British Journal of Aesthetics, Vol. 42, No. 2, April 2002

AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE REVISITED

Noël Carroll

In this article I divide theories of aesthetic experience into three sorts: the affect-oriented approach, the axiologically oriented approach, and the content-oriented approach. I then go on to defend a version of the content-oriented approach.

THE LAST third of the twentieth century witnessed a remarkable burst of energy and imagination in the philosophy of art. Spearheaded by figures such as Nelson Goodman, George Dickie, and Arthur Danto, among others, the discipline explored new topics in new ways. One feature of those developments—as the preceding trio of names might suggest—was a demotion of the importance of the concept of the aesthetic, in particular as traditionally construed, for the field at large. Goodman reconceptualized the so-called aesthetic response as a cognitive one,[1] Danto equated aesthetic experience with interpretation,[2] and Dickie notoriously wondered whether or not it was mythic (in the unflattering sense of that word).[3]

However, philosophers, like Freud's neurotics, have a compulsion (admittedly often salutary) to return to the repressed and, as a result, aesthetic experience is presently commanding a revival of interest.[4] Frequently, the concept of aesthetic experience has been re-introduced in order to solve long-standing questions concerning, for example, the analysis of artistic value[5] or the demarcation problem—that is, the definition of art.[6] Of course, whether or not the concept of aesthetic experience can contribute to these projects depends on settling an antecedent issue, namely that of finding a characterization of the

[1] Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1968).

[2] Arthur Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U.P., 1981).

[3] George Dickie, 'The Myth of the Aesthetic Attitude', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 1 (1964), pp. 56–65; George Dickie, *Art and the Aesthetic* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell U.P., 1974).

[4] Gary Iseminger, 'Aesthetic Experience', in Jerrold Levinson (ed.), *Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., forthcoming); Gary Iseminger, 'Aesthetic Appreciation', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 41 (1981), pp. 389–399; David W. Fenner, *The Aesthetic Attitude* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1996).

[5] Alan Goldman, *Aesthetic Value* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995).

[6] Richard Lind, 'The Aesthetic Essence of Art', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 50 (1992), pp. 117–129; James C. Anderson, 'Aesthetic Concepts of Art', in Noël Carroll (ed.), *Theories of Art Today* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000).

nature of aesthetic experience. For whatever other conceptual work the philosopher wishes the notion of aesthetic experience to acquit, the philosopher of art first needs an analysis of aesthetic experience that is pertinent to her field of inquiry. Thus, in this paper, I intend to focus on that issue, putting the questions about the nature of art and of artistic value on the back burner for the most part.[7] Furthermore, though the characterization of aesthetic experience that I will propose may have ramifications for the aesthetic experience of nature, my discussion in this paper will dwell primarily on an analysis of the aesthetic experience of art.

One way to initiate an investigation of aesthetic experience is to review traditional approaches to the topic. Roughly, these approaches can be categorized into three types: the affect-oriented approach, the axiologically oriented approach, and the content-oriented approach. Though these approaches can obtain in their pure form, I hasten to add that they are also quite frequently combined. Thus, as well as representing distinct categories for theoretically approaching the notion of aesthetic experience, these categories also often figure as component parts of more complex theories. That is, many of the best-known theories of aesthetic experience combine affective, axiological, and content dimensions, while at the same time it is also possible to advance a theory of aesthetic experience that employs only one of these components.

Before critically examining each of these approaches and combinations thereof, it is useful to provide a brief sketch of their extension. By affectively oriented approaches to the analysis of aesthetic experience I have in mind those that emphasize experiential qualia in defining aesthetic experience. Aquinas' account emphasizes delight in contemplation, while Hutcheson's and Kant's accounts stress disinterested pleasure, where pleasure is the operative affective dimension. Schopenhauer then effectively turns disinterestedness itself into an affective term, marking a sense of liberation or release from the strivings of the will, an experience more modestly characterized by Bell's notion of the aesthetic emotion which corresponds to a release from everyday life. In Bullough, the relevant feeling is detachment or distance, while in Beardsley's later writings it is characterized as felt freedom from the concerns of ordinary living.[8] Dewey, on

[7] Also put to one side is the question of characterizing the nature of aesthetic pleasure as that issue has been pursued in Kendall Walton, 'How Marvellous! Toward a Theory of Aesthetic Value', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 51 (1993), pp. 499–510; Jerrold Levinson, 'What is Aesthetic Pleasure?', in Jerrold Levinson (ed.), *The Pleasures of Aesthetics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell U.P., 1996).

[8] Monroe Beardsley, 'Aesthetic Experience', in M. Wreen and D. Callen (eds), *The Aesthetic Point of View* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell U.P., 1982), p. 288. Beardsley also discusses what he calls 'detached affect' in this essay, but I suspect that this is not a distinct phenomenological quale. Rather, it seems to me to be a capacity to experience emotions through the use of the imagination in response to things such as fiction. Because these experiences issue through the imagination, they do not impinge on us directly—we are not threatened in our immediate life circumstances by the stalkers

the other hand, regards aesthetic experience as what he calls consummatory, a feeling of pronounced unity, integration, and wholeness.[9]

Whereas affect-oriented approaches tend to identify aesthetic experience in terms of certain distinctive experiential qualia or feeling tones, such as being lifted out of the flow of life, content-oriented approaches proceed by distinguishing the specific objects of said experiences. Baumgarten specified it as a clear but indistinct idea. Bell thought it was significant form, possibly deriving that notion from Kant's forms of purposiveness. Hutcheson maintained it was a compound ratio of uniformity amidst variety. At one point in his career, Beardsley identified it with form and the regional qualities of the object. Urmson claimed that it was the phenomenal appearance of things and Goodman associated it with various semantic and syntactic features of symbol systems. Though different philosophers have proposed different objects as the focus of aesthetic experience, where the attempt to define aesthetic experience emphasizes the features towards which the experience is directed, the approach is what I call content oriented, though, as some of my examples indicate, many theories combine content dimensions and affective ones.

Another approach to the analysis of aesthetic experience is what may be designated axiological. This approach aims at defining aesthetic experience in terms of the kind of value that it is meant to secure. Here the usual suspect is intrinsic value or value for its own sake. That is, something is taken to be an aesthetic experience only if the experience is valued for its own sake or is intrinsically valued. Sometimes the notion of disinterestedness is used interchangeably with the notion of intrinsic value, as when 'valued disinterestedly' is taken to be synonymous with 'valued for its own sake'. However, since disinterestedness can also be given an affective gloss, as in the case of Schopenhauer, it is perhaps less confusing to reserve the term 'disinterested' for affect-oriented approaches and to speak rather of intrinsic value or value for its own sake when exploring axiologically oriented approaches.

As already mentioned, these approaches can occur in a pure form, where each approach poses as a complete analysis of aesthetic experience or they can be combined, as they are in Bell whose theory contains (i) an affective component—the aesthetic emotion which involves a feeling of liberation or release from the everyday, (ii) a content component, namely significant form, and (iii) an axio-

---

in a crime film—and so we do not flee from them. However, the operation of the imagination need not be correlated here with any peculiar experiential quality. Thus, I do not count Beardsley's notion of detached affect as an affective element in his theory. Another theorist who emphasizes the importance of the imagination for aesthetic experience is Roger Fry. See his 'An Essay in Aesthetics' in Morris Weitz (ed.), *Problems in Aesthetics* (NY: Macmillan, 1970), pp. 49–61.

[9] Given his emphasis on the fusion of the subject and object in aesthetic experience, Mikel Dufrenne may also be an example of the affect-oriented approach. See his *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, trans. Edward S. Casey (Evanston, IL: Northwestern U.P., 1973).

logical component (since Bell thinks having an aesthetic emotion is valuable for its own sake).

Using this taxonomy then as a rough map, we can begin to chart the strengths and weaknesses of various approaches to the analysis of aesthetic experience, starting first with affect-oriented approaches and concluding with content-oriented approaches. Perhaps this ordering of approaches will already suggest to you that I favour a content-oriented approach to the analysis of aesthetic experience.

AFFECT-ORIENTED APPROACHES

Affect-oriented approaches to the definition of aesthetic experience attempt to isolate a certain experiential quale as the mark of or as a necessary condition for aesthetic experience. The French, uncharacteristically exercising extreme caution, referred to it as *je ne sais quoi*. A vaguely more explicit candidate is pleasure or delight or enjoyment. One way of crafting this sort of view might be to say that something is an aesthetic experience only if it is pleasurable (Walter Pater might serve as an example here).[10]

This proposal however is too exclusive. Obviously, many aesthetic experiences are not pleasureable.[11] For example, experiences of failed art works can be tedious, unpleasant, and hardly enjoyable. Surely, these are aesthetic experiences. How else would we classify sitting in a concert hall for an hour, attempting to follow the formal development of a symphony, if not as an aesthetic experience? However, if the forms are hackneyed or botched, resulting in aggravating boredom, it is an aesthetic experience that is unpleasant and not enjoyable, contrary to the affect-oriented approach under review.

The problem here is that this account treats aesthetic experience honorifically, discounting as aesthetic experiences interludes that fail to deliver pleasure or enjoyment. However, that is like treating a defective engine as no engine at all. In short, the trouble with this approach is that it treats the notion of aesthetic experience as essentially commendatory, whereas it is presumably descriptive.

One way of remedying this shortcoming of course is to stipulate that aesthetic experiences are those that are expected or intended to deliver pleasure or enjoyment. Unpleasant aesthetic experiences then are still aesthetic experiences, albeit defective ones, since, though they are undertaken with the expectation of experiencing pleasure and/or they are intended to engender pleasure, said experiences fail to deliver the expected goods.

[10] Walter Pater, 'Preface from Studies in the History of the Renaissance', in Vincent B. Leitch (ed.), *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), p. 836.

[11] It is also too inclusive, failing to block candidates such as sexual pleasures, narcotic pleasures, and gustatory pleasures. Undoubtedly this is why Kant aspired to hive off the aesthetic from the agreeable.

However, not all aesthetic experiences are expected or intended to promote pleasure in any non-stipulative sense of the notion of pleasure. Some are expected and intended to perplex, unnerve, and disturb. Damien Hirst's work often aspires to promote disgust and that is what connoisseurs expect of it. So even the revised version of the pleasure theory appears too narrow to encompass all of that which has a legitimate claim to the title of aesthetic experience.

Likewise, there are other less dramatic experiences that have a fair claim to membership in the category of aesthetic experience, which, as well, are not necessarily connected to pleasure. Taking notice of the suggestive repetition of rectilinear forms in a Cubist painting is an aesthetic experience, descriptively speaking—what else would it be?—but it need not occasion feelings of pleasure.

Perhaps one reason that the conviction that pleasure is a necessary condition for aesthetic experience is so entrenched in our theoretical tradition is that the aesthetic experience that first attracted philosophers to the topic was the experience of beauty. And perhaps a case could be made for the proposition that beauty, very narrowly construed, correlates with pleasure. However, aesthetic experience is clearly broader than the experience of beauty. So, even if (and I stress the hypothetical here) beauty could be defined in part by the disposition to afford some necessary quotient of pleasure that would not show that all aesthetic experience is similarly tethered conceptually to pleasure.

Here, of course, I do not mean to deny that aesthetic experiences can be pleasurable, but only that pleasure or enjoyment is not a necessary condition for aesthetic experience.[12] Undoubtedly, part of the story of why the practice of art persists is that, for many, a goodly portion of it promises pleasure. However, this falls far short of establishing that pleasure is a necessary condition for aesthetic experience.

At this point, it may be thought that I am leaving something out. For the tradition, more often than not, speaks of disinterested pleasure, not pleasure *simpliciter*. Maybe there is something in the notion of disinterestedness that will block some of the previous objections. Whether this is so of course is a nettlesome issue, since disinterestedness is a concept that has diverse meanings, only some of which have any potential for isolating distinctive experiential qualia of the sort that affect-oriented approaches seek to identify and if the concept of disinterestedness tracks no discernible qualia then it will be of little use to affect-oriented approaches, though, as we shall see, this does not preclude its attractiveness for axiologically oriented accounts.

As initially introduced, the concept of disinterestedness does not appear to refer to any qualitative dimension of experience. Indeed, it is a feature of aesthetic judgements rather than of aesthetic experiences. In Hutcheson, a judgement that

[12] Nor is it a sufficient condition, since clearly there are pleasurable experiences that we do not call aesthetic.

something is beautiful should be grounded in disinterested pleasure. That is, judgements of taste, like judgements issued by law courts, should be impartial; they should not be made on the basis of a prospect of personal benefit or disadvantage.[13]

Here disinterest is not an experiential feeling tone, it is a condition for making an acceptable judgement. Thus, saying that judgements of taste should be based on disinterested pleasure does not identify an affect peculiar to aesthetic experience for two reasons: first, because disinterestedness—of the sort that Hutcheson and Kant have in mind—has no distinctive phenomenological cast (and, in all likelihood, no phenomenological cast at all) and, second, because the notion of aesthetic experience should not be collapsed into the notion of an aesthetic judgement or a judgement of taste.

Though an aesthetic judgement will be, perforce, an evaluation, it is far from clear that an aesthetic experience must be. And, though it may be reasonable to suppose that an aesthetic judgement, like other sorts of judgements, should be impartial and impersonal, in the way that Hutcheson suggests, impartiality of this sort, which is also known as disinterestedness, is not the kind of experiential qualia the affect-oriented theorist of aesthetic experience requires.

Kant, of course, extends the notion of disinterestedness rather expansively. Under his treatment, an aesthetic judgement must not only be free from the tincture of personal advantage, but also from any advantage whatsoever. So the pleasure upon which the genuine aesthetic judgement rests cannot derive from any moral, cognitive, political, or otherwise practical advantage the experience might afford, not only to the individual issuing the judgement, but to anyone. This move of course is connected to Kant's argument for the universality and necessity of authentic aesthetic judgements.

Undoubtedly, the currency of the Kantian-derived notion that aesthetic experience is disinterested in the sense that it is divorced from moral, political, economic, social, practical, and cognitive value benefited enormously from the fact that it provided a serviceable theoretical cudgel for artists and art lovers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries for beating back the perceived threats of bourgeois philistinism, commercialism, moralism, and science. These phenomena, each in various ways, challenged the authority of art in the culture. In terms of cultural politics, each lowered the esteem of art in the name of utility.[14]

Thus, it appeared incumbent upon the friends of art to carve out a niche for it that was independent from the encroachment of utility, broadly conceived. And

---

[13] For Shaftesbury, disinterest, for example, just means 'not motivated by self concern'. See Jerome Stolnitz, 'On the Origins of "Aesthetic Disinterestedness"', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 20 (1961), p. 132. Cited in Fenner, *The Aesthetic Attitude*, p. 54.

[14] For a historical account of this see Albert L. Guérard, *Art for Art's Sake* (New York: Schocken Books, 1963). This book was originally published in 1936. See also Noël Carroll, 'Four Concepts of Aesthetic Experience', in *Beyond Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2001).

Kant's observations concerning aesthetic judgement, construed as an account of the aesthetic experience of art, was precisely what the times called for. Consequently, we hear Théophile Gautier proclaiming that 'Nothing is really beautiful unless it is useless; everything useful is ugly for it expresses a need, and the needs of man are ignoble and disgusting, like his poor weak nature. The most useful place in a house is the lavatory.'[15]

The view that the aesthetic experience of art is disinterested, in the Kantian sense, that is, profited from the role it could play in the 'art for art's sake' movement as a firebreak against the diverse 'utilitarian' projects of commercialism, moralism, and science. Ironically, because of its historical, strategically contextual usefulness as artistic propaganda, the claim of disinterestedness became an article of faith of traditional aesthetic theory, despite the fact that most art, along with its accompanying aesthetic experiences, in most cultures is scarcely disinterested, nor is it meant to engender a disinterested response, in the Kantian sense, but rather is in the service of religious, political, moral, and otherwise social enterprises.[16]

However, even if somehow the assertion that the aesthetic experience of art is disinterested in the expanded Kantian sense is defensible, that would still not afford succour for affect-oriented approaches to definitions of aesthetic experience, since this sort of disinterestedness is not an experiential quale. Politically interested pleasure does not feel different from disinterested pleasure. Disinterest, in the Kantian sense, is at best a negative constraint on making certain kinds of evaluative judgements and, though those sorts of judgements might reasonably be expected to rest on aesthetic experience, the judgements and their abiding constraints are not equivalent to said experiences. Nor do the constraints of so-called disinterest affectively characterize aesthetic experience, since they possess no phenomenological coloration of their own.

Though the disinterestedness of Hutcheson and Kant is not connected to any experiential qualia, a related notion of disinterestedness, though often taking different names, which does possess an affective dimension, establishes itself in the tradition through the writings of Schopenhauer. Here the idea is that aesthetic experience involves a feeling of release, a liberation or escape from the

[15] Théophile Gautier, 'Preface to Mademoiselle de Maupin', in Vincent B. Leitch (ed.), *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), p. 758. Perhaps Duchamp's 'Fountain' makes a joke at Gautier's expense. Duchamp, that is, chose a urinal as a way of advancing anti-aestheticism just because Gautier had chosen the bathroom as a weapon to advance aestheticism.

[16] As an example of the service an expanded notion of disinterestedness can perform for the proponent of art for art's sake, consider this pronouncement by the narrator of Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus*: 'Art is intellect, mind and spirit, which has no need whatever to feel obligated to society, to the community—dare not do so, in my opinion, for the sake of its freedom, of its nobility. Art that "joins the volk," that makes the needs of the crowd, of the average man, of small minds, its own, will end in misery, and such needs will become a duty, for the sake of the state perhaps. . . .'

strivings of the will. Insofar as this is a feeling of relief from the burdens of living, this variety of disinterestedness correlates with a pleasurable sensation, as when a heavy weight is lifted off one's shoulders. In effect, what Schopenhauer did was to transform Kant's conditions for issuing an authentic aesthetic judgement into a psychological process, one in which the percipient is freed from the pressures of moral, political, practical, and scientific concerns—from, that is, the burdens of striving and desire.

Though Schopenhauer's concept of aesthetic experience is underwritten by a frankly incredible metaphysical system, the psychologized version of disinterestedness he suggests can be adapted without buying into his most extravagant commitments. Hence Bell identifies aesthetic emotion with being lifted from the flow of daily concerns (including those of morality, politics, and practicality), Bullough with being distanced from said concerns, and Beardsley with being freed from them. Here there need be no talk of cosmic striving; yet at the same time the idea of a phenomenological dimension to aesthetic experience—namely, some sort of relief or release—is retained.

In this sort of disinterest theory an experience is aesthetic only if it is occasioned by a feeling of release from practical concerns, including moral, political, scientific, and economic ones. Though this affect-oriented approach may appear purely negative, it is not, since a feeling of release is something definite and positive, perhaps figuratively characterizable as a sensation of 'uplift'. Nevertheless, on the debit side of the ledger, one does wonder whether every aesthetic experience involves such a feeling of release.

Again, there is the problem of aesthetic experiences of flawed works of art. Does one feel a sensation of release while trapped at an inept performance of a Wagnerian opera? One problem here of course is that the release account of aesthetic experience is commendatory rather than descriptive.

However, the troubles do not end with aesthetic experiences of poorly executed art works. Another problem is that the appropriate aesthetic experience of certain successful art works need not involve release—not even release from political and moral concerns. A realistic novel such as Zola's *Germinal* mandates and arouses a merited emotional response of felt oppression and entrapment by certain social conditions. Though apprehending these expressive features would appear to be an appropriate aesthetic experience of *Germinal*, this is difficult to assimilate to a release from worldly concerns.[17] Moreover, sometimes works of art may implicate audiences politically in a way that promotes an expressive aura of shamefulness that the reader, viewer, or listener realizes applies to him/herself. There seems scant sense to characterizing this sort of aesthetic response as a form of release from practical concerns in the Schopenhauerian-derived sense.

[17] Nor will it do to say that the sense of oppression and entrapment is not connected to one's actual life, since the reader might be a miner.

Aesthetic experience at least sometimes engages us with the moral and political, inviting us to experience expressive properties that plunge us into the practical flow of life rather than providing respite from it. But this is hard to square with the notion that aesthetic experience is always necessarily correlated to a sense of liberation from practical concerns.

In sum, if the notion of release from the everyday is an intelligible one, it does not seem to be the sign of every aesthetic experience. I have cited possible aesthetic experiences that would appear to conflict with feelings of release. However, surely there are also aesthetic experiences in which no palpitation of relief obtains—as when I take note of the powerful cut of the businessman's suit. And if at this point the notion of disinterestedness is watered down to no more than that the percipient when experiencing an object aesthetically is not buffeted by personal concerns, like their tax bill, then, as George Dickie has pointed out, this is best characterized as a matter of paying attention to the object of aesthetic experience and not as some special mental state of disinterestedness or release. Thus, there may be aesthetic experiences—such as attending to the expressive qualities of things—that have nothing to do with a feeling of release from practical concerns one way or the other.

Though I have not interrogated every candidate an affect-oriented theorist of aesthetic experience might employ, my review of some of the most frequently recurring ones suggests provisionally that aesthetic experience does not necessarily possess unique experiential qualia that set it off from other sorts of experience.[18] If there is such a quale, the burden of proof falls to the affect-oriented theorist to produce it, though this seems unlikely, given the diversity of the objects of aesthetic experience and the wide variety of the responses they are designed to elicit.[19] And if it is unlikely that aesthetic experience can be identified in terms of a distinctive affective property, then such experiences must be identified either in terms of their distinctive content or the distinctive form of value they embody.

THE AXIOLOGICAL APPROACH

The axiological approach to defining aesthetic experience identifies it as an experience essentially valued for its own sake. However, this cannot serve as a sufficient condition for aesthetic experience, since, if one believes in intrinsic value, then presumably consistency would appear to require that one acknowledge that there are experiences other than aesthetic ones that are also valued for

[18] One affect-oriented view that I have not examined is Dewey's. For my criticisms of it, see 'Four Concepts of Aesthetic Experience', in *Beyond Aesthetics*. For a defence of Dewey's approach, see Richard Shusterman, 'The End of Aesthetic Experience', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 55 (1997), pp. 29–41.

[19] Marshall Cohen, 'Aesthetic Essence', in Max Black (ed.), *Philosophy in America* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1965).

their own sake. So I shall suppose that the axiological theorist is committed to no more than that it is a necessary condition for an experience's counting as aesthetic that the experience be valued for its own sake.[20]

The axiological approach has several advantages over the affect-oriented approaches surveyed thus far. It does not identify aesthetic experience with any distinctive experiential qualia. Since there is so great a heterogeneity of affects at the phenomenological level of aesthetic experience, the axiologist moves to the level of valuation in order to secure uniformity.

At the same time, it seems obvious that the axiological approach probably evolved historically from certain affect-oriented approaches. For example, many affect-oriented approaches stress pleasure or enjoyment as the relevant experiential qualia for isolating aesthetic experience. So, if one's notion of enjoyment, as many do, involves the notion of intrinsic value, then it is a short intuitive step to the claim that intrinsic value is a component of aesthetic experience. However, of course, it is a step that does not bring in tow the liability of a commitment to any specific phenomenological states, such as pleasure or relief.

The axiological approach also derives from while also making some improvements upon aspects of the notion of disinterestedness. Whereas non-experiential accounts of disinterestedness stress everything that an aesthetic experience is not valued for—personal benefit, practical advantage, moral consequences, cognitive contributions, and so on—the axiological approach has something positive to say about aesthetic experience, namely that it is valued for its own sake.

Of course many traditional theories of aesthetic experience are not merely negative in scope. They also often propose that the object of such experiences with respect to art is form—significant form, purposiveness without a purpose, and so on. This has frequently been grounds for criticizing such theories, alleging that they are too narrow in scope. But the axiological theory now under consideration does not appear to have this shortcoming since it does not stipulate what the pertinent experience must be an experience of, but only that, whatever that experience is of, the experience itself be intrinsically valued. Thus, valuing a novel for the psychological insight it affords can count as an aesthetic experience, so long as the process of acquiring that experience is valued for its own sake. Hence, the axiological theory is not, like so many traditional theories, open to the charge of formalism, aestheticism, or a commitment to 'art for art's sake'. An experience of moral uplift can count as an aesthetic experience in this view, so long as it is valued for its own sake.

---

[20] For a representative statement of this view, see James C. Anderson, 'Aesthetic Concepts of Art'. Though he does not use the notion of the aesthetic, Malcolm Budd may have a similar view of aesthetic experience. On the other hand, he may be talking about the broader category of appropriate experiences of art. However, many of the criticisms of the axiologically oriented approach to aesthetic experience reviewed above would also appear to apply to Budd's notion of appropriate experiences of art. See Malcolm Budd, *Values of Art* (London: Penguin Books, 1995).

Though the axiological approach possesses certain advantages over traditional, affect-oriented approaches, it shares some of their defects as well. For instance, it seems to be committed to a commendatory rather than a descriptive account of aesthetic experience. Aesthetic experience is such that it is valued for its own sake. But then what are we to make of unrewarding experiences of inept art, particularly those in which the percipients are focused on the traditional loci of aesthetic experience, such as the form and the expressive qualities of the art work? I do not value such experiences for their own sake, since I may not value them at all. And if these unrewarding experiences of the formal and expressive dimensions of unsuccessful art works are not aesthetic experiences, what kind of experiences are they?

Once again, the problem here seems traceable to a long-standing confusion between rendering aesthetic judgements and having aesthetic experiences. To declare an art work to be good may plausibly require an assessment of the value—whether intrinsic or otherwise—of the related experience it affords. However, having experiences of the form and the expressive dimensions of an art work that are relevant to aesthetic evaluations of both the art work and experiences thereof would appear to be logically prior to and distinguishable from judging them aesthetically.

Perhaps the confusion here is traceable to Kant, though it is not Kant's fault, since he was in the explicit business of analysing aesthetic judgements not aesthetic experiences. It is his successors who blurred the line between aesthetic experience and aesthetic judgement, with the result that aesthetic experience, as defined axiologically, has been transformed from a descriptive concept to a form of commendation.

One might attempt to avoid this slippage by maintaining that aesthetic experience is not defined by the achievement of a condition valued for its own sake, but only by the expectation that the experience will be rewarding for its own sake. This allows that unrewarding experiences at the opera, where the formal organization of the art work drives one batty, are still aesthetic experiences, just in case one entered the theatre with the expectation that the experience would be valuable for its own sake.

Of course, a great deal here depends on the way in which we are to understand the relevant notion of expectation. Suppose that I am walking down a hallway and, all of a sudden, I come across a painting whose design and expressive properties rivet my attention. Have I not had an aesthetic experience, since I had no expectations about encountering value of any sort before I almost literally ran into the painting? Many aesthetic experiences are entered self-consciously. However, others force themselves upon us, unexpectedly as they say, as when strolling across a foreign city, we are abruptly taken by a striking facade. In what non-arbitrary sense can the relevant expectations be attributed to us when we are genuinely surprised by our aesthetic experiences?

Nor can the issue of unrewarding aesthetic experiences be circumvented by saying that aesthetic experiences of art only obtain where the artist intends the work to afford experiences valued for their own sake, since the artist may have had no such intentions, wishing instead that their song inspire martial vigour in the very muscles of the troops as they march into battle. Thus, the axiological approach would appear to remain saddled with the problem of how to negotiate unrewarding experiences that nevertheless retain a fair claim to being counted as aesthetic experiences.

Another issue the axiological approach confronts is the question of the way in which we are to understand the notion of an experience valued for its own sake. The theory says that something is an aesthetic experience only if it is valued for its own sake. But must the experience be objectively valuable for its own sake or is it only that it must at least be subjectively valued for its own sake by the relevant reader, viewer, or listener?

To say that an aesthetic experience is objectively valuable for its own sake is to say that it is not instrumentally valuable, the percipient's view on the matter notwithstanding. That is, according to the objective version of the axiological approach, aesthetic experience as such has no beneficial consequences, either personal or social, for those who pursue it. It is simply worth having in itself; it is objectively worthy for its own sake, where objectivity correlates with the 'view from nowhere'.[21]

However, this hypothesis is somewhat improbable. In the course of human history, vast energies have been expended in securing the conditions for aesthetic experience. This is not only the case for so-called civilizations, but is also true of less-developed societies. Nevertheless, it remains a mystery why this should be so, were it the case that aesthetic experience yields no objectively valuable, instrumental consequences. It beggars the naturalistic imagination to suppose that so many sacrifices, both individual and social, have been made to promote experiences that have no beneficial or adaptive consequences. The view that aesthetic experiences are objectively valuable for their own sake does not square with what secularists generally believe about human nature. Typically, where humans make great efforts, those endeavours are rewarded with advantages, even if they are not initially obvious ones. That, at least, is our best framework for explaining long-standing human (and animal and vegetable) regularities.[22]

Granted, the aforesaid explanatory lacuna is less evident in affect-oriented approaches that identify aesthetic experience with pleasure or the expectation of pleasure than it is in the axiological approach, inasmuch as pleasure can be made

[21] Of course, another variant of the axiological approach might be that aesthetic experience is valued both intrinsically and instrumentally. I will take up this alternative shortly. At present, I begin with the thesis that, according to axiologists, aesthetic experience is only valued for its own sake.

[22] Moreover, it is due to the authority of that framework that I think the burden of proof here falls to the axiologist.

out to be its own reward. However, we have seen that pleasure is not an essential mark of aesthetic experience. Indeed, it is ostensibly a virtue of the axiological approach that it parts company with pleasure theories. Yet, by exchanging the concept of pleasure for objective value for its own sake, the axiologically oriented theorist provokes a puzzle: if aesthetic experience is not valuable because of its beneficial consequences, why has it persisted throughout human history? Aesthetic experience, so defined, is an anomaly from a scientific viewpoint. How can the objective intrinsic value of aesthetic experience be made comprehensible in a world where evolution reigns?[23]

Furthermore, competing with the axiological account, there are numerous plausible and even attractive evolutionary hypotheses that connect many aesthetic experiences to beneficial or adaptive consequences.[24] Aesthetic experiences, for example, are generally shared amongst audiences—theatre-goers, film-goers, concert-goers, dance aficionados, and the like—who find themselves in congruent emotive states. This is clearly an advantage from the evolutionary point of view, since it nurtures a sense of group cohesion. In this regard, aesthetic experience is objectively valuable instrumentally.

Nor is it only to the advantage of the group to cultivate fellow feeling; it is also to the advantage of the individual to develop and refine a talent for being attuned to the feelings of conspecifics. Aesthetic experience makes the transmission of a common culture of feelings accessible—with evident benefits for both the group and the individual. At the very least, aesthetic experiences can satisfy a social need

[23] At this point, it may be argued that I have overlooked the possibility that aesthetic experience is a free-rider on some other aspect of human nature that can be explained as an adaptation with beneficial evolutionary consequences and that this factor affords the axiologist the logical space required for fitting aesthetic experience valued for its own sake into the naturalistic world view. However, this move faces several challenges. First, the axiologist will have to establish convincingly what that other feature might be and also show that aesthetic experience is really separate from it. For if the alleged feature is something like the ability to make fine perceptual distinctions it is not clear that aesthetic experience is something over and above that in a way that warrants hypothesizing valuation for its own sake. That is, if one wishes to maintain that aesthetic experience is a spandrel, then one must establish on what this spandrel rests, while also showing that it makes no functional contribution. So the burden of proof here belongs with the axiologist, particularly since there are, as I suggest in what follows, plausible conjectures about the adaptive advantages of aesthetic experience. The axiologist needs to explain what is wrong with these explanations and what remains to be explained if they or something like them are correct.

Furthermore, I at least think that the possibility that our pursuit of aesthetic experience is a spandrel is unlikely, since human cultures worldwide invest such energy and resources on securing it. It is far more probable that aesthetic experiences have the kinds of functions that I explore above. That is, for aesthetic experience to be construed as a free rider on some other phenomenon, it would have to be genuinely cost free socially. However, that is not the case, since societies often make great sacrifices and incur great costs in the pursuit of aesthetic experience. For further comment on the spandrel objection, see my 'Art and the Domain of the Aesthetic'.

[24] For suggestions along these lines see Ellen Dissanayake, *Homo Aestheticus* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1992); Ellen Dissanayake, *Art and Intimacy* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2000).

for being connected with others. Even reading a novel alone brings one in contact with a broader social world.

Similarly, inasmuch as aesthetic experience involves the detection of expressive properties, having such experiences exercises our powers for determining the emotive states of conspecifics, while contemplating the form of art works refines our abilities to comprehend purposes and intentions. Aesthetic experience also augments our perceptual powers of discrimination, thereby facilitating the recognition and re-identification of objects and properties,[25] capacities whose sophistication can make one better able to navigate the world. Moreover, aesthetic experiences of art engage audiences in the play of their emotive, sensuous, and intellective powers, redundantly encoding useful cultural knowledge across several faculties and thereby rendering it both more entrenched in memory and easier to access than it might otherwise be.

These hypotheses and others like them account for why aesthetic experience is objectively valuable, though not in terms of intrinsic value, but in terms of why aesthetic experiences are good consequentially for the human organism. They explain why certain aesthetic experiences of art have been sought after by every known culture in every period of history.

An axiological theorist favourably impressed by these hypotheses or by other evolutionary hypotheses like them might decide to take them on board, at least to the extent of saying that aesthetic experiences are such that they are both valued for their own sake and for the instrumental benefits they afford.[26] However, there are several problems with this adjustment.

First, if aesthetic experience is defined in this way, one wants to know how the axiological theorist intends to cut the difference between aesthetic experiences and so many other sorts of experience. Will this not be precisely the way that they will characterize a great bulk of experience? Second, if the axiologist goes so far as to concede that aesthetic experience is valued both instrumentally and intrinsically, a natural question arises from considerations of explanatory simplicity about whether the instrumental consequences of aesthetic experience cannot exhaustively account for the phenomenon at hand. What extra explanatory work is being done by telling us that aesthetic experience is, in addition to its instrumental value, valuable objectively for its own sake?

Aesthetic experience, construed as objectively valuable for its own sake—that is, as separate from consequential advantages—seems to be a wheel disconnected from the rest of the mechanism. It is not only that instrumental hypotheses may appear more economical. From the explanatory point of view, the hypothesis that aesthetic experience is valuable for its own sake leaves us literally speechless,

[25] Eddy Zemach, 'What is an Aesthetic Property?', in Emily Brady and Jerrold Levinson (eds), *Aesthetic Concepts: Essays After Sibley* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), p. 55.

[26] Robert Stecker appears to be willing to defend such a position. See his 'Only Jerome: A Reply to Noël Carroll', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 41 (2001), pp. 76–80.

since it appears divorced from our best frameworks for understanding human nature.

Of course, some may respond that we can never know that aesthetic experience is not valuable for its own sake. All our evolutionary hypotheses may be so many just-so stories. Nevertheless, as hypotheses, these instrumental accounts of aesthetic experience have the provisional advantage of segueing better with a scientific worldview and they are more productive, that is they call attention to features of aesthetic experience in a way that is informative about specific aspects of it. That is, saying that aesthetic experience is valuable for its own sense is rather empty—it fails to tell you what to look for when speaking of aesthetic experience.

The hypothesis that aesthetic experience is objectively valuable for its own sake makes the phenomenon essentially mysterious, an orphan from the natural world as we think we know it and it provides little guidance about what the pertinent features of aesthetic experience are. In short, the hypothesis that aesthetic experience is valuable for its own sake appears to be an explanatory dead end.

At this point in the debate, it is open to the axiologist to propose that valuation for its own sake should be construed subjectively not objectively. That is, the objective facts of the matter are not relevant, so long as the percipient believes that the relevant experience is valuable for its own sake. Even if she is biologically preprogrammed to seek out certain experiences because they are adaptive, she may not know or believe this. So, from her vantage point, the experience is valued for its own sake. She does not question why else she might seek out such experiences.[27] So it seems to her that the aesthetic experiences are valued for their own sake. That is where their explanation ends.

Certainly it is not hard to imagine people like this. Nor need people like this be involved in any self-deceptive or self-contradictory state of mind. Nevertheless, the question is whether this alone establishes that something is an aesthetic experience only if it is valued for its own sake by the pertinent reader, listener, or viewer. Could not someone who does not believe that the experience at hand is valuable for its own sake be having an aesthetic experience?

Imagine, for example, a person who believes some or another evolutionary hypothesis about the adaptive value of aesthetic experience. Suppose that she

[27] It might be argued that I am putting too much weight on the belief in intrinsic value as a motivating factor. However, one might claim that the belief that aesthetic experience is valuable for its own sake is not a cause of my attending aesthetically, but is rather an effect. That is, as one reflects on an aesthetic experience, one comes to believe that it is valuable for its own sake. So the axiologist maintains that it is a necessary condition for having an aesthetic experience that one come to believe that it is valuable for its own sake. However, that the percipient comes to this conclusion may only be a reflection of their pre-existing cognitive stock. Another person performing the same acts of attention and contemplation may come to regard the same experience as only instrumentally valuable, perhaps due to their beliefs in evolutionary psychology. So whether one regards the relevant beliefs as motivating factors or as effects of aesthetic experience, the sort of counterexample to be introduced above can be suitably modified to challenge the axiologist. I owe these considerations to Sheila Lintott.

believes that detecting the formal and expressive properties of art works exercises and thereby enhances her abilities to identify the emotions and intentions of her conspecifics and that she pursues aesthetic experiences with only this in mind.

That is, she follows the formal and expressive structures of the relevant art works with understanding. She attends to the interplay of line and colour in a way that is appropriate to the prevailing practices of art and she sizes up their significance and their effects on her sensibility in ways well warranted by the traditions of aesthetic reception. She looks in the right places and makes the right connections between her successive perceptions.

However, she believes that this is valuable instrumentally rather than intrinsically because through practice it broadly augments her interpersonal skills. Or, perhaps more vaguely, she believes that it is instrumentally valuable because aesthetic experience keeps her in touch with other people and that this is important to anyone's mental equilibrium and health, something that she values instrumentally.[28] Are these beliefs, despite the fact that she is processing the relevant stimuli in canonical ways, enough to discount her experience as aesthetic?

It does not seem to me that they are. For in the case as I am imagining it, our viewer is, *ex hypothesi*, doing and reacting to the stimulus in the same way as a viewer who believes that the state is valuable to be in for its own sake. That is, the succession of computational states of the two viewers are, we suppose, type identical with each other.[29] Both are attending to and processing the same things with comparable understanding. Both note that their sensibilities are aroused, their emotions engaged, and their imaginations energized in the same ways—ways, moreover, endorsed by tradition and suitable to the stimulus object. Given this possibility, it appears to be arbitrary to say that the person who values the

[28] Or they might pursue aesthetic experience simply because they believe it promotes an instrumentally valuable mobility and alertness of mind. Moreover, sometimes it is said that people attend to art in order to cultivate self-understanding. But, of course, someone might seek self-understanding only for strategic reasons and not because they value the experience for its own sake. Nor need the kinds of beliefs here be only ones about human psychology. In his lecture 'Aesthetic Experience and Nirvana' at the annual meetings of the British Society for Aesthetics (Oxford, 2001), Robert Wilkerson pointed out that, in certain Hindu traditions, aesthetic experience is valued as an avenue to nirvana. The alleged loss of self that aesthetic experience is thought to occasion is regarded as a preparatory exercise for advancing to nirvana. That is, aesthetic experience is believed to be subservient to a religious project of self-transformation. Moreover, since we are now dealing with the subjective version of the axiological approach, it is important to remember that the beliefs we are attributing to the relevant percipients need not be true beliefs. The percipients need only hold them in order for our objections to obtain. Insofar as the instrumental beliefs I have conjectured are possible ones, they challenge the axiologist's contention that aesthetic experience is necessarily valued just for its own sake.

[29] I am emphasizing the succession of their computational states here rather than their overall mental states, since their overall mental states diverge inasmuch as one of them believes the experience is valuable for its own sake whereas the other does not. It is the succession of their computational states that I am proposing are type identical and it is that claim that is relevant to my thought experiment.

experience instrumentally is not having an aesthetic experience, while only the one who values the experience for its own sake is.

After all, their successive computational states are the same. What reason is there to suppose that their different beliefs must result in any discernible difference in the way that they process the relevant stimulus, presupposing that they both do so with understanding? Nor need the fact that one of our subjects believes the experience is valuable instrumentally entail any inadequacy in their understanding of the formal and expressive design of the stimulus. And finally, if attending to the formal and expressive properties of an art work with understanding is not an aesthetic experience, how else would we classify it?

Here it is important to stress that our instrumental viewer's beliefs about the adaptive value of her experience need not be true. Nor need they have the evolutionary spin that I have given them. Someone might pick up a recent novel such as Walter Krin's *Up in the Air* in order to help to find a way to begin to organize her thoughts and feelings about contemporary air travel and the uprooted form of life that correlates with it—not because this is valuable for its own sake, but because she feels she has a pressing existential need to get a handle on it. Or she might read the novel taken by the belief that it is an effective instrument for dispelling boredom. However, if she reads such a novel, attending to its expressive dimensions with understanding is she not having an aesthetic experience? Yet then it need not be the case that valuing such an experience for its own sake is a necessary condition for having an aesthetic experience.

In response to this argument, it is tempting to suggest that we are placing too much weight on what the person who alleges she values the experience instrumentally says. That is, we are only considering her conscious beliefs. However, despite what she avows, it may be the case that she unconsciously or subconsciously or tacitly believes that aesthetic experiences are valuable for their own sake.[30] What she says about her beliefs about the value of aesthetic experience is really a rationalization. For if her beliefs about the instrumental value of her experiences were shown to be false, it is predicted that she would continue seeking after aesthetic experiences. And what could explain this, except that she believes, albeit subconsciously, that they are valuable for their own sake.

I am not convinced that this thought experiment will always work out as predicted. It is not clear to me that if one's beliefs about the instrumental value of aesthetic experience are defeated people across the board will continue to pursue aesthetic experience or, if they do, it may be in the expectation that some other source of the instrumental value of aesthetic experience can be ultimately identified.[31]

---

[30] This argument is proposed by Robert Stecker in his 'Only Jerome'.

[31] For further counterarguments along the lines in this paragraph, see Noël Carroll, 'Art and the Domain of the Aesthetic', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 40 (2000), pp. 191–208.

However, another reservation that I have about the preceding thought experiment is that two can play at the unconscious belief game. The axiologist says that unconsciously those who seek out aesthetic experiences do so because they value them for their own sake, even if they protest otherwise. Alternatively, an at least equally compelling explanation is that unconsciously those who say they intrinsically value them nevertheless seek aesthetic experiences because they are instrumentally valuable. Aesthetic experiences are adaptively valuable and this is what motivates our pursuit of them, even though we may be unaware of this.

Chewing crunchy foods, such as potato chips, crackers, and pretzels, involves chewing behaviour that exercises muscular activity that has a stress-relieving effect. Watching a co-worker who has had a hard day at the office scoffing down a bowl of tortilla chips we may ask him why he is doing it. Since he knows nothing about the relevant medical research he might say 'I don't know. I just like the taste—I just value the experience of eating them for its own sake.' However, we have ample reason to suspect that his body knows that this is a way of reducing unwanted stress and that this unconscious knowledge is the basis for his behaviour.

Similarly, it is arguable that we are biologically preprogrammed to seek out aesthetic experiences for the adaptive and practical benefits they bestow. That one may not be consciously aware of this should cause no more hesitation about attributing unconscious beliefs to readers, viewers, and listeners than does our co-worker's apparent ignorance of the stress-relieving potentials of chips preclude an unconscious instrumental aim underpinning his proclivity for eating them.

Both the axiologist and his opponent can appeal to unconscious beliefs about the value of aesthetic experience. But this does not, I think, amount to a stand off between the two positions. For where we are able to find a compelling scientific explanation underlying a certain behaviour that has previously been characterized uninformatively or euphemistically, our tendency is to prefer the naturalistic explanation. This is what makes debunking explanations attractive. So if the axiologist adverts to unconscious beliefs to support his case, he must be prepared to show why reasonable countervailing instrumentalist hypotheses about unconscious beliefs—that might otherwise appear to have a prior claim on our allegiance—are either mistaken or, at least, not as compelling as the axiologist's.

So far I have been attempting to undermine the basic claim of the axiological approach to aesthetic experience—that something is an aesthetic experience only if it is valued for its own sake. Nevertheless, it should also be added that, if this is taken to be the whole story about aesthetic experience, then it does not track the traditional usage of that concept.

Of course, the notion of aesthetic experience is not quite an ordinary concept; it is not an article of common speech. It is a semi-specialized or theoretical

idea. But even so, there are certain regularities in its traditional usage among those who employ it that one would expect any account of it to accommodate.

Traditionally, the concept of aesthetic experience is generally taken to preclude moral insight, political inspiration, recognition of representational content, and so on. However, as noted earlier, the axiological approach to aesthetic experience will not achieve this since as long as the relevant experiences of moral and political benefit or of representational content are valued for their own sake they will count as aesthetic experiences. Earlier I suggested that this appears to be a plus for the axiological approach, since it avoided formalism. However, it is also a debit, since it casts the net of aesthetic experience far wider than the tradition standardly permits. Thus, the axiological approach runs the danger of introducing a neologism into the discussion. And, all things being equal, an account of aesthetic experience that better approximates traditional usage should be preferred, lest we run the danger of changing the subject altogether.

THE CONTENT-ORIENTED APPROACH

A great many aesthetic experiences engender pleasure (or displeasure) and prompt evaluations (positive and negative) and all aesthetic experiences have objects. However, the experiential qualia of aesthetic experiences are quite diverse, too diverse in fact to assimilate to a single formulaic, phenomenological characterization and, in fact, some aesthetic experiences may have no accompanying qualia. I may simply be unmoved one way or the other during an aesthetic experience; I notice the droopiness of the weeping willow tree, but I may be moved to neither sadness nor delight by it. Thus, having an aesthetic experience does not require as a necessary condition that the subject experience a certain feeling or even any feeling. This in turn suggests that the state may have to be defined in terms of its content, the kinds of objects towards which it is directed and not in terms of any affect, distinctive or otherwise.

Similarly, aesthetic experiences may or may not issue in any evaluation of their worth, including that of taking it to be something that is valuable for its own sake. For example, I note that the poem has a unifying A/B/A/B rhyme scheme, but this does not lead me or other appropriately informed readers to find it valuable, either intrinsically or instrumentally. Nor, in such a case need one assess such an experience negatively. I may regard some aesthetic experiences indifferently, as neither good nor bad, intrinsically or instrumentally.[32] This also suggests that aesthetic experience may have to be characterized in terms of its content, since content rather than affect or value is what all aesthetic experiences have in common.

However, what then comprises the content of aesthetic experience? When

[32] Noël Carroll, 'Enjoyment, Indifference and Aesthetic Experience: Comments for Robert Stecker', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 41 (2001), pp. 81–83.

speaking of art the most commonly mentioned candidates include the form of the art work and its aesthetic properties, of which expressive properties comprise a very large and noteworthy subclass. The form and the aesthetic and expressive properties of the work also interact in various ways. Sometimes form gives rise to aesthetic properties, such as unity, while the succession, evolution, or juxtaposition of expressive properties can constitute the form of the art work. Form, expressive and aesthetic properties, and the interaction between them are the most commonly indicated objects of aesthetic experience, as well as being the ones about which there is least controversy. Thus, we may hypothesize that, if attention is directed with understanding to the form of the art work or to its expressive or aesthetic properties or to the interaction between these features, then the experience is aesthetic.

In addition, aesthetic experience is also often directed at the way in which these factors engage and mould our attention to and awareness of them; to observe the way in which colours draw our eyes into the background of the painting is an aesthetic experience. Consequently, another object of aesthetic experience is the relation of the form, the expressive properties, the aesthetic properties, and the interaction thereof to our response to them—to the way in which they shape and guide our reactions. Therefore, if attention is directed to the form of the art work and/or to its aesthetic and expressive properties and/or to the interaction thereof and/or to the way in which the aforesaid factors modulate our response to the art work, then the experience is aesthetic.

This characterization provides us with a disjunctive set of sufficient conditions for categorizing aesthetic experiences of art works. There may be further objects of aesthetic experience that might be added to this list. However, given our tradition, these are the most recurrent, non-controversial ones. That is, on the basis of the tradition, we can say that, at least, satisfaction of one or more of these conditions is the most straightforward way of determining whether or not an experience of an art work is aesthetic. This list also has the virtue of excluding some of the more controversial candidates for aesthetic experience. For example, the simple recognition of what a representation, such as a picture, is of does not traditionally count as an aesthetic experience; seeing-in, in other words, is not an aesthetic experience. So it is not on my list.

I arrived at this list of conditions by thinking about the features of art works, attention to which are most likely to elicit consensus and least likely to spur controversy among people who talk about aesthetic experience. The consideration of the moral consequences as such of an art work for the commonweal is typically said not to be germane aesthetic experience, so it is not on the list. On the other hand, form is taken to be a prima-facie object of aesthetic experience by virtually everyone, even if they do not believe that it is the only object of aesthetic experience. So it is on the list.

I concede that I may have left something out—that the list might have to be

revised to accommodate other conditions. However, if so, that can be easily remedied by reflection on our discursive practices. Nevertheless, it is my conjecture that, by focusing on the contents of what are standardly taken to be aesthetic experiences, even if more objects of said experience need to be added to my list, we will reach our most reliable account of aesthetic experience.

Form, as I have mentioned, is one of the most commonly adduced objects of aesthetic experience. Those who rail against formalism generally do so because of the way in which form is often dragooned into solving the demarcation problem—that is, the attempt to define art in terms of significant form, where form is what affords aesthetic experience. However, my invocation of form here is neutral with regard to the demarcation problem. Attention to the form of an art work with understanding is a sufficient condition for having an aesthetic experience, but having an aesthetic experience, in my view, is not any sort of condition for art status. Moreover, anyone who objects to the presupposition that attention to form is a necessary condition for having an aesthetic experience has no quarrel with me, since I have only speculated that it is one, among a disjunctive set, of sufficient conditions.

If attention is directed at the form of an art work, then it is an aesthetic experience. By the form of an art work, I mean the ensemble of choices intended to realize the point or the purpose of the art work.[33] To consider an organism biologically is to consider the features of the organism that are relevant to its biological operation; to consider an art work formally is to consider the features of the work relevant to its formal operation—to consider the features of the work (and their coordination) that realize the point or purpose of the work.[34] Attention to the form of a work is attention to its design—to the way the work is intended to work.[35]

Taking notice with understanding of the way in which the spire of a cathedral moves the eye and mind upwards towards heaven is attending to the form of the church and, therefore, counts as an aesthetic experience, in this case as an experience of form. Obviously, such attention can be done with greater and lesser acuity and apprehension. However, even a rudimentary sense of how the parts of the work fit together and function concinnitiously is an aesthetic experience of the formal kind.

In addition to form, aesthetic properties are another major source of aesthetic

[33] Noël Carroll, *Philosophy of Art: A Contemporary Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1999), ch. 3.

[34] This mode of argumentation is adapted from Kenneth R. Rogerson's 'Dickie's Disinterest', *Philosophia* (1987). However, I part company with Rogerson's use of this argument pattern because he links experiencing something aesthetically to attending to features relevant to contemplation of the object for its own sake. I object to both the appeal to intrinsic valuation and to Rogerson's narrowing of the pertinent mental activity to contemplation.

[35] The form of the art work is the perceptible embodiment of the point or purpose of the work. Like the human form, it is how the art work appears. Perhaps it is this link with perceptibility that makes it natural to group attention to form with attention to expressive and aesthetic properties.

experience. Detecting the joy in the music, the massive appearance of the statue, the symmetries in the painting, and the buoyancy of the dancer's steps are all aesthetic experiences. As this brief, incomplete inventory indicates, there are various different kinds of aesthetic experience, insofar as aesthetic experiences may have a diversity of objects. Expressive properties or anthropomorphic properties are one sort; sensuous properties, such as massiveness, another. Some can be called Gestalt properties, such as symmetry.

These properties are response dependent, because their existence depends on creatures like us with our sensibilities and imaginative powers. These properties supervene on the primary and secondary properties of objects of attention, as well as upon certain relational properties, including art–historical ones, such as genre or category membership. Aesthetic properties emerge from these lower order properties; they are dispositions to promote impressions or effects on appropriately backgrounded creatures with our perceptual and imaginative capabilities.[36]

Because aesthetic properties are response dependent, the fear may arise that there is the risk of circularity in saying that, if attention is directed to an aesthetic property, then the experience is aesthetic.[37] For it may seem that, in conceding that aesthetic properties are response dependent, we are saying no more than that aesthetic properties are just the properties that are picked out by aesthetic experience. This however is only a threat to the content-oriented approach, if aesthetic experience is additionally characterized in an affect-oriented or axiologically oriented way. That is, trouble only looms for the content-oriented approach if, in order to pick out aesthetic properties, we must postulate things such as disinterestedness or valuation of the experience of the properties in question for their own sake.

However, aesthetic properties can be characterized without such commitments. One might, after the fashion of Nelson Goodman, characterize them in terms of their semantic and/or syntactic features. Or, in a less revisionist vein, one might say that the aesthetic properties of art works are dispositions to promote impressions or effects, notably of expressivity, mood, figuration (metaphoricity), synesthesia or cross-modal correspondence, perceptual salience, Gestalt organization, and/or qualitative intensity, which emerge from the base properties of the works at hand in relation to suitably informed percipients with standard-issue human sensibilities and imaginative powers.

In visual and sonic art works, aesthetic properties are predominantly but by no means exclusively involved in promoting the ways in which the work appears phenomenally, over and above the operation of its primary and secondary properties. In literary works, aesthetic properties are typically less a matter of sensuous

[36] Jerrold Levinson, 'Aesthetic Properties, Evaluative Force, and Differences in Sensibility', in Emily Brady and Jerrold Levinson (eds), *Aesthetic Concepts: Essays After Sibley* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2001).

[37] This worry is voiced by David Fenner in his 'Aesthetic Attitude', pp. 104–105. It is also iterated in Gary Kemp, 'The Aesthetic Attitude', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 39 (1999), p. 395.

address and primarily emerge from the descriptions in the text in relation to the imagination.[38] Though hardly an exhaustive account of aesthetic properties, these brief remarks should nevertheless suggest that an aesthetic experience can be identified in terms of its content, without reference to affective states such as pleasure, disinterested or otherwise or to evaluative postures, such as finding experiences of said properties to be valuable for their own sake.

By limiting the aesthetic experience of art works to attention with understanding to the work's formal and aesthetic properties and their interaction with each other and to the ways in which they engage our sensibilities and imagination, some may argue that I have made the compass of aesthetic experience unduly restrictive. For there are other legitimate responses to art works than these, such as deriving moral insight from them. However, the presupposition underlying this criticism is that the concept of aesthetic experience should incorporate every legitimate response to an art work, whereas I contend that aesthetic experiences constitute only one family of responses, albeit an important one, that we may appropriately undergo or undertake with respect to art works. To suppose otherwise heads, on the one hand, towards formalism with regard to the demarcation problem or, on the other hand, to expanding the concept of aesthetic experience far beyond its traditional usage.

Though I have focused on the aesthetic experience of art, the content-oriented approach I have defended may have suggestive ramifications for the analysis of the aesthetic experience of nature. Though nature lacks form in the way that I have defined it, one can attend to it functionally, sizing up the ways in which the contours of an ecological system have evolved from natural processes, pressures, and constraints. Allen Carlson calls this mode of attending to nature 'the natural environmental model'.[39] Attention to form in art works, then, has an analogue in the aesthetic experience of nature in the naturalistically informed attention to the apparent teleology of natural processes and prospects.

Likewise, attention to aesthetic and expressive properties in art works has analogues to the aesthetic experience of nature insofar as nature often moves us feelingly or arouses us in ways that engage our sensibilities and imagination so that we attribute aesthetic and expressive properties to it.[40] Thus, if it is a requirement of an adequate account of aesthetic experiences with regard to art works that it have some connection to the aesthetic experience of nature, then the content-oriented approach can meet this desideratum insofar as attention to the formal and expressive properties of art works have strong analogues in the aesthetic experience of nature.

---

[38] Robert Stecker, *Artworks* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State U.P., 1997), p. 275.

[39] Allen Carlson, *Aesthetics and the Environment: The Appreciation of Nature, Art, and Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2000), Part I.

[40] This view has been defended under the title of the 'arousal model' in Noël Carroll, 'On Being Moved by Nature' and Noël Carroll, 'Emotion, Appreciation, and Nature' in my *Beyond Aesthetics*.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the most prominent theories of the aesthetic experience of art are the affect-oriented approach, the axiological approach, the content-oriented approach, and combinations thereof. Inasmuch as aesthetic experiences need not be marked by any distinctive experiential qualia, such as pleasure or even by any experiential qualia—one may simply track the form of the work—the affect-oriented approach appears unpromising. The axiological approach, in particular with its recurring commitment to the intrinsic value of aesthetic experience, also seems disappointing, since it seems possible to have aesthetic experiences of the sensuous appearances of things, such as the pronounced angularity of a staircase, which one values neither positively nor negatively, instrumentally nor for its own sake. This leaves us with the content-oriented approach to aesthetic experience as the likeliest avenue for future research on aesthetic experience, though, needless to say, more work needs to be done on this project, particularly in terms of securing some closure on the disjunctive list of sufficient conditions rehearsed in this paper.[41]

Noël Carroll, Department of Philosophy, University of Wisconsin–Madison, 5185 Helen C. White Hall, 600 North Park Street, Madison, WI 53706-1474, USA.

[41] The author wishes to thank Elliott Sober, Peter Kivy, Sally Banes, Ivan Soll, Sheila Lintott, Nick Zangwell, Susan Cunningham, and Peter Lamarque for their helpful suggestions regarding the preparation of this paper. This paper was also read at the annual meetings of the British Society for Aesthetics and I am extremely grateful for the observations that listeners provided. Nevertheless, I alone am responsible for the errors herein.