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Value First: Comments on Mohan Matthen's 'The Pleasure of Art'

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ABSTRACT

While I welcome Mohan Matthen's insistence that art is connected to aesthetic pleasure, I worry about his commitment to viewing pleasure as prior to, and constitutive of, the value of art. I raise my reservations by (i) dispelling his criticism of the reversed explanatory direction, and (ii) showing problems for his commitment. As an alternative, I offer an account of pleasure that explains it in terms of the independent value of art—an account that is free of the problems Matthen raises against this explanatory approach.

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1. A Welcome Link: Response to a Standard Objection

During the past century, the idea that art is necessarily connected to pleasure has faced great opposition. I welcome Mohan Matthen's insistence on the link, and in this first section augment his defence of the idea by sketching a response to a standard objection. In the remaining sections I raise concerns about the specific way Matthen articulates the connection between art and pleasure.

The most common objection to the link between art and pleasure is based on a narrow conception of pleasure. On this conception, all pleasure, including aesthetic pleasure, is passive and merely sensory like a feeling of elation or a thrill. But, it is argued, the experience of art is active, complex, and not merely sensory. Hence, the objector concludes, there is no reason to think that art is connected to pleasure. But Matthen—like Aristotle, Kant, and others before him—gives us good reasons to reject that conception of aesthetic pleasure, and accordingly to resist that conclusion. His challenge is grounded in a distinction between 'r-pleasures', which are largely passive, and 'f-pleasures', which are complex and often 'cognitively demanding' [8]. For Matthen, aesthetic pleasure is an instance of the latter. As he emphasizes, aesthetic pleasure involves *understanding*, and has an active, 'intellectual' [13], and not merely sensory nature. This way of thinking about the pleasure in art is supported by its phenomenology. For example, taking aesthetic pleasure in Henry James's *The Ambassadors* requires that we attend to the structure of its sentences, appreciate how loaded they are, unpack their meaning, and

recognize the complexity of the characters and the plot line through the characters' choice of words and tone of voice. To enjoy the novel fully, one might need to be familiar with some of James's other writings, appreciate their similarities and differences, and consider *The Ambassadors*' relation to comparable novels in the relevant canon. Aesthetic pleasure is not a passive sensation, but either itself a form of appreciation and recognition of aspects of the work, or closely related to appreciation and recognition through a certain nexus. And so, the active and complex nature of the experience of art provides no reason to deny the link between art and pleasure.

Those who oppose the necessary association between art and pleasure may persist by arguing that, rather than pleasure, engagement with some great artworks involves much pain. But this too is based on a narrow conception of pleasure. Matthen's account of the 'f-nexus' connected to aesthetic pleasure helps to explain how the experience of certain artworks in which we take aesthetic pleasure can involve pain. For him, aesthetic pleasure facilitates and reinforces costly, difficult, and even painful engagement with works because it is both rewarding and cognitive. Additionally, because it is highly plausible that some artworks, predominantly tragedies, are great partly *because* they are painful, it is also plausible that the same works can and should be found aesthetically pleasing partly *because* they are so painful. For example, Michael Haneke's *Amour* is worthy of aesthetic pleasure in part because it is disturbing to watch. Painful art, then, is no reason to deny either the connection between pleasure and art that Matthen elaborates on or the view that the evaluation of a work is constituted by aesthetic pleasure.

2. A Caveat: Pleasure and Value

While I welcome the link between art and pleasure, I have reservations about the *direction* of Matthen's *explanation* of aesthetic pleasure and the *value* of art. My worries concern Matthen's suggestion that pleasure is prior to, and in some sense constitutive of, the value of art: that art is valuable *because* it is pleasurable.

Before I expand on these reservations, let me dispel a possible objection against my wish to examine his take on the link between pleasure and *value*. One may worry that introducing value is unfair to Matthen since he professes 'not to propound any aesthetic norms ... nor even try to show why we should value art' [26]. But the paper does commit him to the view that the value of art is explained by, and is grounded in, the experience of aesthetic pleasure that it gives rise to. Matthen warns against trying 'to explain pleasure in terms of the independently existing aesthetic merit of its object... . It runs in the wrong direction' [14]. He also claims that 'we judge objects to have aesthetic merit when they are a good fit for our psychological attitudes' [15; cf. 20]. On his view then, the judgment of aesthetic value is based on the fitness of objects to arouse aesthetic pleasure. Works have aesthetic value *in virtue of* the aesthetic pleasure that engagement with them arouses.

Like Cynthia Freeland [2.3: 32–33], I wonder if Matthen can consistently hold on to this view, which appears to contradict some of his other contentions. For example, how can Matthen avoid reducing 'aesthetic norms to psychological attitudes' [fn. 5] as he wishes, if he is committed to the view that aesthetic merit is explained by a work's fittingness to arouse these attitudes [15]? He also claims

that ‘perception of *value* may increase my pleasure’ [10]. This seems to suggest that the ‘degree’ of pleasure can depend on value, rather than the other way around. But this is incompatible with Matthen’s view that ‘correct’ engagement with a work is the one that produces a maximal degree of aesthetic pleasure [20].

3. Dispelling the Criticism of the Reversed Explanatory Direction: ‘Value-First’

3.1 Informative About Pleasure

My main reservations about Matthen’s view that art is valuable *because* it is pleasurable are more systematic than those just mentioned. I raise them by focusing on his criticism of the reversed explanatory direction—the explanation of aesthetic pleasure *by* the independent features that make a work aesthetically valuable. I will argue that such a reversed explanatory strategy is free of the flaws that Matthen attributes to it, and that it is to be preferred to his own explanation.

Matthen describes this strategy as follows:

This ultra-Platonic stance subordinates subjective evaluation to objective value; ... it runs in the wrong direction. Saying that you like something because it is good *rationalizes* your mental attitude. But it offers nothing informative about the mental process by which you came to your evaluation. [14]

By way of a counter-example, consider the following ‘value-first’ but ‘informative’ proposal: On a certain value-first view, when one feels aesthetic pleasure it is *through* this pleasure that one *perceives* the work and *approves* of it as valuable—one *enjoys* the work *as valuable*. On this account, the value of a work does not lie in the pleasure it gives, but in the aspects that make it *worthy* of pleasure—for example in its fine acting, powerful plot, and beautiful compositions. Properly evaluating a work requires that one be responsive to what the work *merits*. But this means, on the proposed view, that properly engaging with and evaluating a work requires among other things that one feel pleasure in it, since, as Kant put it, the value of art ‘has a claim to everyone’s satisfaction’ [1790, 5:282]. This is neither motivational hedonism (the view that we are interested in art because it gives us pleasure) nor value-hedonism, also known as value empiricism (the view that art is valuable because experiencing it is pleasurable [cf. Shelley 2010]). *If* it were any kind of hedonism, this would be a constitutive or formal hedonism—the view that the evaluative experience of art, indeed its evaluation, necessarily involves pleasure. I take it that this accords with Kant’s claim: ‘Taste is the faculty for judging an object or a kind of representation through a satisfaction or dissatisfaction’ [1790, 5:211]. Call this a hedonic view of *valuing* or *evaluation*, but *not* of value.

Such an account implies a good deal about aesthetic pleasure: proper aesthetic pleasure is a feeling that reveals the work to be valuable in the way it actually *is*. This pleasure is not only object-directed—that is, not merely revelatory of the value of the work—but also self-directed. It includes an awareness of *itself* as responsive to its object’s value. Accordingly, as Matthen also maintains, aesthetic pleasure involves a cognitive dimension and intentionality. Such an account can without contradiction add that aesthetic pleasure involves attention, both to features of content and to features of form—or, using Matthen’s helpful terminology, that it is connected to a nexus of

learning and refinement. For example, since reading *The Ambassadors* is demanding or even difficult, to properly enjoy it is very likely to enjoy *what makes it a great novel*: its style, the composition of its sentences, its complexity, and its beauty, to name just some of its valuable features. In and through its enjoyment, we become more attentive to these aspects. And the more attentive we are, the better we understand its beauty and power; and it is through this understanding that we come to enjoy it better. Aesthetic pleasure is thus an attentive and intelligent appreciation of value. Accordingly, an account of aesthetic pleasure can explain *both* its nature and its rational responsiveness to the (independent) value of art.

3.2 Not Beset by Idealism

While Matthen explicitly charges the strategy underlying the value-first account only with an inability to be *informative* about pleasure, his description of it as an ‘ultra-Platonic stance’ evinces metaphysical worries.

But holding that the value of art is independent of pleasure means only that whether a work is valuable does not depend on whether it, or the activity of engaging with it, gives (or is capable of giving) pleasure. It does not entail that the value of art resides in any idealistic realm, or in any kind of absolute reality. In fact, this account is compatible not only with the view that art, to paraphrase Susan Wolf, is a *human* activity that does not exist in the absence of human life, but also with the view that the products of this activity would have nothing recognizable as value if there were no human subjects capable of appreciating them [cf. Wolf 2015: 77]. A view about the independence of art’s value from pleasure need not entail *any* metaphysical commitments, let alone Platonic commitments. An advantage of this account is that it fits the phenomenology of our experience of art: it fits the ordinary belief that value resides in the artworks one encounters and is available to be experienced [cf. McDowell, 1998: 112]. No Platonic ideas lurk in the vicinity.

4. Problems for Matthen’s Account

Matthen criticizes the view that aesthetic pleasure is a response to an independent value as merely ‘rationalizing’ our mental processes [14]. By that he means to say that this strategy offers a merely retrospective rationalization of aesthetic pleasure. But there is a different sense of ‘rationalization’ that distinguishes the value-first view from his. On Matthen’s account, aesthetic pleasure is ‘rational’ in so far as it is ‘cognitively demanding’ and linked to a nexus of learning. But the reversed explanatory strategy, which takes pleasure to be a response to an independent value, regards it as rational *also* in so far as it both reveals the work to be valuable and is responsive to the work as that which merits pleasure. Aesthetic pleasure is a response to value, and therefore *reasons* for a pleasing evaluation.

An account that endorses this other kind of ‘rationalizing’ is preferable to Matthen’s grounding of the value of art in aesthetic pleasure for the following reasons.

First, if we account for value in terms of *its* being a ‘good fit for our aesthetic psychology’, it would be very hard to explain why, say, *The Ambassadors* is more valuable than *The Da Vinci Code*, assuming that Matthen would accept this explanandum. After all, pleasure in Dan Brown’s best-seller is more pervasive, as it is shared by more people, and arguably more intense. If value is a matter of the pleasure generated by

engaging with a work, how can we assign greater value to *The Ambassadors*? Matthen probably thinks that contemplating it is more valuable than contemplating *The Da Vinci Code*. But given that the pleasure in the latter is—in the straightforward way just explained—‘greater’ than the pleasure in *The Ambassadors*, he cannot account for such a difference between the two contemplative experiences.

Second, Kant convincingly argues that aesthetic pleasure is not private but universal: *normatively* universal. For example, while I lack legitimate grounds to settle our disagreement about whether eating oatmeal for breakfast is pleasurable, I can and should seek agreement about the pleasure to be had from beholding Gustave Caillebotte’s *The Floor Scrapers*. As many today accept, one can *legitimately* pursue agreement in this case because aesthetic disagreement entails that one of us is at *fault*: one of us is *wrong*. Aesthetic agreement and aesthetic universality are a matter of *correctness*. The best and simplest explanation of this correctness appeals to whether or not each of us is properly responsive to the value of the work.

Now, I do not mean to suggest that Matthen is unable *in principle* to explain aesthetic correctness. He claims that ‘the “correct” way of engaging with art is the way that is maximally productive of pleasure *provided that this does not contradict fact*’ [20; emphasis in original]. But I worry that the notion of ‘fact’ at stake here is insufficient for the kind of correctness ordinarily required for resolving evaluative disagreements (cf. Freeland [36]).

The facts Matthen seems to have in mind are ‘plain facts’—facts about whether or not *Pride and Prejudice* is *about* zombies, to use his example. But most familiar disagreements, even those that seem most straightforward, cannot be resolved by an appeal to facts of this kind. Say we disagree about *Pride and Prejudice*. We both enjoy it, but I enjoy its perceptiveness, wit, complex characters, and beautiful sentences. You, by contrast, enjoy how it calls to mind your daughter’s good qualities. In this case, one of us is wrong even if *neither evaluation contradicts the ‘plain facts’*; even if Elizabeth Bennett does resemble your daughter in the relevant respects. Matthen’s explanation falls short here. Appeals to experiences that maximize pleasure, and to *plain* rather than *value-laden* facts about the work, explain such normative failures inelegantly at best. At worst, Matthen’s strategy cannot account for correctness at all. *Valuable* features of a work—those that constitute its value independently of whether they yield pleasure—provide simpler and more successful explanations. On this ‘value-first’ view, one of us readers is wrong because one of us fails to track and to be responsive to features that in fact make *Pride and Prejudice* valuable, full stop. Aesthetic pleasure, on my view, neither explains nor grounds aesthetic *value* even though it does constitute aesthetic *evaluation*.

Finally, note that the alternative proposal outlined here neither denies that pleasure is an affective state nor asserts that it is produced ‘at will’. Like other affective attitudes such as care and love, and not unlike belief, aesthetic pleasure is not produced at will. Nonetheless, like these other attitudes, it *does* involve a crucial dimension of activity, normativity, responsiveness to reasons, and therefore some form of rational agency [Gorodeisky [forthcoming](#)]. Regarding aesthetic pleasure as *explained by* value, rather than as *explaining* value, is just what we need.

My disagreement with Matthen about the direction of explanation notwithstanding, I thank him for a rich and thought-provoking paper, and for unflinchingly drawing the connection that many like to oppose: the link between art and pleasure.



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