

Book forum

On Jerrold Levinson's

Aesthetic pursuits. Essays in philosophy of art

(Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016, pp. 224)

With contributions by Jerrold Levinson, Jérôme Dokic,
John Gibson

Précis of the book

Jerrold Levinson (University of Maryland)

Aesthetic pursuits is my fifth collection of essays in aesthetics, and complements my fourth collection, *Musical concerns* (2015), consisting exclusively of essays focusing on music. *Aesthetic pursuits*, by contrast, contains essays treating matters other than music, such as literature, film, painting, humor, beauty, artistic value, and aesthetic experience. With one exception, the essays contained in the book were composed between 2006 and 2015.

Most of the essays in *Aesthetic pursuits* were previously unpublished, though early versions of two of them, *Immoral jokes* and *Artistic achievement and artistic value*, appeared in French, while an early version of another, *Toward an adequate conception of aesthetic experience*, appeared in German, and a version of yet another, *Farewell to the aesthetician?*, appeared in Italian. And though the essays in *Aesthetic pursuits* might profitably be read in almost any order, one rationale for the order decided on is the placement of essays with overlapping concerns in proximity to one another, so that a given essay almost always has some concern, whether a theme or an artform, with either the preceding or the succeeding essay.

Farewell to the aesthetician? was composed for a special issue of the Italian journal "Aesthetica Preprint Supplementa" on the topic

"Dopo l'estetica" ("After aesthetics"), on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the Palermo-based Centro Internazionale Studi di Estetica, and until now had appeared only there, in Italian translation. This short, semi-humorous piece addresses the question of whether there is a future for the discipline of *aesthetics*, in the sense of a continuing justification for what *aestheticians* are engaged in doing. A positive answer to that is returned and defended by sketching three scenarios, only slightly exaggerated, of who or what might take the place of the aesthetician, and arguing that none of them is at all plausible. I conclude that the future of the aesthetician, even if an endangered species, is thus secure, at least for now.

Aesthetic contextualism, under the title *Arte e contesto*, was given as a public address in Siracusa on the occasion of my receiving the 2010 Premio Internazionale of the Società Italiana d'Estetica. I was helped in this by a young philosopher friend, Filippo Focosi, who both translated the text and coached me on Italian pronunciation. The essay actually originated some years back, in an attempt to explain why those engaged in the arts or to whom art matters should be interested in what philosophers have had to say about art and aesthetic experience.

I begin with general reflections on the relations between art and philosophy, pursuits not obviously aligned in either aim or method, but quickly turn to the task of identifying a distinctive theme of aesthetic theory in the past fifty years of philosophical theorizing, acknowledgment of which is arguably crucial to the proper appreciation and understanding of art. The theme identified and then elaborated in the remainder of the essay is labeled *aesthetic contextualism*. The central idea is this: a work of art is an artifact of a special sort, the product of human invention at a particular time and place, an essentially historically embedded object, one that has neither art status, nor determinate identity, nor aesthetic character, nor definite significance, apart from the cultural context in which the work is created and through which it is fully constituted as a work of art.

Toward an adequate conception of aesthetic experience owes its existence to an invitation to speak at a small conference at Carleton College in fall 2007 on the occasion of the retirement from Carleton of aesthetician Gary Iseminger. The essay aims to develop an intuitively compelling conception of aesthetic experience while clarifying along the way the relation between aesthetic experience and aesthetic attitude, aesthetic attention, and aesthetic properties. Before

spelling out the conception of aesthetic experience I endorse I engage at length with two competing conceptions, the *content-oriented* account of Noel Carroll, and the *valuing-based* account of Gary Iseminger, my differences with the former being more substantial than my differences with the latter. What distinguishes aesthetic experience on my characterization of it is the conjunction of a particular kind of *perceptual* engagement with an object and some sort of broadly *affective* response to that engagement. In the last section of the essay I address the status of three experiences that could be said to lie on the periphery of the aesthetic.

The question at the heart of *Artistic achievement and artistic value* is this: is an artwork valuable in virtue of the valuable experience that it can afford us, or is the experience that the artwork can afford valuable because it is an experience of a valuable artwork or an artwork with valuable properties? In other words, which is primary in the constitution of artistic value: the nature of the artwork as such or the experiences the artwork can engender? A more specific version of the question is this: does the artistic value of an artwork consist *wholly* in the value of the aesthetic experiences that it affords or makes possible, or does its artistic value instead consist *partly* in its just being a certain way, such as its embodying a certain artistic achievement, independent of the experiences it affords or makes possible? To endorse the first option is to embrace the *Experientialist* position, while to endorse the second option is to embrace the *Objectualist* position. I here argue for the Experientialist position, at least as regards artistic values of the *achievement* sort. But that leaves it open that there are other artistic values, such as cognitive or ethical ones, that may not ultimately rest on the value of experiences.

Artistic worth and personal taste follows on an earlier essay of mine (Levinson 2002). In the present essay I address and confront two related themes: the fact of there being demonstrably better and worse as regards art, and the undeniable importance of personal taste in aesthetic matters. In the first part of the essay I recapitulate my defense in Levinson (2002) of the reality of differences in artistic worth and the rationality of being guided by ideal critics in discovering and appreciating superior works of art. In the second part of the essay I turn to the status of personal taste in light of that. What should the relationship be between what one as an individual prefers aesthetically and what is artistically objectively superior? To what degree should the former be aligned with the latter? Might there be a

tension between these two apparent values, that is, on the one hand, one's own taste in art and related domains and, on the other, what really is aesthetically or artistically better? If so, in what way might such tension be reduced or mitigated? The difficulty here could be labeled "the paradox of aesthetic perfectionism".

Falling in love with a book originated in a Portuguese venture to assemble a collection of short essays on down-to-earth issues problems in aesthetics, ones at some remove from those that aestheticians and art theorists have habitually addressed. That venture was, unfortunately, ill-fated, and did not result in a book, but did result in this short, rather personal essay, which addresses itself to the phenomenon of falling in love with a work of literature, focusing on the case of novels. I try to limn the most salient features of the phenomenon, highlighting similarities and differences with the rather more familiar phenomenon of falling in love with a person, and hazarding thoughts on what makes a work of literature apt to elicit a positive reaction of this character. Toward the end of the essay the dangers of an intense absorption of this sort, whether in regard to books or to persons, are briefly acknowledged.

Immoral jokes concerns the ethics of humor, and more specifically, a certain category of jokes that can justifiably be labeled *immoral*. I claim that such jokes exist, and that many of them are funny despite being immoral; that is, their immorality does not wholly undermine their humorousness, and may even some in some way contribute to it. A first task of the paper is to say what a joke's being *funny* or *humorous* consists in. A second, more important, task is to say what it is for a joke to be *immoral*, and irredeemably so. A third task is to decide what attitude or behavior is appropriate to such jokes in light of their immorality, and to consider whether their total proscription is justified, or even humanly possible.

Beauty is not one: the irreducibility variety of visual beauty was composed for a collective volume edited by Peter Goldie and Elisabeth Schellekens dedicated to the theme of interactions between aesthetics and psychology. My chosen topic was prompted by a growing sense that although I had then been doing philosophical aesthetics for over thirty years, I had never addressed what most regard as problem *numero uno* in that domain, namely, the nature of beauty. Though beauty manifestly comes in many forms, and though the objects that exhibit beauty are of diverse sorts, one is tempted to think that beauty is essentially the same thing or property, wherever it is

found, and whatever possesses it. In this essay, confined to the most central domain of beauty, namely the visual, I oppose the idea that beauty is one, suggesting instead that visual beauty is irreducibly multiple, that the types thereof are essentially different and not reducible or assimilable to one another. This multiplicity is articulated in seven categories, which represent the minimum degree of differentiation the domain of visual beauty seems to require: abstract beauty, artefactual beauty, artistic beauty, natural beauty, physical beauty, moral beauty, and accidental beauty. In the latter part of the paper I outline some dimensions of difference among these different beauties, and weigh rationales for affirming the real divergence among them with respect to the dimensions of difference highlighted.

The next two essays in the volume share a format, which is that of a critical discussion of a single book of major importance for aesthetics. The first of those, *Emotional upheavals*, was written as a contribution to a symposium at the 2004 American Philosophical Association Pacific Division meeting devoted to Nussbaum (2003), a magisterial work on the nature of emotions and their role in the arts, the personal sphere, and the public sphere. The present essay focuses almost exclusively on the basic account of emotions that Nussbaum develops in her book.

Nussbaum's theory, derived from profound study of and meditation on late Stoic writings, is a strong form of cognitivism about the emotions, seeing them as essentially modes of thought, as opposed to feelings, sensations, or bodily disturbances. I expound Nussbaum's theory at some length and then engage with it critically at a number of points, including a musical application of the theory to an orchestral song of Gustav Mahler. Though disagreeing with Nussbaum's strongly cognitivist line on the emotions, my admiration for what she accomplishes in her wide-ranging Nussbaum (2003) remains undiminished.

The second of the critical discussions included here, *Artful intentions*, was a critical notice of Livingston (2005), one of the most important volumes to appear in recent years on the issue of interpretation in art. Livingstone (2005) defends a rather strong intentionalism as regards the ontology and interpretation of works of art, the ground of which is laid by especially careful analyses of what an intention, an author, an oeuvre, and the act of creation consist in. Though in substantial agreement with Livingston on many of the issues he addresses, in the present essay I engage critically with him on

a number of fronts, and attempt in particular to respond to his criticisms of hypothetical intentionalism, the view on artistic interpretation I favor, and which Livingston regards as the chief competitor to his own position.

Defending hypothetical intentionalism defends hypothetical intentionalism, the view of literary and cinematic interpretation I endorse, from some recent criticisms, ones due to Stephen Davies and Robert Stecker. The essay also attempts to make more salient the virtues of hypothetical intentionalism in comparison with competing views, especially that labeled moderate actual intentionalism. The last part of the essay illustrates the appeal of hypothetical intentionalism, which is ultimately a form of *non*-intentionalism about the meaning of artworks, in connection with a film of enigmatic character, François Ozon's 2005 *La piscine*.

Seeing, imaginarily, at the movies is the oldest of the pieces reprinted here. It defends the position that the viewing of a fictional film inevitably involves imaginary seeing. The issue at the heart of the essay is the phenomenology of the experience of an ordinary film viewer wrapped up in what is on screen when viewing a typical fiction film. Many have argued, most notably Kendall Walton, that the experience of such a viewer standardly involves imagining *seeing* the characters portrayed by the actors and the events in which they take part, as opposed to merely recognizing what is represented by the actors or the film images in which they figure. This claim, which we can label the Participation Thesis, has been criticized by Gregory Currie in an essay that offers a number of ostensible difficulties for the Participation Thesis. I try to show that those difficulties are only apparent, and thus that Currie has been too hasty in his dismissal of the Participation Thesis, a thesis that has substantial intuitive appeal.

Sound in film: design versus commentary was written for a symposium in Paris in 2008 organized on the theme of "The Soundtrack". The issue that primarily occupies me is this: what are the different possibilities for assigning a source or responsibility to the sounds that form part of a film, according to the nature of the sounds, the nature of the film, and the nature of the narrative, if any, that is unfolding? This question is not one to which one can respond by citing the film's sound editor, but is rather one of determining, in the course of adequately following a film, what position the sounds heard in the film occupy in relation to the fictional world constituted, in the main, by the film's image track. In the first part of *Sound in film* I explore those

issues in light of an earlier essay of mine, and some important recent writings on film narration by George Wilson. In the second part of *Sound in film* I illustrate those issues through an analysis of the uses of sound in Jean-Luc Godard's 1965 film *Masculin-feminin*.

Bibliography

Levinson, J., *Film music and narrative agency* (1996), in *Contemplating art*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006, pp. 143-83.

Levinson, J., *Hume's standard of taste: the real problem* (2002), in *Contemplating art*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006, pp. 366-85.

Livingston, P., *Art and intention*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005.

Nussbaum, M., *Upheavals of thought*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Beyond minimalism: the specificity of aesthetic experience.

Comments on Jerrold Levinson's *Aesthetic pursuits*

Jérôme Dokic (EHESS)

Most of what I know about aesthetics I owe to Jerrold Levinson, and I still have much to learn from his writings. I see my own research as belonging to philosophy of mind rather than aesthetics, but paradoxically my comments in what follows involve (modest) internal rather than external questions (to use venerable Carnapian terminology) about Levinson's stance in aesthetics, which I am broadly sympathetic with. Moreover, *Aesthetic pursuits* is an incredibly rich volume, and it would be either impossible or tedious to tackle here even the main themes discussed in it. Still, my comments will target a central notion in aesthetics in general and in Levinson's writings in particular, namely that of aesthetic experience. I shall specifically focus on the fourth chapter of the volume, entitled *Toward an adequate conception of aesthetic experience*, which moves beyond Levinson's previous attempts at characterizing the specificity of aesthetic experience.

In this chapter, Levinson criticizes a minimalist conception of aesthetic experience, endorsed by Noël Carroll, and suggests a specific way of fleshing out this conception, building on and modifying a proposal due to Gary Iseminger.

On the minimalist conception, aesthetic experience is simply defined as the perception or cognition of aesthetic properties (for brevity's sake, I omit Levinson's qualification "aesthetic and/or formal properties"). It is a content-based approach, since the specificity of aesthetic experience is explained at the level of its content, i.e., in terms of the aesthetic properties it presents or represents to the subject. Neither the attitude itself which the experience belongs to nor the other mental states the subject might be in are central to whether the experience should count as genuinely aesthetic.

The minimalist conception seems to have (what many of us would see as) an unfortunate consequence, namely that aesthetic experience can be *cold*, i.e., evaluatively and affectively neutral, even when it is supposed to warrant a positive aesthetic judgment. On this conception, as Levinson puts it, aesthetic experience "necessarily involves neither distinctive affect, nor pleasure, nor satisfaction, nor elation, nor absorption, nor appreciation" (Levinson 2016: 32). This consequence appears clearly in Noël Carroll's scenario, in which two subjects are presented as perceiving the very same aesthetic properties of a painting while only one of them (Jerome) properly enjoys the experience. Despite the evaluative and affective differences between the subjects, the minimalist conception entails that they both have an aesthetic experience of the painting.

I agree with Levinson, *pace* Carroll, that only Jerome is having a genuine aesthetic experience. So how should we enrich the minimalist conception in order to account for the relevant difference between the subjects? Modifying an account initially proposed by Iseminger (2005), Levinson favors (what I shall dub here) a metacognitive answer to this question. In a nutshell, what makes Jerome's experience aesthetic is not only his object-level experience, which is directed at the aesthetic properties of the painting and is shared with the other subject, but also his specific evaluative attitude toward this experience. Jerome, in contrast to the other subject, values his object-level experience for its own sake. Jerome's aesthetic experience then comes out as a composite mental state, involving an object-level perception of aesthetic properties and a higher-level, evaluative experience of his perception.

One might worry that as it stands, this proposal runs the risk of severing the connection between the metacognitive evaluation of the subject's object-level perception and what is perceived. In principle one may value an experience independently of its content. For in-

stance, according to an influential account of aesthetic experience in cognitive psychology, processing fluency is inherently pleasurable: it “feels good” (Reber *et al.* 2004, Bulot, Reber 2013). Processing of sensory information can be fluent because of intrinsic features of the perceived object (e.g., its simplicity or its symmetry, which can be processed easily), but also because the subject is familiar with the object, or is used to process it. The (in)famous “mere exposure effect” is precisely that the more we see something, the more we like it (Zajonc 1968). Thus, on the processing fluency account, it is conceivable that two subjects track the same aesthetic (or at least formal) properties of some object, but one of them is doing it more fluently than the other, and so enjoys his experience more than the other. The subjects evaluate their object-level experiences differently on the basis of non-semantic features, i.e., irrespective of their contents. Intuitively, though, we value aesthetic experiences at least partly because of what they are about. The contents of our aesthetic experiences should play a role in our positive evaluation of them. As a consequence, mere feelings of fluency cannot be the whole of our aesthetic experience of the object. As I argued elsewhere (Dokic 2016), they cannot explain by themselves the self-sustaining character of aesthetic experience.

If I am right and we value aesthetic experience at least partly because of what it is about, we should look at ways of dealing with Carroll's scenario that locate the specificity of aesthetic experience at the object level, at which we perceive the aesthetic properties of the object. Consider the following argument, which might be endorsed by some neo-sentimentalist philosophers:

1. at least some aesthetic properties are values.
2. Representing an object as having a particular value is evaluating it.
3. Evaluating an object is essentially an affective experience.
4. Thus, at least some aesthetic experiences have an affective dimension.

Notoriously, the issue of what aesthetic properties are is thorny, but it is usually acknowledged that at least some of them, such as being elegant or being sentimental, are axiological properties, or values. An elegant dance move possesses aesthetic merit, and a sentimental painting possesses aesthetic demerit (Lopes 2005). The second and third premises form the core of the neo-sentimentalist picture: we represent a dance move or a painting as having a (positive or negative) value essentially through our (positive or negative) emotional

response to it. The conclusion of the argument is non-minimalist because it entails that some experiences are both aesthetic and necessarily involve a distinctive evaluative-affective aspect.

There are different ways of exploiting this argument in the context of Carroll's scenario. For instance, one might argue that Jerome and the other subject are perceiving the same aesthetic properties, but that in addition Jerome experiences them *as* aesthetic values, which explains his distinctive emotional profile. Some philosophers have suggested that specific emotions, such as wonder or awe, can be construed as representations of aesthetic values, such as beauty or sublimity. Following this suggestion, only Jerome experiences an aesthetic emotion about the perceived properties of the painting. Another strategy is to deny that the two subjects are tracking the very same aesthetic properties, on the grounds that one cannot track an aesthetic property without representing it as an aesthetic value, which requires having an appropriate emotion. Sensory perception by itself is cold and cannot represent anything as a value. A third strategy is to claim that Jerome, unlike the other subject, is having a hybrid experience, with both perceptual and affective aspects – something like what Prinz (2011) calls “seeing with feeling”. If, as Dominic Lopes has argued, “aesthetic evaluation sometimes amounts to seeing value” (Lopes 2005: 106), then, according to the neo-sentimentalist argument, some visual experiences must be *hot*, i.e., affect-laden.

Whatever its details, the bulk of the argument is that the specificity of aesthetic experience should be located at the level of the subject's experience of aesthetic properties, rather than at the level of his metacognitive evaluation of that experience. Now although Levinson essentially follows Iseminger's metacognitive diagnosis of Carroll's scenario, his final formulation of his own non-minimalist conception is in fact more liberal:

Aesthetic experience is experience involving aesthetic perception of some object, grounded in aesthetic attention to the object, and in which there is a positive hedonic, affective, or evaluative response to the perception itself or the content of that perception. (Levinson 2016: 39, italics removed)

Note the disjunction: “to the perception itself *or* the content of that perception”. If having a positive hedonic, affective or evaluative response to an aesthetic property *is* the royal road to representing it as an aesthetic value, then the proposal is that the specificity of aes-

thetic experience can be explained at the object level after all, namely in the form of a specific emotion (such as wonder or awe).

Levinson makes clear from the outset that he wishes to respect the intuition that aesthetic experience is “rewarding, valuable, or worthwhile” (Levinson 2016: 31). A legitimate worry is that an approach which is entirely focused on the object level does nothing to explain the worthiness of aesthetic experience, or why we value such experience in a specific way. After all, one needs a substantial argument to show that the experience of a valuable object is necessarily itself valuable. So perhaps in the end we need both the object and the metacognitive levels to deal with any particular case of (positive) aesthetic experience, which is both about some aesthetic value and itself valuable. Still, it might be that the metacognitive explanation derives from, or is based on, the object-level explanation. Again, it is intuitively the case that we value aesthetic experiences at least in part because of their contents. It does not follow that we value aesthetic experiences only because of their *aesthetic* contents, i.e., because of the aesthetic properties that they are about. For instance, aesthetic experience might involve various kinds of “aha” experiences, which are intrinsically pleasurable. Such experiences have more to do with epistemic properties than with aesthetic values, but they can contribute to the generation of a complex and dynamic aesthetic experience. Here too, the explanation of why we value the overall experience is connected with what it is about, namely an interplay of familiar and novel aspects, even if the relevant aesthetic properties are not reducible to such epistemic properties (see Dokic 2016).

In a nutshell, Levinson's two-tiered approach to aesthetic experience is surely on the right track, even though we want to know more about the articulation between the two tiers, and the contribution of the first tier to the question of why we value aesthetic experience the way we usually do.

Bibliography

Bullot, N.J., Reber, R, *The artful mind meets art history. Toward a psycho-historical framework for the science of art appreciation*, “Behavioral and Brain Sciences”, n. 36/ (2013), pp. 123-37.

Dokic, J., *Aesthetic experience as a metacognitive feeling? A dual-aspect view*, “Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society”, n. 116/ (2016), pp. 69-88.

Iseminger, G., *The aesthetic state of mind*, in M. Kieran (ed.), *Contemporary debates in aesthetics and the philosophy of art*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2005.

Levinson, J., *Aesthetic pursuits. Essays in philosophy of art*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016.

Lopes, D., *Sight and sensibility. Evaluating pictures*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2005.

Prinz, J., *Seeing with feeling*, in G. Currie, M. Kieran, A. Meskin, J. Robson (eds.), *Aesthetics and the sciences of mind*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. 143-58.

Reber, R., Schwarz, N., Winkielman, P., *Processing fluency and aesthetic pleasure. Is beauty in the perceiver's processing experience?*, "Personality and Social Psychology Review", n. 8 (2004), 364-82.

Zajonc, R.B., *Attitudinal effects of mere exposure*, "Journal of Personality and Social Psychology", monograph supplement, n. 9 (1968), 1-27.

The prospects of a maximalist account of aesthetic experience

John Gibson (University of Louisville)

Smart and immensely readable, *Aesthetic pursuits* collects much of Levinson's best recent work. It is particularly strong on the nature of aesthetic experience, and this is what I shall focus on here. I am interested in Levinson's critique of "minimalist" accounts of the notion of aesthetic experience and, especially, the more venturesome theory he urges as a corrective. Apart from highlighting what makes Levinson's view attractive, I want to pose an improbable question and ask whether his theory might offer one way of making it seem worthy of consideration. It concerns the possibility of an altogether maximalist account of aesthetic experience, and it asks whether the affective component of aesthetic experience might make possible a certain perceptual relationship to an artwork. Roughly, might we need to *feel* a certain (aesthetically-relevant) way about a work if we are so much as to be able to *see* it as fully possessed of an aesthetic dimension? Absent any feeling, might there be something in a work of art – something essential to its status as an aesthetic object – to which we have no perceptual or cognitive access? I said that the question was improbable. Let's see whether it can be intelligibly posed.

First things first, what is aesthetic minimalism? The minimalist urges that we explain the notion of aesthetic experience in terms of

fairly open-access notion of aesthetic attention: the perceptual act of registering an object's "formal and aesthetic properties and the inter-relations among them" (Levinson 2016: 33). In this respect, minimalism denies that the concept of the aesthetic bears an internal or necessary link to the idea of a particular kind of (worthwhile, positive, inherently valuable, etc.) *affective* or *hedonic* response to an object. The minimalist collapses the notion of aesthetic experience into that of aesthetic regard, contrary to the long-standing tradition of casting the former as productive of the latter. What gives minimalism the air of right-mindedness is its ability to make the aesthetic dimension of art and life fully available to nearly anyone capable of attending to the distinctly artistic features of an object, critics, presumably, included. Think of the minimalist as endorsing the following position: the notion of a *valuable and affectively-charged* response plays an eliminable role in our account of aesthetic experience. To appreciate a work of art, to be said to fully grasp its aesthetic properties and hence aesthetic significance, one need not feel anything about it. The minimalist's move has the apparent virtue of explaining the aesthetic in terms of the content of the object of scrutiny rather than the quality of the experience it provokes, and it thus seems to be more hospitable to the objective aspirations of criticism. It also appears to do right by the intuition that what we should be talking about when we talk about art is the work itself and not the tingles and joys it prompts in us, the subjectivism of which can at times seem both vulgar and theoretically unnecessary.

The directness and sheer obviousness of Levinson's response to aesthetic minimalism is refreshing. Shorn of a commitment to the *felt* registering of the worthwhileness of an experience, we have an experience but hardly an aesthetic experience. Emptied of the idea that what we see before us produces a distinctive kind of pleasure and apprehension of value, we have a perception but not a fully aesthetic mode of seeing and understanding: we leave unmentioned any form of affective and cognitive investment in an object that might stand a chance of explaining why we so much as care to seek out the aesthetic dimensions of art and life. For Levinson, these retorts register "something of a grammatical fact" (Levinson 2016: 32) and show that minimalist arguments are guilty of the sin of ambiguity: to wit, failing to understand the particular thing that is meant by the term "experience" in characteristic uses of the phrase "aesthetic experience". He thus revives what the minimalist tries put to rest: the idea that an

aesthetic experience, properly so-called, requires a serviceable notion of the kind of valuing that is given expression in a hedonic/affective response to an artwork. Levinson defines valuing as a form of “*endorsed satisfaction*” (Levinson 2016: 37, all italics in quotations are Levinson’s). This is effectively an implicit expression of *affirmation* of the experience an artwork produces, just on account of the character and quality of the experience itself. In his words

Aesthetic experience is experience involving aesthetic perception of some object, grounded in aesthetic attention to the object, and in which there is a positive hedonic, affect, or evaluative response to the perception itself or the content of that perception. (Levinson 2016: 39)

Note immediately that this does not imply a narrow and sterilized view of the aesthetic, as though works with intensely critical, tragic, discomfiting, or wholly disgusting interests are incapable of aesthetic enfranchisement. What is paramount here is the question of whether we *endorse* the experience in a particular manner, and this rules out very little in respect to the range of objects, emotions, and responses that are permitted entry into the aesthetic realm, standards of reasonableness notwithstanding. It is a surprisingly open, and modern, articulation of a traditional account of the nature of aesthetic experience.

To motivate my improbable question, first consider that by the lights of Levinson’s theory the following is the case: through a certain form of aesthetic attention to an object, the spectator, in ideal conditions, grasps its aesthetic import and so comes to experience a distinctive kind of pleasure in response to it. Aesthetic experience, in this sense, is the culmination of successful acts of aesthetic attention. If this is so, the minimalist can concede that Levinson has offered a compelling account of the nature of aesthetic experience but complain that all the critically-relevant action happens at the beginning of the process, in the moment of scrutiny. The minimalist can thus charge that aesthetic appreciation can be explained entirely in terms of the notion of aesthetic attention (excluding the matter of why the aesthetic matters to us. Levinson wins this debate). In acts of aesthetic appreciation, regardless of whether they culminate in a proper aesthetic experience, one is granted access to the full array of aesthetic and artistic properties an object bears, and one is in a position to communicate their significance. Or so this picture would suggest. As

such, the minimalist can reframe her position and claim that, even if we grant that aesthetic experience is more or less what Levinson says it is, the notion does little work in helping us make sense of what it means to understand an aesthetic object and to be in a position to share this understanding. It does very little theoretical work, and it fails to add much to our understanding of the nature and demands of appreciation, interpretation, and criticism. Perhaps Levinson is happy to accept this. But those who are dissatisfied with minimalism might reasonably desire the notion of aesthetic experience to do more work, not merely function as the prize at the end of an aesthetic encounter but as an experience that is *productive* of certain kinds of understanding such that a case can be made that aesthetic experience *registers information* about an object, information that cannot be got in any other way.

How might we approach such a line of thought? I confess I'm not sure, though I am confident that the search is righteous. As a suggestion, we might begin by asking how it is that we come to experience an object as fully enriched with aesthetic meaning, with "meaning" taken to indicate that aesthetic predicates can be rightly (or wrongly) applied to a work because they convey information about the aesthetic import or "sense" of the work's properties. We might then consider that aesthetic properties are commonly thought to be dependent upon – "emerge" from – the non-aesthetic properties of a work. One way of thinking about this is to claim that the aesthetic features of a work are declared through its "mode of presentation" of its non-aesthetic properties. A volta in a sonnet is executed *elegantly*, a diminished 7th arpeggio is played *gracefully*, a painting's blurred figures and subdued colors are *wistfully* represented, and so forth. In short, the objectively present material of an artwork (the words and meter that compose a volta, etc.) comes to be grasped as imbued with an aesthetic valence and thus as enriched with aesthetic meaning. One can be a radical subjectivist or sensible realist in one's handling of aesthetic properties, but, since Frank Sibley, many scholars will agree that these properties are response-dependent and that the relevant response will have, as they do for Levinson, an essentially *af-fective* dimension: it is the business of aesthetic properties to prompt, or to be disposed to prompt, pleasure. There are many ways of construing "pleasure" but it is at least a felt registering of value in the mode in which a work presents its content. Levinson's theory captures this element especially well.

This opens up the possibility of lodging the claim that *experiencing* a work as fully enriched with aesthetic meaning is evidently inseparable from *feeling* something about its handling of its content. This makes it attractive to pursue the further line of thought that one cannot fully grasp or even “perceive” a work’s aesthetic dimension, if there is such, when one is wholly unmoved by the manner in which it presents its non-aesthetic properties. If this is so, it indicates a strategy for arguing that a work which fails to prompt characteristic forms of affective/perceptual immersion will be experienced as *without an aesthetic dimension*. Affective impassivity doesn’t merely block us from experiencing a work’s potential aesthetic significance; its presence implies that there is none to be experienced. We are often wrong in thinking this about a work, but appreciation emptied of affect and pleasure implies a certain stance towards its object, and that stance appears to cast the object without a properly aesthetic dimension, given a certain picture of what the aesthetic is. The response-dependence of aesthetic properties, coupled with the absence of pleasure and immersion characteristic of the aesthetic, suggest that for the cold, objective, and unmoved spectator an artwork will suffer from a chronic failure of aesthetic enrichment. Or so it will be experienced. As such, it is unclear that the affectless spectator, the viewer who experiences none of the characteristically aesthetic forms of pleasure and engrossment, has fully seen, understood, or *experienced* aspects of a work that would seem utterly essential to its status as a work of art.

This strategy for a maximalist account of the aesthetic raises many questions. It apparently commits one to the view that there should be an appreciable difference between what the aesthete and the affectless critic can say about a work, and showing this would be a considerable undertaking. And lest it be unable to tell a convincing causal story of what aesthetic experience allows us to see that mere aesthetic attention does not, it would also oblige us to think of the affective and hedonic aspects of aesthetic experience not as a *consequence* of successful acts of attention but as dispersed throughout the various stages of the aesthetic encounter itself. Perhaps these challenges can be met, and it is to Levinson’s credit that he makes one long for more maximalist account of the aesthetic and its indispensability to our understanding of art. His work on the topic is still among the very best in the field, and it is impossible to read *Aesthetic*

pursuits without succumbing to the urge to join it in making bold claims.

Responses

Jerrold Levinson

It was a pleasure to receive a commentary on my essay concerning aesthetic experience as constructive as that of John Gibson, all the more so as it deepens the discussion by outlining the possibility of a more maximalist conception of such experience as a counter to the minimalist conception to which we are both opposed. I am completely in accord with the far-from-improbable question that Gibson formulates as follows, and to which he returns a positive answer: "Might we need to *feel* a certain way about a work if we are so much as able to *see* it as fully possessed of an aesthetic dimension?"

In an early essay of mine (Levinson 1982) I posed more or the less the same question in connection with the expressive predications we make of music:

We are saddened, in part, by perception of a quality in a musical passage that we construe as sadness, but we in part denominate that quality 'sadness' in virtue of being saddened by the music or sensing its capacity to sadden us under somewhat different conditions. Recognizing emotion in music and experiencing emotion from music may not be as separable in principle as one might have liked. If this is so, then the suggestion that in aesthetic appreciation of music we simply cognize emotional attributes without feeling anything corresponding to them may be conceptually problematic as well as empirically incredible.

The broader issue at stake, highlighted by Gibson's discussion, is one I explored further in a subsequent essay (Levinson 2005). It is whether we can make aesthetic judgments of objects, wherein we grasp their aesthetic properties, in the absence of which we cannot be said to have aesthetic *experience* of them, without having any sort of affective *response* to such objects. Naturally, much depends on what analysis of aesthetic properties one adopts, and in particular whether, and in precisely what fashion, such properties are *response-dependent*. But if they are response-dependent to any appreciable

degree, then a sharp separation between purely perceiving and emotionally responding to such properties is likely unsustainable.

Finally, the minimalist in effect claims that aesthetic *attention* to a work's formal and aesthetic properties is enough by itself to ensure aesthetic *experience*. But the reply to this, as Gibson notes, is that it is unclear that such attention amounts even to aesthetic *perception* of at least some of those properties if there is no affective engagement with the work in question.

What one might thus call the *intertwining* of aesthetic perception and affective response in regard to a work of art is also, it seems, something with which Jérôme Dokic agrees, in his very searching examination of the same essay from *Aesthetic pursuits*. But Dokic is inclined to push acknowledgment of that intertwining in a direction that runs counter to the two-level analysis of aesthetic experience that I proposed, suggesting that the specificity of aesthetic experience might, as Carroll claimed, lie *entirely* on the level of content, if it is recognized that some such content is inherently *evaluative*, and that, more specifically, some aesthetic properties are, as such, *values*, having an intrinsic positive or negative valence.

I confess I am not entirely comfortable with the idea, which Dokic seems happy to embrace, of values as something on the order of *things*¹. I am also skeptical whether *any* aesthetic properties, even ones such as elegance and grace, should be understood as intrinsically and univocally valenced (see Levinson 2001). Dokic admits, moreover, toward the end of his commentary, that even if we conceive the object-level of aesthetic experience as comprising *values* as well as higher-order non-evaluative perceptual *properties*, experience of the latter may be something that we *value* – perhaps *because* of our emotional response or affective reaction to such properties, which as noted earlier may even be required for registering them – in which case the metacognitive level posited in my analysis would not be otiose. Note also that even if registering certain aesthetic properties requires *some* measure of affective response, that does not preclude a more *global* emotional or evaluative response to an object and the ensemble of aesthetic properties it is perceived to possess, which

¹ An idea that seems especially popular with Swiss philosophers. See, for instance, Tappolet 2000.

more global response might plausibly be held necessary for full-fledged aesthetic experience.

Finally, if we look at the readings of Carroll's scenario sketched by Dokic that putatively "locate the specificity of aesthetic experience at the object level", we will find some reason to doubt that they locate that specificity entirely at that level. One reading involves a subject having an *emotion* to an object's aesthetic property, in virtue of which it is represented as an aesthetic value, while another reading involves a subject seeing the object *with feeling*. I do not claim that those readings *must* be understood as implying the two-level analysis of aesthetic experience I have offered, but they *can* be understood as compatible with it, that is, as implying perception of an object's aesthetic and other properties plus an affective or evaluative response to that perception or those properties.

It remains only to thank my commentators for their insightful and challenging commentaries, ones focused on one of the more substantial essays contained in *Aesthetic pursuits*. As it happens, my ideas on aesthetic properties and aesthetic experiences remain in flux, and those commentaries will surely prove useful to me as I revisit those issues in a paper-in-progress entitled *Aesthetic properties through thick and thin*².

Bibliography

Levinson, J., *Music and negative emotion* (1982), reprinted in *Music, art, and metaphysics*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1990, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010.

Levinson, J., *Aesthetic properties, evaluative force, and differences of sensibility* (2001), in *Contemplating art*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006, pp. 315-35.

Levinson, J., *What are aesthetic properties?* (2005), in *Contemplating art*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006, pp. 336-51.

Tappolet, C., *Emotion et valeurs*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2000.

© 2019 The Authors. Open Access published under the terms of the CC-BY-4.0.

² A version of which was presented at a conference on thick aesthetic concepts at the University of Heidelberg in October 2018.