

Spatially-Rotated Paintings: A Reply to Markosian's "Sideways Music"

Shen-yi Liao

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In "Sideways Music", Ned Markosian uses aesthetic intuitions about temporally-rotated music to argue that the metaphysics of time is different from the metaphysics of space. In response, I use aesthetic intuitions about spatially-rotated paintings to pose a dilemma for Markosian's argument: either he accepts the intuitions about spatially-rotated paintings, in which case he must give up on some assumptions in his argument, or he rejects intuitions about spatially-rotated paintings, in which case an analogous response can be given regarding intuitions about temporally-rotated music. That is, *if* Markosian wants to hold on to the assumptions that underwrite his argument, *then* he thereby offers his opponent the resources with which to resist his conclusion. As such, Markosian's argument cannot offer a new independent consideration for adjudicating the metaphysical debate between the Dynamic Theorist and the Spacetime Theorist.

1. From Aesthetics to Metaphysics

Ned Markosian (forthcoming) starts with the following aesthetic intuition:

Difference of Aesthetic Value. Spatial rotation preserves aesthetic value, but temporal rotation does not. For example, a painting turned spatially sideways has the same aesthetic value as before, but a song turned temporally sideways—such that all the notes are playing at once—does not.¹

With the help of a few assumptions—we will get to those very shortly—Markosian then argues for a metaphysical thesis:

Difference of Space and Time. The temporal dimension is intrinsically different from the spatial dimensions.

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¹ "Here is a notable fact about aesthetic value: If we rotate the painting 90 degrees, so that it is hanging sideways on the wall, its aesthetic value will be unaffected. [...] Whereas the original series of events [of Nina Simone playing seven distinct notes] had some considerable positive aesthetic value (for it was a passage from an especially good performance of a beautiful piece of music), the resulting series of events has either no aesthetic value or, more likely, negative aesthetic value (since it is a cacophony of sound consisting of seven notes all occurring at once)." (Markosian forthcoming: 3–4).

Following Markosian's terminology for the respective metaphysical positions, the Dynamic Theorist endorses *Difference of Space and Time* and the Spacetime Theorist rejects it. Markosian's argument from aesthetics to metaphysics promises to add a new consideration to the longstanding metaphysical debate about the metaphysics of time (and space) in favor of the A-theory, in favor of endurantism, and so on. Moreover, it promises to reveal a surprising link between aesthetics and metaphysics.

2. The Critical Assumptions

To make this argument, Markosian makes quite a few assumptions in just a few passages.² Markosian groups the first three of them under the umbrella of "aesthetic realism", but since that term receives rather different uses, it is preferable to separate out three individual components: Existence, Intrinsicity, and Mind-Independence. Of the other two, one is a general metaphysical assumption, Rotation, and another is a general epistemological assumption about our access to aesthetic value, Judgment.

- *Existence*. Aesthetic value exists.
- *Intrinsicity*. Aesthetic value is intrinsic to whatever that possesses it.
- *Mind-Independence*. Aesthetic value is independent of actual or possible minds, and any construct dependent on actual or possible minds (see, especially, footnote 6).
- *Rotation*. Intrinsic features are unchanged by rotation along "perfectly similar dimensions" (3).
- *Judgment*. We, creatures with the perceptual psychology that we actually have, are "sometimes correct (and justified) in our judgments about aesthetic values" (2).

As we will see, the three most critical assumptions in Markosian's argument turn out to be *Intrinsicity*, *Mind-Independence*, and *Rotation*. To be clear, I will not seek to unconditionally reject any of these assumptions. Instead, my aim is to clarify the role of these assumptions in Markosian's argument.

To preview, I will use aesthetic intuitions about spatially-rotated paintings to pose a dilemma for Markosian's argument: either he accepts the intuitions about spatially-rotated paintings, in which case he must give up on these critical assumptions in his argument, or he rejects intuitions about spatially-rotated paintings, in which case an analogous response can be given regarding intuitions about temporally-rotated music—using these same critical assumptions. That is, *if* Markosian wants to hold on to the assumptions that underwrite his argument, *then* he thereby offers his opponent the resources with which to resist his conclusion.

² "I assume that there is such a thing as *aesthetic value* (both positive and negative), that it is an intrinsic feature of whatever possesses it, and that it contributes to the overall intrinsic value of the world. [...] I take it that the facts about aesthetic value are objective and mind-independent facts [...] the value of a beautiful object is an intrinsic property of the object itself, and does not depend on the object's being appreciated by some sentient being. Nor does it depend on the object's disposition to produce a particular kind of aesthetic experience in a sentient being. Finally, I also assume that we are at least sometimes correct (and justified) in our judgments about aesthetic values. [...] These facts follow from the more general fact that, when an object is located in an n-dimensional space consisting of perfectly similar dimensions (like our three-dimensional physical space), changing the orientation of the object in that space does not change the object's intrinsic features." (Markosian forthcoming: 2–3).

3. Spatial Rotation, Revisited

Is it true, as Markosian claims, that spatial rotation preserves aesthetic value? I am not so sure. Consider two cases, one from the artworld and another as a hypothetical.

Inverted Paintings. The painter Georg Baselitz is known for his “inverted paintings”, in which subjects are upside-down, or rotated 180 degrees, relative to the viewer. From their verbal and behavioral responses, it seems that Baselitz and the rest of the artworld think that there is something different between these paintings and their (hypothetical) non-inverted counterparts. If they are correct in their judgments, then it seems that—like temporally rotating a song—spatially rotating a painting does change its aesthetic value.

Backwards Paintings. Markosian illustrates the idea of sideways painting by rotating along x- and y-axes (see his Figure 1). But we can also rotate along x- and z-axes. For example, consider a painting that is rotated 180 degrees so that its back is shown to the viewer. In the case of his original sideways painting, Markosian says that “It might be harder for us to appreciate the value of the painting after it has been rotated in this way, but this problem could be easily overcome by changing our own orientation in space” (3). However, in the case of the backwards painting, it is not obvious that the analogous problem could be similarly easily overcome. The viewer needs to do more than changing their orientation in space, since the wall would still be blocking their view even if they went to the other side. Instead, it seems that they need to have a different perceptual psychology, one that allows them to see through the wall. If that is correct, then it seems again that—like temporally rotating a song—spatially rotating a painting does change its aesthetic value.

These cases present a *prima facie* challenge to *Difference of Aesthetic Value*, the aesthetic intuition that is supposed to constitute a new independent consideration in favor of the metaphysical thesis *Difference of Space and Time*. There is a response available to the Dynamic Theorist, which makes use of Markosian’s critical assumptions. But in showing how these assumptions can be used to resist my argument from spatially-rotated paintings, the Dynamic Theorist inadvertently also shows the Spacetime Theorist how to use the same assumptions to resist Markosian’s argument from temporally-rotated music.

The Dynamic Theorist’s response has a metaphysical and an epistemological component. The metaphysical component of the response invokes *Intrinsicity* and *Rotation* along with the Dynamic Theory’s central metaphysical commitment that only spatial dimensions, but not the temporal dimension, are perfectly similar to each other. Since aesthetic value is an intrinsic feature and intrinsic features are unchanged by rotation along the perfectly similar spatial dimensions, then it necessarily follows that spatial rotation cannot change aesthetic value. So, given these assumptions and the central metaphysical commitment of their theory, the Dynamic Theorist can insist that inverted and backwards paintings have the same aesthetic value as their respective non-inverted and non-backwards counterparts.

Then, the epistemological component of the response invokes *Mind-Independence* to debunk the aesthetic intuitions. The Dynamic Theorist might say that we are simply confused in thinking that inverted and backwards paintings do not have the same aesthetic value as their respective non-inverted and non-backwards counterparts. In particular, we might have confused the extrinsic *artistic values* of the works with the intrinsic aesthetic values of the works.³ On this debunking story, our confusion arises from the gap between our actual aesthetic judgments, which are necessarily dependent on our perceptual psychology and therefore better track artistic value, with the aesthetic values that they imperfectly track, which are not dependent on our (or any other creatures') perceptual psychology. That is, limitations regarding what our senses can access and limitations regarding our capacity for re-orienting ourselves along different dimensions are just facts about ourselves, which are—by assumption—irrelevant to aesthetic value.

Again, I want to emphasize that, in isolation, this is a perfectly reasonable response for the Dynamic Theorist. The problem for Markosian is only apparent when we consider the overall dialectic. To preview, the Spacetime Theorist can parallel this response—but swapping in their own central metaphysical commitment that all spatiotemporal dimensions are perfectly similar to each other—in order to respond to Markosian's argument from aesthetics to metaphysics.

4. Temporal Rotation, Revisited

Is it true, as Markosian claims, that temporal rotation does not preserve aesthetic value? I am not so sure. Or, rather, I think there is a perfectly reasonable response for the Spacetime Theorist.⁴

The Spacetime Theorist's response has a metaphysical and an epistemological component. The metaphysical component of the response invokes *Intrinsicity* and *Rotation* along with the Spacetime Theory's central metaphysical commitment that all spatiotemporal dimensions are perfectly similar to each other. Since aesthetic value is an intrinsic feature and intrinsic features are unchanged by rotation along the perfectly similar spatiotemporal dimensions, then it necessarily follows that temporal rotation cannot change aesthetic value. So, given these assumptions and the central metaphysical commitment of their theory, the Spacetime Theorist can insist that sideways music has the same aesthetic value as normal music.

Then, the epistemological component of the response invokes *Mind-Independence* to debunk the aesthetic intuition. The Spacetime Theorist can say that we are simply confused in thinking that sideways music does not have the same aesthetic value as normal music. In particular, we might have confused the extrinsic

³ The debates concerning the difference (if any) and the relationship (if any) between aesthetic value and artistic value are too long and too complicated for us to get into. See Stecker (2019), ch. 3, for an overview and an argument for distinguishing these two nearby values. My point is only to illustrate a debunking story that emphasizes a difference in mind-dependence between the two nearby values.

⁴ Indeed, this is a variation of the response that Markosian anticipates as “the response to The Argument from Sideways Music that Spacetime Theorists ought to make” (7, footnote 10).

artistic values of the works with the intrinsic aesthetic values of the works. On this debunking story, our confusion arises from the gap between our actual aesthetic judgments, which are necessarily dependent on our perceptual psychology and therefore better track artistic value, with the aesthetic values that they imperfectly track, which are not dependent on our (or any other creatures') perceptual psychology. That is, limitations regarding what our senses can access and limitations regarding our capacity for re-orienting ourselves along different dimensions are just facts about ourselves, which are—by assumption—irrelevant to aesthetic value.

Markosian anticipates a variation of this response, but says that it is not at all plausible for the Spacetime Theorist to offer a debunking story on which given “how human consciousness works, we are just not very good at perceiving the aesthetic value of sideways music” (7). But I am not sure why, especially given that the analogous debunking story is necessary for the Dynamic Theorist's response to the cases of inverted and backwards paintings.

To further explore the dialectic, it might be instructive to consider creatures who are unlike us. In Ted Chiang's speculative fiction story “The Story of Your Life” (1998/2002), Heptapods are creatures who do not experience events linearly, but simultaneously. Given their perceptual psychology, Heptapods plausibly perceive and make aesthetic judgments about sideways and normal music in the same way. However, *Mind-Independence*—a critical assumption in Markosian's argument—says that this difference between us and Heptapods is irrelevant to aesthetic value. And, recall, the Dynamic Theorist needs this assumption in order to respond to the cases of spatially-rotated paintings. For example, in the case of backwards paintings, they need this assumption to say that the difference between us and creatures that can see through walls is irrelevant to aesthetic value.

To be clear, I am not rejecting the assumption of *Mind-Independence*; it is reasonable enough, in isolation. However, I am making a parity point about the overall dialectic: the Dynamic Theorist gets to invoke this critical assumption in the epistemological component of their response to spatially-rotated paintings *if and only if* the Spacetime Theorist too gets to invoke the same assumption in the epistemological component of their response to temporally-rotated music.

The analogous observation applies to the metaphysical components of the respective responses as well. To be clear, I am not rejecting the assumptions of *Intrinsicality* and *Rotation*; they are reasonable enough, in isolation. However, I am making a parity point about the overall dialectic: the Dynamic Theorist gets to invoke these critical assumptions alongside their own central metaphysical commitment—namely, that only spatial dimensions, but not the temporal dimension, are perfectly similar to each other—*if and only if* the Spacetime Theorist too gets to invoke the same assumptions alongside their own central metaphysical commitment—namely, that all spatiotemporal dimensions are perfectly similar to each other.

Markosian is, in one sense, correct in noting that his argument reveals a surprising link between aesthetics and metaphysics. However, this surprising link is merely the artifact of his critical assumptions of *Intrinsicality* and *Rotation*. Given that aesthetic value is an intrinsic feature and intrinsic features are unchanged by

rotation along perfectly similar dimensions, whether temporal rotation changes aesthetic value is—by assumption—dependent on one’s background metaphysical theory. The Dynamic Theorist says yes and the Spacetime Theorist says no, but their respective answers simply reflect their respective central metaphysical commitments. That is, given these assumptions, whether *Difference of Aesthetic Value* is true already depends on whether *Difference of Space and Time* is true. As such, Markosian’s argument cannot offer a new independent consideration for adjudicating the metaphysical debate between the Dynamic Theorist and the Spacetime Theorist.

References

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