popular does not seem to have anything to do with whether it merits appreciation.

One might worry that this objection begs the question against Lopes, since he has no practice-external notion of aesthetic value; maybe for members of a particular aesthetic practice, the fact that something has caught on really does give them aesthetic reason to promote it, even if outsiders might lack such reasons.<sup>16</sup> But the objection arises even within a practice. Lopes writes that the 'network theory contemplates ordinal rankings of items only where types of agent, their circumstances, and the aesthetic practice are held constant' (2018: 204). Suppose an agent within a practice is considering which of two artworks within that practice to appreciate. Suppose also that one of the works is widely regarded, by critics within that practice, as aesthetically superior, as giving rise to greater object-given aesthetic reason to appreciate it. By Merit, however, this second fact is simply *irrelevant* to which work has greater aesthetic merit; what is relevant is whether my success in appreciating one work rather than the other contributes to promoting, to a greater degree, its aesthetic value features. This looks like the wrong kind of reason to appreciate something. While Lopes may wish to argue that this is ultimately the right view of aesthetic merit, I think it has not yet been fully appreciated just how revisionary of critical practice his theory is. Indeed, it may be that Lopes does not have the notion of an object-given aesthetic reason at all. Unlike

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<sup>16</sup> Thanks to two anonymous referees for raising this concern.



the engagement and communitarian theories, which might adopt a normative rider to preserve monotonicity, I suggest the network theorist should abandon this adaptive account of aesthetic merit altogether. The main normative claim of the network theory—that achievement is the source of aesthetic reasons' force—is fully compatible with recognizing object-given reasons.

## **7. Conclusion**

Why is non-monotonicity a flaw in a theory of aesthetic value? Simply put, because it breaks the link between the aesthetic goodness of an object and our object-given aesthetic reasons to appreciate it. As I argued in §2, there are many facts that count in favor of appreciating some artwork or natural item, but only some of those are facts about the overall aesthetic value of the object itself. Those facts—the canonical subjects of art criticism that I called object-given aesthetic reasons—play a privileged role in determining what we have reason to appreciate. In assessing whether each of these theories respects NAM, I have held fixed the strength of object-given aesthetic reasons and varied the degree of aesthetic value according to what the theory says about its ground.

Remember that I have allowed that our aesthetic reasons to appreciate some object may remain unchanged even as those objects change in overall aesthetic value. NAM need not be paired with a maximizing theory of aesthetic rationality: we need not insist that agents always have strongest aesthetic reason to appreciate whatever has most overall aesthetic value. NAM rules out only that agents ever have weaker object-given aesthetic reason to appreciate some object that has less overall aesthetic value.

Above, I said that Broad Appreciative Monotonicity may be consistent with holding that aesthetic reasons include subjective modifiers, so long as subjective modifiers never diminish the strength of our aesthetic reasons to appreciate some object as its aesthetic value increases. But I now want to argue that it might not be consistent. Recall that subjective modifiers, or what I called subject-given aesthetic reasons, are given by facts about the agent's relation to an aesthetic object, such as their love of or commitment to that object. But it seems possible that some improvement in overall aesthetic value in an object might

*decrease* our subject-given aesthetic reasons: if we loved the original artwork more, or had an ongoing appreciative relationship with it, or had in some other way bound ourselves to ongoing appreciation of it, then that increase in overall aesthetic value might correlate with a decrease in the strength of our subject-given aesthetic reason to appreciate it, because we have no normatively significant relationship to the improved object. Now if aesthetic reasons are a function of subject-given and object-given aesthetic reasons, then it is possible to claim that an increase in strength of object-given aesthetic reason will always be greater in magnitude than the decrease in strength of subject-given aesthetic reason, such that object-given aesthetic reasons always win out. But I can see no good way of arguing for this claim, particularly because it denies the possibility that subject-given aesthetic reasons could ever defeat object-given aesthetic reasons. Consider an analogy: ‘trading up’ in personal relationships. Although we may have ‘object-given’ reason to love some person more than another, if we have an existing commitment to the person whom we have less object-given reason to love, that is thought, at least in some cases, to defeat the reason given by the improvement in the person’s object-given value. This confirms that NAM, and not BAM, is the best version of the monotonicity principle.

Notice, finally, that even someone who is skeptical about the reasonableness or purpose of many comparative aesthetic judgments should be able to accept my counterexamples. As I noted at the outset, these kinds of comparative judgments are baked into artistic practice (see also Sun 2022, who defends aesthetic judgments comparing actual artworks with hypothetical variations of those works). Indeed, when they make choices about what will improve the aesthetic value of their works or performances, artists are not considering standards of what will be most engaging, or what will most foster aesthetic community, or what is most likely to spread.

In closing, I want to raise a final challenge for the engagement and communitarian theories, one that applies to hedonism as well. I suggested that, in order to preserve NAM, which is a principle about object-given aesthetic reasons, these theories should endorse a normative rider. The relevant theoretical structure can then be represented in two claims. First, certain aesthetic value features of objects—their wit, subtlety, elegance, and so

forth—are object-given reasons to appreciate and, in combination, make it the case that we have object-given aesthetic reason of a certain strength. All theories that preserve NAM will make this claim. Second, while pleasure, engagement, and aesthetic community are not themselves object-given reasons to appreciate, they are that in virtue of which an object’s aesthetic value features give us reason to appreciate it; the aesthetic value of objects is derivative of the value of pleasure, engagement, or aesthetic community. Hedonism, then, says it is in virtue of an object’s pleasing us that its aesthetic value features give us reason to appreciate it. The engagement theory says it is in virtue of an object’s enabling engagement that its aesthetic value features give us reason to appreciate it. The communitarian theory says it is in virtue of an object’s promoting aesthetic community that its aesthetic value features give us reason to appreciate it.

The challenge is to justify the normative rider: to justify the restriction to object-given reasons in the first claim in light of the second. Not every difference in object-given reasons to appreciate is explicable as a difference in pleasure, engagement, or aesthetic community; this is what motivated the normative rider in the first place, which restricts the kinds of pleasures, engagement, and aesthetic community that are the source of the aesthetic value of objects to those that are merited by the features that are object-given reasons. But if pleasure, engagement, or aesthetic community are what ultimately matter in the aesthetic domain—if they are the ultimate sources of aesthetic value—then why should we bother to appreciate aesthetic objects, as we do, for those object-given aesthetic reasons that are *not* explained by pleasure, engagement, or aesthetic community?

I do not argue here that this challenge cannot be met. I simply close by observing that these recent theories, despite recoiling from hedonism, turn out to face some of the same objections that historically bedeviled it.

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