

On the Aesthetic Ideal

Nick Riggle
University of San Diego

ABSTRACT: How should we pursue aesthetic value, or incorporate it into our lives, if we want to? Is there an ideal of aesthetic life? Philosophers have proposed numerous answers to the analogous question in moral philosophy, but the aesthetic question has received relatively little attention. There is, in essence, a single view, which is that one should develop a sensibility that would give one sweeping access to aesthetic value. I challenge this view on two grounds. First, it threatens to undermine the meaningful attachments we form with aesthetic items, *e.g.*, poems, paintings, songs, or items of design and dress. Second, it fails to accommodate the motivational character of our encounter with beauty, which can diminish our desire to pursue the wider world of aesthetic value. I conclude that whatever the aesthetic ideal is, it must reconcile our desire to broaden our access to aesthetic value with our desire to maintain and cultivate our meaningful aesthetic attachments. I motivate the alternative thought that having style is the aesthetic ideal.

1. Introduction

The thought that we could be excellent at finding and appreciating aesthetic value, or incorporating it into our lives, is seductive. But how should we go about it? How should we pursue aesthetic value, if we want to? Is there an ideal of aesthetic life? Philosophers are generally familiar with the analogous questions and answers in moral philosophy. The moral ideal is exemplified by those who maximize utility, act on universalizable maxims, or master the virtues. The aesthetic question, in contrast, has received relatively little attention.

There is, in essence, just one answer—handed down by David Hume, echoed by Immanuel Kant, and recently resurrected by Jerrold Levinson. Hume wondered if we could make sense of the idea that there is a standard of taste by which we could reconcile disputes over aesthetic matters. His proposal is that the ‘true standard of taste and beauty’ is given by the joint verdict of *true judges*—people with highly developed sensibilities who, according to Hume, have

Strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice'.¹

Though Hume does not offer a view about the aesthetic ideal, some philosophers have found his view about the standard of taste suggestive in this regard. The 'Hume-inspired' view is that the aesthetic ideal is a matter of developing an *ideal sensibility*, as defined (at least) by the characteristics he requires of a 'true judge'.² The aesthetic ideal is exemplified by those whose fineness of discrimination, sensitivity, practice, wide exposure, and neutrality give them sweeping access to the field of aesthetic value. In what follows, I argue against this conception of the aesthetic ideal. Locating its weakness reveals a novel constraint that any theory of the aesthetic ideal must meet. I develop this constraint and motivate a way of meeting it.³

¹ David Hume, 'Of the Standard of Taste,' in *Selected Essays* (Oxford: OUP, 2008), 133-153. Hume's essay has had considerable influence on aesthetics. For example, see Peter Railton's 'Aesthetic Value, Moral Value, and the Ambitions of Naturalism,' in *Aesthetics and Ethics, Essays at the Intersection*, ed. Jerrold Levinson (Cambridge: CUP, 1998), 59-105, and Alan H. Goldman's *Aesthetic Value* (Westview Press, 1995). See also Jerrold Levinson, 'Hume's Standard of Taste: The Real Problem,' *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 60, No. 3 (2002), 227- 238; and 'Artistic Worth and Personal Taste,' *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 68, No. 3 (2010), 225-233, both of which I discuss below.

² I want to emphasize at the outset that Hume himself never makes the claim that the 'true judge' constitutes the aesthetic ideal. Jerrold Levinson adopts Hume's view as a view of the aesthetic ideal in 'Hume's Standard of Taste' and 'Artistic Worth and Personal Taste'. For much of the essay, I have Levinson's view in sight. As I indicate in the final section, there's some reason to think that Hume would have supported a very different view, so the term 'Hume-inspired' is potentially misleading.

³ Matthew Kieran has offered a different argument for the claim that the ideal critic is not ideal, and we both focus on intrapersonal facts about aesthetic appreciation. However, his focus is on whether we can have reliable

I begin by considering a challenge to the Hume-inspired view, recently considered by Jerrold Levinson—one of the view’s staunchest defenders. Our aesthetic lives concern an array of evaluative attitudes directed at a range of items, from artworks to items of style and décor. At least some of these, we think, make one the kind of person one is. But due to the fact that true judges, or ‘ideal critics’, share aesthetic preferences, they must lack unique ‘aesthetic personalities’. Levinson thinks we should preserve such uniqueness, and so a worry arises about whether one really should develop the sensibility of an ideal critic. I begin by motivating this ‘challenge from uniqueness’ (§2) and arguing that it is not a genuine challenge (§3). However, there is a different challenge that is genuine—the challenge from *aesthetic love*: the Humean ideal threatens to undermine the meaningful attachments we form with aesthetic items, and it fails to accommodate the motivational character of our encounter with beauty, which can diminish our desire to pursue the wider realm of aesthetic value (§4). By way of making this challenge more precise, I criticize Levinson’s definition of ‘aesthetic personality’ and develop an alternative account of the source of concern (§5). I then consider how a defender of the Hume-inspired ideal might respond to the challenge and claim that the argumentative weight favors the search for an alternative conception of the aesthetic ideal. I make a suggestion about where to turn (§6).

2. The Challenge from Uniqueness

Meet Oliver, an aesthetically normal guy: he likes a bit of this, loves a bit of that, and his aesthetic preferences enjoy a kind of coherence—they suit him. Oliver, we might say, has his own

knowledge of how our ideal counterpart would respond, whereas my focus is on the importance in aesthetic life of the meaningful attachments we form with aesthetic objects. See his ‘Why Ideal Critics are Not Ideal: Aesthetic Character, Motivation and Value,’ *BJA*, Vol. 48, No. 3 (2008).

‘sensitivity’. Something in him is keyed into certain features of art; it responds powerfully to Proust, Morandi, and Radiohead, somewhat indifferently to Mozart and Monet, and negatively to Celine Dion and Thomas Kinkade. He does not merely respond strongly to the works he loves—he takes them to be, in some sense, important parts of his life. They ‘speak to him’ in a special way that other works do not, which brings him back to these works again and again, always seeking—and often finding—nuance, insight, rejuvenation.

One day Oliver meets Oscar, an *Ideal Critic*. Ideal Critics—ideally aesthetically informed, unprejudiced, widely experienced and practiced, perceptually, emotionally, and cognitively refined—are able to fully and accurately appreciate aesthetic items. They see in them all that they have to offer as such. This rare creature thoroughly sizes up our aesthetically healthy, albeit undeniably non-ideal, friend Oliver. Oscar tells him of the *aesthetic promised land* awaiting those with an ideal sensitivity. In perfecting his sensitivity, Oliver will finally have access to all of the aesthetic value in the world.

Oliver senses the appeal of aesthetic perfection. He imagines his ascent with a delight that resembles his feeling for certain musical works. But just as a journey away from one’s close friends can harm those bonds and thereby dislodge one’s sense of self, so Oliver worries that his ascent to aesthetic perfection threatens his sensitivity. It promises to sever those ties. He cannot imagine appreciating Mozart or Impressionism as the Ideal Critic says he should; nor can he imagine altering the specific tone of his connection to Radiohead’s music or to the passages of Marcel Proust.

It seems that he should and should not attempt to ‘perfect’ his sensitivity. Ascending to aesthetic perfection threatens to alter the very sensitivity he cherishes. The closer he comes to tasting perfection, the further he strays from that which he experiences as dear to himself—and the more indistinguishable he becomes from the Ideal Critic. So what should he do?

This story illustrates an interesting issue raised by Jerrold Levinson in ‘Artistic Worth and Personal Taste’. Levinson’s starting point is a popular view about aesthetic value. We generally want to make sense of the possibility of someone’s being mistaken (or correct) in their aesthetic judgments. Suppose someone makes the claim that there are no beautiful sunsets: many philosophers want to be able to say of this person that their judgment is, in some sense, mistaken. Levinson’s preferred way of making sense of this position is Humean in spirit: the aesthetic value of an item consists in its capacity to afford intrinsically rewarding aesthetic experiences in ideal critics. Ideal critics have sensibilities that allow them to fully appreciate masterpieces, which are the artworks that have stood the test of time. The standard of taste is determined by the joint verdict of the ideal critics.⁴ Their developed sensibilities give them sweeping access to aesthetic value, which sounds pretty good. Those who seek out aesthetic value, the thought goes, ought to aspire to have such a sensibility.

A view expressed in Kant’s *Critique of the Power of Judgment* is arguably similar to the Hume-inspired view.⁵ Kant famously holds that judgments about beauty have universal purport—to make such a judgment is in part to claim that everyone ought to agree with it. But Kant worries about what justifies this universal claim, especially because the judgment of taste about beauty, he thinks, issues from a kind of subjective response or pleasure. For others to agree with one’s judgment, others must *feel* the way one does—but how can one demand that? What could the common ground between us be, such that I may make a judgment that demands your subjective agreement, whoever you are? One answer he seems to give is that it is constitutive of making such judgments that one be aiming at a certain ideal, which he calls the *sensus communis*, or

⁴ For the details see Levinson, ‘Hume’s Standard of Taste’.

⁵ See his *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: CUP, 2000).

common sense. Kant writes, ‘...only under the presupposition that there is a common sense...can the judgment of taste be made’.⁶ And, according to Kant, ‘...the common sense...is a merely ideal norm.’⁷ In making judgments about beauty, one aims to exemplify this ideal and thereby regards oneself as speaking for all. What we must strive for in aesthetic life, then, is to constitute ourselves in such a way that this claim is warranted—that one is, in fact, speaking for all. In the respects that interest us here, then, the Kantian aesthetic ideal is the same as the Humean ideal: the ideal of aesthetic life is to make one’s sensibility that of the universal critic or the true judge—the sensibility of one who can lay claim to the agreement of others, who can settle aesthetic disputes and tell it like it aesthetically is. What these views appear to have in common is the thought that we should develop a sensibility that gives us sweeping access to aesthetic value.

However, in developing such a sensibility, we run a serious risk. According to Levinson, we risk losing the *uniqueness* of what he calls our ‘aesthetic personality’. He writes,

One’s taste, in the sense of personal preferences in matters aesthetic, arguably not only partly *reveals* who one is or what sort of person one is, but also partly *constitutes* who one is or what sort of person one is. Let us term the totality of such aesthetic preferences an *aesthetic personality*.⁸

I will assume that an aesthetic preference is a disposition to choose an aesthetic object over some other such object for its aesthetic value. The more ideal we become, the more our aesthetic preferences become indistinguishable from those of any ideal critic—a result that Alexander Nehamas calls ‘a nightmare’:

⁶ Ibid., 122.

⁷ Ibid., 123.

⁸ Levinson, ‘Artistic Worth and Personal Taste’, 228. I argue below (§5) that there are serious problems with this definition.

If aesthetic judgment makes a claim to universal agreement, then, ideally, everyone would accept every correct judgment: in a perfect world, we would all find beauty in the very same places.

But that dream is a nightmare... Imagine, if you can, a world where everyone likes, or loves, the same things, where every disagreement about beauty can be resolved. That would be a desolate, desperate world.⁹

Insofar as the uniqueness of our 'aesthetic personalities' is valuable, we seem to have reason *not* to pursue the Humean ideal. So what do we do? How should we live our aesthetic lives?

Levinson attempts to show that, contrary to appearance, it is possible for the ideal critics to have unique aesthetic personalities. But rather than dwell on Levinson's particular solutions to the problem (which I have discussed in detail elsewhere¹⁰), I want to argue that Levinson is focused on the wrong issue.

3. Is the Challenge from Uniqueness Genuine?

It is not clear that Levinson's problem is a genuine problem that gets to the heart of Oliver's concern about becoming 'aesthetically perfect'. In this section, I raise two concerns. The first is a plea for clarification: it is unclear why we should care about having unique aesthetic personalities. Second, even if we should care about having unique aesthetic personalities, it is not clear that our reason for doing so issues from considerations of aesthetic value. But if our reason for caring about having unique aesthetic personalities does not issue from considerations of aesthetic value, then considerations of uniqueness cannot undermine the ideal *as an aesthetic ideal*.

⁹ Alexander Nehamas, *Only a Promise of Happiness: The Place of Beauty in a World of Art*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 83.

¹⁰ See my critical notice 'Levinson on the Aesthetic Ideal', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 71, No. 3 (2013), 277-281.

Considerations of uniqueness would show, at best, that there are some reasons against pursuing the Hume-inspired ideal—but that’s true of any ideal. I’ll address these concerns in turn.

It is unclear whether we should care about having unique aesthetic personalities. Consider the fact that, normally, it is exciting when one meets someone who likes or loves artworks that one likes or loves. For all I know, in every city in the world there is someone who has an aesthetic sensibility nearly identical to mine. That doesn’t bother me in the slightest. What difference does it make if there are two or two thousand such people? And if there is a difference, then where is the line to be drawn?

The question is meant to put pressure on the idea that one should care about whether one has a unique aesthetic personality. As we just saw, Nehamas supports the view that aesthetic uniqueness is important by imagining a world in which everyone ‘likes or loves’ all and only the same artworks and claims that such a world would be a nightmare. But the thought experiment is not fleshed out in much detail. What exactly is wrong with such a world? Why would it be a nightmare?

There are two ways of filling out the thought experiment. We can imagine a ‘loving world’ in which everyone loves the same aesthetic objects, *and they genuinely love them*. But we can also imagine a kind of ‘poser world’ where everyone *acts as if* they love the same aesthetic objects, but only some genuinely do. I recognize the problem with the second world, but the problem with the first is not obvious. If I were in that world, every room would be my style, every outfit would inspire, every song would be a delight. It is a strange world, for sure—everyone happens to genuinely love the same aesthetic objects—but what exactly is wrong with it? Without a good answer to that question I suspect that Nehamas’s nightmare really is just a dream.

Setting this issue aside, I think there is a deeper problem with the purported challenge from uniqueness. Some reasons not to pursue an ideal do not threaten the ideal’s status as an

ideal. We might accept, for example, that the epistemic ideal is to believe only truths while having non-epistemic reason to believe some falsehood. This would give us some reason not to pursue the epistemic ideal, but it wouldn't challenge the very idea that believing only truths is epistemically ideal. What would be problematic for such an ideal is if considerations of *knowledge* gave us reason not to pursue it. Likewise, we might have prudential reason not to pursue the moral ideal without this threatening the ideal's status as the moral ideal.

The uniqueness challenge is genuine only if aesthetic uniqueness is something we should care about in the pursuit of aesthetic value—we would have to show that considerations of aesthetic value give us reason to develop unique aesthetic personalities. If Levinson's uniqueness problem is meant to threaten the very idea that the Hume-inspired ideal is the aesthetic ideal, then we must have aesthetic, not merely prudential or practical reason to have unique aesthetic personalities. The best response to the challenge from uniqueness, then, might be to show that it is not a genuine threat.

How, after all, could considerations of uniqueness play an important role in one's pursuit of aesthetic value? How could uniqueness give one reason to appreciate something's beauty, or incorporate a certain aesthetic object into one's life? Suppose two people, A and B, have the same aesthetic personality type—one that differs from all others—and are faced with the choice of gaining access to the aesthetic value of Schubert's or Brahms's piano sonatas. Suppose further that B learns that A has chosen to learn to appreciate Schubert. B can now see that choosing to appreciate Brahms will give her a *fully unique* aesthetic personality. If considerations of uniqueness matter, then she should opt to appreciate Brahms. But I don't see how this gives her good reason to pick the one over the other.

These considerations suggest that the challenge from uniqueness is not a genuine challenge. But this leaves us in an uncomfortable place, for there was intuitively something

genuinely troubling about the idea that Oliver should readily adopt the ideal critic's advice and begin the ascent to 'perfection'. So what might the problem be, if not the challenge from uniqueness?

4. **The Challenge from Aesthetic Love**

As much as Oliver longs for 'aesthetic perfection', he fears the loss it seems to imply. What exactly does this loss consist in, if not the loss of uniqueness? Our aesthetic preferences and predilections change all the time and we have good reason to expect, indeed to welcome and even seek out, such change. Friends introduce us to new bands and artists; critics show us where to find aesthetic value in something we thought was lacking; one day we react negatively to something we thought was really valuable. These changes might be surprising, but they don't necessarily carry the threat of loss that concerns Oliver.

Oliver shouldn't have a *general* concern about change in his aesthetic preferences. Rather his concern targets, in part, a change in something more specific, something dear to himself—a kind of change that would harm him in a way that everyday aesthetic change does not. I want to argue that his fear targets a change in those features of his sensibility that, to put it roughly, ground the meaningful attachments he has to certain aesthetic objects.

There are two sources of concern here. First, many of us form meaningful connections to certain artworks, places, and styles of dress and design. We connect to them in such a way that we count them as important or meaningful parts of our lives. It's not uncommon to experience such a connection with a novel, poem, song, or style of design, dress, or décor. It is a passionate connection that, at least sometimes, seems to give one insight into the kind of person one is or the kind of life one thinks is worth living. With respect to artworks, Mary Mothersill notes that it can be like falling in love: '... 'falling in love' strikes me as literal and non-hyperbolic in its application

to aesthetic response within a certain range.¹¹

Second, aesthetic value includes beauty, and finding something beautiful can be isolating and personal; it can diminish one's desire to pursue the wider world of aesthetic value—a pursuit that the unrestricted Hume-inspired ideal requires. Charles Burchfield, a 20th century American painter, expresses this with characteristic spirit. He writes in his journal about the natural beauty near his home:

This is my beauty—all the beauty I wish for: the love of this nature around my home. They talk of Italian Skies. I envy not the Italian. Nor do they envy me. I find no sympathetic beauty in the sky I have not lived under. The Elysian fields are not at the ends of the earth—they are here at my feet.¹²

In appreciating the natural beauty around his home, he doesn't care about 'Italian Skies'. His love for 'his beauty' closes him off to the wider world of aesthetic value, in such a way that he finds no other 'sympathetic beauty'.

¹¹ See Mary Mothersill, *Beauty Restored* (Oxford: OUP, 1984), 274.

¹² Charles Burchfield, *Charles Burchfield's Journals: The Poetry of Place*, ed. J. Benjamin Townsend (New York: SUNY Press, 1992), entry of September 1914. Another feature of beauty's phenomenology that philosophers tend to ignore is its power to ignite creative passion, moving us to *create* beauty rather than consume more of it. Leonard Cohen describes many of his songs as 'a response to beauty': 'A lot of those songs are just a response to what struck me as beauty, whatever that curious emanation from a being or an object or a situation or a landscape, you know. That had a very powerful effect on me, as it does on everyone, and I prayed to have some response to the things that were so clearly beautiful to me. And they were alive,' as quoted in, *Leonard Cohen: I'm Your Man*, dir. Lian Lunson (Lions Gate Films, 2005).

A response to beauty similar to Burchfield's is depicted in the first book of Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*. The young Marcel escapes a family photograph engagement to see the beautiful hawthorns near his home one last time before the family moves back to Paris.

On the morning of our departure . . . my mother . . . found me standing in tears on the steep little path close to Tansonville, bidding farewell to my hawthorns, clasping their sharp branches in my arms. . . . 'Oh, my poor little hawthorns,' I was assuring them through my sobs, 'it isn't you who want to make me unhappy, to force me to leave you. You, you've never done me any harm. So I shall always love you.' And, drying my eyes, I promised them . . . I would never copy the foolish example of other men, but that even in Paris, on fine spring days, instead of paying calls and listening to silly talk, I would set off for the country to see the first hawthorn-trees in bloom.¹³

Here Marcel is depicted as being extremely (hyperbolically) devoted to the beautiful hawthorns in Combray—a devotion that, he claims, will divert him away from 'paying calls and listening to silly talk' and towards the beautiful hawthorns as soon as they bloom (that is, as soon as they present their beauty). But notice that 'paying calls and listening to silly talk' is not the only thing Marcel will miss out on. A sincere devotion to the hawthorns would also keep Marcel in France, far away from Burchfield's 'Italian Skies'.¹⁴

Some philosophers would be tempted to connect these two points: beauty, they would

¹³ Swann's Way, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin (New York: Vintage, 1992), 203–4. For a fascinating discussion of Proust and beauty see Richard Moran's "Kant, Proust, and the Appeal of Beauty," *Critical Inquiry*, 38(2) (2012), 298–329.

¹⁴ As readers of Proust's novel well know, Marcel quickly breaks his promise to the hawthorns and eventually makes it to Italy.

argue, is the object of love.¹⁵ And indeed a striking connection with love is made explicit in the passages from Mothersill, Proust, and Burchfield. But we don't need to adopt that view in order to acknowledge that we sometimes literally love, or at least meaningfully connect with aesthetic objects and that the experience of beauty often has a love-like isolating, focusing, even consuming effect. Thus in what follows I will refer to these dimensions of aesthetic life as 'aesthetic love'.¹⁶

Beauty, it seems, can isolate us from the wider world of aesthetic value. Yet the Hume-inspired ideal tells us to cultivate our sensibilities so as to be able to appreciate beauty, and aesthetic value more generally, in its many manifestations—the Elysian fields and Italian Skies alike. But if that's right, then the Hume-inspired ideal seems to characterize beauty, or at least this aspect of its significance, as a troubling distraction from the main point of aesthetic life.

It seems, then, that there is a part of aesthetic life—of our interaction with and pursuit of aesthetic value—that actively prevents the unrestricted pursuit of the Hume-inspired ideal. On the one hand, we might love certain aesthetic objects and for that reason feel uneasy about actively pursuing massive changes in those aspects of our sensibility that underwrite such love. We want to maintain and cultivate these attachments. And on the other hand, our own experiences of beauty in particular may have drawn us to particular objects and scenes in such a way that we

¹⁵ To get a sense of this view and its history, see my entry "Beauty and Love" in *Oxford Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, 2nd edn, ed. Michael Kelly (Oxford: OUP, 2014). For a recent defense of the view, see Nehamas, *Only a Promise of Happiness*.

¹⁶ We use the word 'love' in at least two different senses to talk about aesthetic objects. We often spontaneously say we *love* a certain song or film, where all we mean is that we like it a lot, that it is highly pleasurable or entertaining. But this 'hedonic love' is not the only notion of aesthetic love. One might love, say, the early songs of Leonard Cohen in a way that seems entirely different from one's love of certain hedonically superior pop songs. There's a character of depth to our love for certain aesthetic objects, even if their hedonic charge is less electric.

have little or no desire to pursue the wider world of aesthetic value.

There are, then, not one but two issues raised by the opening narrative. In pursuing the Humean ideal, Oliver abandons all hope of being aesthetically *unique*, that is, of having a *distinctive* sensibility. The other issue is that the pursuit might undermine Oliver's aesthetic love. These are indeed two different problems. Oliver might already be aesthetically very similar to other people; indeed, he might already be part of an aesthetic herd—just another one of the Radiohead-Morandi-Proust sheep. But this does not matter to him, for these are *his* works, just as Burchfield's skies are his skies—they are the ones that he loves, and it simply does not matter if he is one of many in this respect. The tension Oliver feels here, in considering the ascent to 'perfection', concerns changing these aesthetic attachments *at all* regardless of whether he is an aesthetic sheep now or becomes one later.

This is a different challenge, but we need to make it more precise. In particular, we need an account of the object of concern that the pursuit of the Hume-inspired ideal threatens. Levinson takes the object of concern to be one's 'aesthetic personality', but as I show below his definition is seriously flawed and therefore needs to be replaced. In doing so, I arrive at a necessary condition on an account of the aesthetic sensibility. With this in place, we can see what the challenge from aesthetic love amounts to.

5. Aesthetic Sensibility And Aesthetic Love

Levinson thinks that the challenge to the Hume-inspired ideal concerns the 'aesthetic personality'. Here is the definition again:

One's taste, in the sense of personal preferences in matters aesthetic, arguably not only partly *reveals* who one is or what sort of person one is, but also partly *constitutes* who one is or what sort of person one is. Let us term the totality of such aesthetic preferences an *aesthetic personality*.¹⁷

There is a crucial problem with this definition that can be brought out by considering intrapersonal changes in aesthetic preference. As noted above, we are no strangers to such change. Our attitudes toward aesthetic objects can be sensitive and flexible—the painting that enthused you one week bores you the next; the band you loved over the summer, you loved *only* over the summer; the shirt you let collect dust in the closet strikes you, one day, as among the best you own.

The problem with Levinson's definition is that by including *all* of one's aesthetic preferences, any change in aesthetic preference is a change in one's 'aesthetic personality'. But as a result, Levinson's notion fails to track something we care about preserving, cultivating, or even making unique. One can expand one's preferences by liking a new aesthetic object; one could reject or refine one's preference for a certain aesthetic item; one could back off of one's preference to become undecided about the aesthetic object—all without a change what we care about aesthetically. Furthermore, and relatedly, so many changes in one's aesthetic preferences are *in keeping with*, or *out of step with*, one's sensibility. Levinson's notion of aesthetic personality cannot account for these facts.

We need to specify a subset of aesthetic preferences, or aesthetic pro-attitudes generally, that it makes sense to care about preserving. So which subset matters? I highly regard the works of Shakespeare and have for a long time, but is such 'high regard' something I care about preserving. Maybe so, maybe not. Intuitively what matters are, as Levinson suggests, those

¹⁷ Levinson, 'Artistic Worth and Personal Taste', 228.

attitudes that ‘reveal’ or ‘partly constitute’ the kind of person one is—we need to know what it is for an ‘aesthetic preference’ to have such a status.

There are two desiderata here. One is to find some candidate standing attitudes. Note that ‘preference’ is a misleadingly loose term here. There are several candidate attitude-types, distinct from that of ‘preference’, or mere favor, each of which could play a role. These notions are surprisingly under-explored in aesthetics and include love, liking, respect or high regard, and admiration, among others.¹⁸ Each of these pro-attitudes tends to persist throughout, and even guide to varying extents, our more ephemeral aesthetic obsessions and flirtations. Throughout changes in preference, we tend to continue to admire those objects we admire, to hold on to our favorites, and to value what we love.

Another desideratum is to determine whether, among those attitudes, any have a claim to reveal or partly constitute the kind of person one is. This is ambiguous. In a sense, the expression of *any* standing attitude reveals the kind of person one is—one is the kind of person who tends to react or behave in such a way. In another sense, though, the expression of a standing attitude may or may not reveal the kind of person one is. Although my high regard for the works of Shakespeare is a standing state, I would not be bothered much if I woke up one day and found that my regard had diminished. The same is not true of my attitude toward the works of Radiohead, Proust, or Schubert. It is this latter sense that interests us here, for this is the sense in

¹⁸ Frank Sibley warned that *liking* ‘...is not preference, and not admiration—terms which writers interchange often with unprofessional insouciance.’ See his ‘Taste, Smells, and Aesthetics’ in *Approach to Aesthetics*, eds. John Benson, Betty Redfern, and Jeremy Roxbee Cox (Oxford: OUP, 2007), 207-255. In what follows I focus, reasonably I think, on positive attitudes, though one might think that negative attitudes can also play a role. After all, one might be as committed to hating, disliking, disfavoring, or disrespecting various things as one is to loving, liking, respecting, favoring, or admiring.

which a person cares about his sensibility—the sense in which a change in sensibility would amount to something like a loss or diminishing of self.

Our aesthetic love seems to best satisfy these desiderata. It is especially enduring and present in our aesthetic lives, guiding and coloring our aesthetic choices. Our favorites come and go (except of course those that *are* our loves), and the works we admire tend to remain in the background—they're on the bookshelf, as it were, but they stay there. Aesthetic love is also especially well-suited to satisfy a robust reading of the second desideratum. It is arguably grounded in attitudes and dispositions that partly constitute, or whose expression can be said to reveal, the kind of person one cares about being. This is less clear with, say, admiration. Or, at least, admiration for a work says less about someone than does the love of it.

Why is this? The meaningful attachments we form with aesthetic objects arguably reflect broader non-aesthetic concerns of ours—our values, ideals, personalities, histories, cultures, or projects. Among the aesthetic objects we love are items that seem to be expressive of, or that embody, features of ourselves or our lives that are important to us. Radiohead's music, for example, consistently issues a kind of frenetic, highly creative, and emotionally charged radiance. And although one might fall tragically short of this, it might be one's ideal to be this way, to be someone who lives with a kind of frenetic and emotionally charged creative energy. If Radiohead's music expresses one's ideals, then engaging with it might make one feel that one is, however slightly, living up to those ideals. That's one thing that could make their music meaningful. In other cases, we feel that we have a different but similarly important connection to the artist. Perhaps we feel that their guidance would benefit us, help us thrive or get us through a tough time. In these cases, we might feel a bond that is like the bond of friendship. These are just two ways aesthetic objects can be meaningful to us, that we might say we 'love' an aesthetic

object while meaning more than that it is a source of pleasure or enjoyment. There are no doubt more.

The claim I want to carry away here is that the aesthetic sensibility must include a capacity to respond in these ways, to feel that an aesthetic object is not just pleasing or enjoyable, but meaningful. A *capacity* for aesthetic love is *partly* constitutive of the aesthetic sensibility, in such a way that, anyone who has no capacity for aesthetic love thereby, and to that extent, has a defective sensibility.

If we think of the aesthetic sensibility partly in terms of a capacity to form meaningful attachments to aesthetic objects, and we understand this capacity partly in terms of attitudes and values that inform our wider sense of self, then we can see what the challenge from aesthetic love amounts to. The worry is that the unrestricted pursuit of the Hume-inspired ideal threatens to change those aspects of one's aesthetic sensibility that ground the meaningful connections one has with aesthetic objects, and thereby threatens one's sense of self.

Our aesthetic lives are guided by two conflicting aims. On the one hand, we want to preserve and cultivate our meaningful aesthetic attachments. But at the same time we want to pursue the wider world of aesthetic value. The unrestricted pursuit of aesthetic value threatens to change our aesthetic sensibilities in a way that threatens our aesthetic love, and our aesthetic love threatens to isolate us, to shut us off from the wider world of aesthetic value.¹⁹

Note that I am not saying that we should hold on to our aesthetic attachments come what may. Nothing I have said entails that we should never give up an aesthetic attachment in pursuit

¹⁹ This seems to be an instance of a more general tension between our desire to be self-expressive individuals—i.e., to develop and express our own values—and our desire to be part of a community—i.e., to take up, engage with, and respond to values that make up a community.

of the wider world of aesthetic value. Sometimes that's exactly what we should do, especially when the attachment is grounded in cognitive, perceptual, or moral deficiencies, or in ideals that are unsuitable for us, or that are otherwise not worth having. The point is that this is a tension in aesthetic life—one that we have to negotiate, and one that a conception of the aesthetic ideal must accommodate.

The question is whether there is a conception of the aesthetic ideal that can do that, and so can answer the challenge from aesthetic love. In the next and final section, I consider whether the Hume-inspired ideal is such a conception and present several reasons to think that it is not. I am sympathetic to these considerations, but they aren't conclusive. I then argue that even if my objections can be met, developing the sensibility of an ideal critic may not be the *best* way to resolve the tension. I motivate the thought that pursuing 'style' is better.

6. Resolving the Tension

The difficulty with thinking of Hume's standard of taste as an ideal of aesthetic life arises from the need to find a place for aesthetic love within the unrestricted pursuit of aesthetic value. Aesthetic love is, in this way, subordinated to that pursuit. A straightforward way to show that the Hume-inspired ideal can meet the challenge from aesthetic love, then, is to show that there is a place for aesthetic love in the life of an ideal critic. Showing this would not be entirely satisfying; it would leave open the possibility that in becoming 'ideal' the meaningful attachments one has formed might change, and the motivational force of beauty might steer one off course here and there. But at least we would be assured that being an ideal critic is compatible with having meaningful aesthetic attachments. One might worry, after all, that becoming an ideal critic would not just *change* one's meaningful aesthetic attachments but simply eradicate the possibility of having any. And given the condition set out in the previous

section, this would entail that the ideal critic has a defective sensibility and so cannot be the aesthetic ideal. So if we could be assured that *that* is not the case, then perhaps our aesthetic lives can be complete even at the level of the ideal critic.

The considerations of the last two sections show that a complete understanding of something's aesthetic value involves understanding its suitability as an object of aesthetic love, not just its suitability for aesthetic pleasure, enjoyment, interest, preference, and so on. One way to understand how the ideal critic can meet the challenge from aesthetic love is to consider how the ideal critic achieves this understanding. There are two general ways of doing so, either by *actually* loving the object or in some other way—perhaps through imagination, or through another type of appreciation. Let's consider these options in turn.

The first option is to suppose that the ideal critic understands the lovability of an aesthetic object by actually loving it. This is in line with his general strategy of understanding something's aesthetic value by finding it to have that aesthetic value. But the problem is that the range of objects the ideal critic would have to love is far too wide—from Proust, dapper suits, Hip Hop, and ball gowns, to Hemingway, J-Pop and Death Metal. We cannot conceive of a single person loving such a diverse range of aesthetic objects. The only way we can conceive of it is to suppose that the ideal critic loves the same thing in each, say, the expression of creativity. But, among other problems, this does not really do justice to their lovability.

One response is to narrow the ideal critic's domain of expertise by restricting it to a particular art form, genre, or artistic period. Although we cannot conceive of a critic who actually loves everything that is lovable, perhaps we can conceive of a critic who loves everything that is lovable within a certain art form or genre. This may be a promising way to think of the ideal critic as a standard of taste or artistic merit, but it does not solve the problem at issue. If it

accommodates aesthetic love, it does so only by restricting the pursuit of the wider world of aesthetic value to a narrow domain of expertise.

Another response is to require the ideal critic to simulate aesthetic love, perhaps by imaginatively adopting the various points of view that underlie it. But there is some reason to think that the ideal critic can do this only if he lacks his own meaningful aesthetic attachments. In general, we can be sensitive to the preferences or sensitivities of certain people whose sensibilities differ from our own. We might know that a friend would love a certain artwork or item of style or décor, in spite of the fact that we ourselves don't. We can also try to grasp, with some success, what someone might have loved in certain socio-historical contexts, even ones that are distant from and foreign to our own.

But an ability to imagine some alternative modes of aesthetic appeal does not entail an ability to imagine all alternative modes of aesthetic appeal. Our aesthetic attachments seem to impose limits on our ability to simulate aesthetic love. For a stark illustration of this consider people who famously have meaningful attachments to artworks, items of fashion, décor, or forms of music or dance. Imagine Audrey Hepburn loving death metal. Imagine Sid Vicious loving the best examples of bubblegum pop.²⁰ Oliver's love for Proust might make it difficult to imagine

²⁰ An anonymous referee points out that something like this actually occurred. Former Megadeath guitarist Marty Friedman ditched the heavy metal band to pursue his love of J-Pop music. One might think that this shows that, counterintuitively, there's no tension in loving both death metal and J-Pop. But what is striking is that he is described as 'losing interest' in heavy metal and becoming 'passionate' about J-Pop—so passionate that he completely devoted himself to J-Pop—he learned Japanese, moved to Japan, and became a leading popular figure in the J-Pop scene. It seems, then, that Friedman is an example of extreme diachronic aesthetic change but not of synchronic radical aesthetic diversity. See Chris Benderev, 'A Former Megadeath Guitarist's Journey to Japanese Pop', (July 2014)

loving Hemingway's stark literary landscapes. Relatedly, consider the common phenomenon of virtuosic artists or performers having narrow but highly refined sensibilities. An accomplished concert pianist might like just a small handful of other pianists; a painter might detest works in other genres or movements. It seems that a capacity for aesthetic love entails limits on the capacity to imagine loving certain aesthetic objects. And it is not unreasonable to think that artists, performers, and style icons do not live diminished or defective aesthetic lives—quite the opposite.

But perhaps the ideal critic does not need to 'simulate' aesthetic love at all. Perhaps in order to understand something's suitability for aesthetic love all the ideal critic needs to be able to do is 'appreciate' or 'admire' it. And perhaps the ideal critic can do this while having his own aesthetic attachments. In 'Of the Standard of Taste', Hume writes that 'We choose our favourite author as we do our friend, from a conformity of humour and disposition. Mirth or passion, sentiment or reflection; whichever of these most predominates in our temper, it gives us a peculiar sympathy with the writer who resembles us.'²¹ And it is a familiar claim from moral philosophy that correct moral judgment often requires us to put our attachments aside and judge impartially. Perhaps the ideal critic is like the good moral judge—one who is able to set his attachments aside in order to properly appreciate or admire aesthetic objects. One should, after all, be able to see the good in some aesthetic objects one doesn't, or perhaps even couldn't, love.

Such a response seems the most promising, but there is room for skepticism. Can we really make sense of such an appreciator? The ideal critic must appreciate *everything* that's

<<http://www.npr.org/2014/07/05/328513393/megadeth-guitarist-marty-friedmans-journey-to-japanese-pop>>

accessed 29 June 2015.

²¹ Hume, *Essays*, 150.

appreciable, while having his own meaningful aesthetic attachments. In moral philosophy we can make sense of the thought of someone who is completely alienated from the world of personal attachments but who is nonetheless fully in touch with moral value. This is because we can make sense of the thought that moral value is sufficiently independent of personal concerns, that it is something we grasp it via reason, empathy, or on reflection from the view from nowhere. But one might think that it is more difficult in aesthetics, if not impossible—that when we put our attachments aside, whatever that entails, we lose something essential to aesthetic appreciation. Hume himself was arguably skeptical of the idea that aesthetic appreciation could be detached from one's 'humours and dispositions'. He recognized the tight connection between aesthetic appreciation and personality or character: '...it is almost impossible not to feel a predilection for that which suits our particular turn and disposition.'²² One explanation of that is that our aesthetic responses, judgments, attitudes, and creations are expressions of the kind of person we are or aspire to be—we access aesthetic value *through* the particular self we are. To set that aside is to engage in a different mode of appreciation.

The issues here are complex, and they require a more nuanced treatment of aesthetic appreciation, judgment, and value (among other things). But there's enough here to appreciate why one might think that the ideal critic could not be the aesthetic ideal. Aesthetic love is bound up with the particular ways of life we have found worth our living—with our ideals, commitments, and values. One way to think of the ideal critic is as someone whose life is thoroughly devoted to finding and appreciating aesthetic value, but then he could not have meaningful aesthetic attachments because there would be nothing to be *expressed* in that attachment, no particular way of life other than the very pursuit of aesthetic value. Or, to flip the

²² Ibid., 150.

thought around, it's as if Oscar had implored Oliver to be a thousand different people, to which Oliver's reasonable response was the fear that he'd be none.

Note that this does not entail that Hume's ideal critic, or some version of it, is a poor standard of taste. Hume's thought was that we might be able to find a standard of taste that can be applied in disputes about 'taste', where he is primarily concerned with disputes about artistic (especially literary) merit. Hume sought 'a rule, by which the various sentiments of men may be reconciled; at least, a decision afforded, confirming one sentiment, and condemning another.'²³ The 'at least' clause is important here. It suggests that Hume is not necessarily seeking a rule that would actually *reconcile* divergent 'sentiments', but a standard that can be applied in disputes about *artistic merit* to determine whose sensibility tracks a certain kind of (artistic, literary) value. And it may be that to locate such a standard, one has to distort the aesthetic sensibility. Hume's ideal critic specifies what one should strive for in order to be a legitimate judge in disputes about artistic value. The adoption of such a standard as an ideal would overlap with the pursuit of *aesthetic* value in certain respects, but it wouldn't provide a general answer to the question of how one should live one's aesthetic life—that question would remain open.

My reasons for being skeptical of the Hume-inspired aesthetic ideal are not conclusive reasons to reject it, but they would be beside the point if there were a clearly better alternative. As I noted at the beginning of this section, the Hume-inspired ideal subordinates aesthetic love to the pursuit of the wider world of aesthetic value. Perhaps a better conception of the aesthetic ideal should begin by resisting this subordination, by allowing our cultivation of aesthetic love to constrain and guide our pursuit of aesthetic value. The aesthetic ideal would involve restricting our pursuit of the wider domain of aesthetic value to items that we *could* meaningfully connect

²³ Ibid., 136.

with, whether or not we do. In other words, perhaps the first step toward a new conception of the aesthetic ideal is to constrain the pursuable domain of aesthetic value by that which we *could* love. In this way, our ideals and values would give a certain character to our pursuit of aesthetic value—that pursuit would be an expression of the ideals and values that underly our aesthetic love.

I'll end with a consideration in favor of this thought, which is that it might help make sense of an intuition one may have when initially thinking about the aesthetic ideal. My sense is that there are two such intuitions. One is the intuition that defenders of the Hume-inspired ideal seem to have, namely, that the *aesthetic expert or critic* is aesthetically ideal. The critic is the master of artistic value, the discerning judge of excellence and authenticity. But another intuition that might drive our inquiry is that those who have *style* are aesthetically ideal. We tend to admire people who we think have style. They seek out, appreciate, and even create aesthetic objects that fit into a broader scheme of valuing—one that tends to give the character of their self-presentation a certain appeal. One thing that might give one's self-presentation such an appealing character is if one's pursuit of aesthetic value were an expression of aesthetic love.

Of course, if we can see any truth in that thought, it's only from afar—real contact requires much further work.²⁴ If my main point is right, then there's a constraint that any conception of the aesthetic ideal must meet, and there is reason to doubt that the ideal critic

²⁴ In my paper 'Personal Style and Artistic Style' (forthcoming in *Philosophical Quarterly*), I argue for a theory of personal style according to which having style is, roughly, a matter of expressing one's ideals.

embodies the best way to meet it. If my suggestion about style is on the right track, then maybe we can also see the glimmer of a way forward.²⁵

²⁵ This paper has been shaped over the years by numerous helpful comments and discussions. I would like to thank the two anonymous referees for the *BJA*, the participants of the Fall 2011 Conference on the Nature of Taste in Paris, the participants of the 2011 Eastern Division Meeting of the American Society for Aesthetics, audiences at Auburn University and the University of San Diego, Paul Boghossian, Anthony Cross, Daniela Dover, Rob Hopkins, Jerrold Levinson, Béatrice Longuenesse, Colin Marshall, Richard Moran, Jim Pryor (for comments and encouragement on an awfully early draft), Jeff Sebo, and J. David Velleman.