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Aesthetic and Artistic Verdicts

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In this article I propose a way of thinking about aesthetic and artistic verdicts that would keep them distinct from one another. The former are reflections of the kinds of things we prefer and take pleasure in; the latter are reflections of other judgments we make about the kinds of achievements that are made in works of art. In part to support this view of verdicts, I also propose a way of keeping distinct the description, the interpretation, and the evaluation of works of art. (And along the way, I worry about whether we offer the same kinds of interpretations of the objects of our aesthetic pleasures, properly considered, that we clearly do offer with respect to works of art.) The thesis I propose—the achievement model—is not original with me. What is original, perhaps, is that it is posed as an alternative to two other views of artistic evaluation, namely the appeal to "ideal critics" and the appeal to one way of understanding our preferences with regard to works of art. I do not attempt to show that each of these alternatives meets with insuperable problems; but I do indicate what I take to be the substantive content of those problems. In the end, in order to flesh out the thesis I propose, I borrow some material from the literature on human well-being concerning how we determine what an achievement is.

Keywords: Description, interpretation, evaluation, art, aesthetic pleasure, achievement.

"Appreciation" and "criticism" are terms in philosophical aesthetics and philosophy of art whose meanings have proved elusive. These terms are often used to mean description, and sometimes to mean interpretation. But they may be used to refer to evaluation. Indeed, one prominent figure in analytic aesthetics has argued not only that criticism needs to be revived but also that it is inescapably evaluative (Carroll 2008). For sake of precision, when it comes to evaluative judgments, we should follow Sibley in this: we should recognize they are "verdicts" as to the quality of the object or activity, whether that which is evaluated is a work of art or not (Sibley 1965: 136).

It is on the last of these, verdictive judgments, that I wish to focus in this article. I will, however, begin with some remarks about description and will also say a few things about interpretations. Both of the latter sets of comments will be made in regard to their uses in stating and defending verdictive judgments.

1. *A crudely sketched distinction*

Aesthetic experiences, including aesthetic experiences that are specifically of works of art, form one kind of pleasurable experience of objects or activities. The differences among them, *as* experiences, has primarily to do with differences among the kinds of thing one experiences.

Clear and obvious instances of things we might experience aesthetically include such things as sunsets, moonrises, cats, lizards, oak trees, grass, wind, silence, and so on. Equally clear and equally obvious instances of works of art that we might also experience (whether aesthetically or not) will include a Bach concerto, a performance of the play *A Streetcar Named Desire,* the novel *don Quixote,* the Vimeo of *Uterus Man*, the video game *Rocket League*, and so on.

If we had to say or write down what we experienced—especially if we had to say what made our experience of it an aesthetic experience of a work of art—we would have to describe it; we might have to interpret it; and perhaps we would be inclined to evaluate it as well. A quick and crude sketch of the distinctions on which I am relying could go like this.

> A person *describes* objects or activities (including of course, works of art) if she presents a statement of the evidence given to her senses, which statement is as free as she can muster from either interpretation or evaluation.[1]
> A person *interprets* objects or activities if she (a) gives a description of that work, (b) states, without evaluation, what she thinks the work is, is for, is about (possibly in some large sense), or means and c) ties that significance to details in the work's description.
> A person *evaluates* objects or activities (renders a verdict regarding them) if she (a) presents a statement either about how well what she has described achieves what she thinks it is, is for, is about, or means *or* about whether what she believes it is, is for, is about, or means is worth doing or is true; and (b) states either what descriptive facts about the work supports the contention it does or does not achieve its aims (under some kind-determination) or why the work's aims are in some way defective (under any kind-determination).

This distinction admits of intermediate states. However, I do not think it is "scalar" and not a genuine distinction after all. That is, despite the possibility of intermediate cases, this does not seem to admit "degrees" along a "spectrum" in the standard senses of those words.

[1] I set on one side the question whether aesthetic and artistic descriptions are the result of inferences (Dorsch 2013).

2. *Aesthetic verdicts of works of art and other things*

At the level of description, it is important that we observe a distinction between aesthetic and non-aesthetic properties of objects and activities, and that we determine which aesthetic features are in play in a given object or activity at least partly by determining what category the object or activity is likely to belong to based on its non-aesthetic features (Sibley 1965; Walton 1970). Many works of art, in particular, demand evaluations that are more or less plausible depending, in part, on what the descriptive facts actually are. And, actually, this seems right whether the object or activity in question is a work of art or not.

Consider how you might support the claim

(1) "That's a gorgeous sunrise."

Since this is in the present tense, I suppose you would frequently just point to it and say, "Look!" But if your interlocutor looked and did not respond in the same way, how would you go on? Here (and I am just guessing) you might point out that it is particularly golden, that it reflects golden sunlight off of low lying and level clouds (stratus or altostratus clouds), and so on.

Yet there is a puzzle here. If our focus is only on our *aesthetic* verdicts regarding works of art, then surely Paul Ziff has this much right: anything that can be viewed at all (including works of art) can be viewed aesthetically (Ziff 1984). And here is a particularly troubling example:

(2) "The Morris Louis painting in the Nelson-Atkins really makes me weak in the knees."

This example, which is not uncommon, suggests that our *aesthetic* verdicts about works of art are not only made *on the basis of* our subjective preferences, it also suggests that, in some way, they are also *about* those same subjective preferences.[2]

And that, in turns, raises an important question for those interested in our aesthetic reactions to the world including the artworld, namely, whether our aesthetic judgments are merely indexed to us according to preferences or are our expressions of those preferences. These, as Barry Smith has argued, are each flawed attempts to respond to the fact of aesthetic disagreement. In fact, if either of them is right, we lose the idea that people offering alternative aesthetic evaluations have actually *disagreed* (Smith 2012).

3. *Interpretation*

Of judgments about what an object or activity is, is for, is about, or means, I shall have only a little to say. First I should observe that the closer one is to the first item on this list—saying what something

[2] Part of the reason this is puzzling is that most of our sensory experience is subjective, and yet most of our judgments based on that experience are matters of objective fact about the world.

is—the more nearly descriptive one's judgments will be. Sometimes *category-placement* just is an interpretation. Alternatively, sometimes an interpretation, when it settles what something *is*, turns out to look a great deal like, and may even function in our reasoning *as* a description, because it works to settle the "what is it?" question by means of category-placement (Walton 1970). Furthermore, this observation goes a long way toward explaining what I meant when I remarked earlier that the distinction I am employing is "crude."

Conversely, the further along toward the last on the list—saying what an object or activity *means*—the more likely it is that our judgments are evaluative in nature. There is a reason for this, namely that it is more likely in such cases that one will be tempted to inflect the interpretation with one's own or one's group's *preferences*. For if one asserts that a work has a certain meaning, it is fairly natural to ask "meaning *what*, and *to whom*?" Many ways of answering that question make appeal to what an individual or group finds *significant*. And, I confess, I know of no way to explicate the idea of the significance of something to someone without reference to her, or their, preferences.

There is a second point: when one engages in interpretations of either of the latter three kinds—saying what an object or activity *is for*, what it *is about*, or what *it means*—the more likely it is that the interpretation will have been offered of a work of art, broadly construed. This may be indicated by noticing that we typically do not render these kinds of interpretations of sunsets, moonrises, cats, lizards, oak trees, grass, wind, silences, and so on. People do not often remark about what a sunset, for example, *is for*, what it *is about*, or what *it means*. Yet of course people often offer precisely these kinds of interpretations of Bach concertos, performances of *Streetcar,* of *don Quixote,* of *Uterus Man*, of presentations or playings of *Rocket League* or *Until Dawn*, and so on.

A third point, specifically about interpretations of works of art, is in order. In some recent work, Robert Stecker has pulled back on his early enthusiasm for holding that art-relevant interpretations are about the "*work meaning*" of the work (Stecker 2015). Stecker writes this:

> For me this is interpreting a piece for its work meaning as I define that notion in *Interpretation and Construction: Art, Speech, and the Law* (Blackwell, 2003). However, in setting out this test, I try to leave it more open just which types of interpretation provide the necessary understanding because I want to allow someone to accept the test without buying into my views about interpretation. (Stecker 2015: 395, n7)

Jane Forsey had taken Stecker to task about the earlier claim that interpretations are only about the "*work meaning*" of a work and suggested that, instead, we should think less about the meanings of works of art and more about their *functions*.

To be sure, her point is that we are not likely to get an adequate account of so-called "everyday aesthetics" without doing so (Forsey 2014). But I do not take her opposition to viewing the aesthetics of the every-

day through the lens of philosophy of art quite as seriously as she seems to. Nor for that matter do I take Stecker's oft expressed insistence of interpretation as the determination of "work meaning" all that seriously. One reason for both of these views is that interpretive judgments about works of art come in all of the kinds I mentioned above. That is, they are as likely to be concerned with what a work of art *is for* as they are to be concerned about what a work of art *is about* or what *it means*. This is especially true when the interpretations concern certain kinds of ceramics, many works of architecture, many documentary movies, and so on. In contrast, claims about what a work *is about* or what *it means* are more nearly about what has been at the center of discussions of the interpretation of painting since the 1950s or so. And claims about what a work *is for* are clearly about the *function* of the work.

4. *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*

Brock Rough claims there is a clear distinction, at least on the behavioral level, between philosophical aesthetics and philosophy of art, for "the study of aesthetics is the study of the felt quality of perceptions of the senses, while the study of art is the study of the historical practice of making art objects" (Rough 2014). Rough also offers a second way of drawing the distinction, this time couched in terms of a distinction between aesthetic and artistic *properties*. The idea is that

> Aesthetic properties are those that are the properties of sensory taste that we perceive in the things we experience: properties like 'beautiful,' 'dynamic,' 'graceful'… Artistic properties are those that are relevant to artworks: facts about the context of creation, who the artist was, when they made the work, what their intentions for the work were, etc.

He does this, as the rest of his blog essay reveals, in order to note how difficult it actually is to make out the distinction in a principled way. For there may be no principle that successfully distinguishes between them at the level of description. Moreover, he claims,

> there is no obviously principled way of distinguishing between, say, the pleasure felt by slipping into a hot bath, the awe one feels before a brilliant sunset, and whatever aesthetic response is felt when one contemplates a Caravaggio.

Notice that the claim he makes is that there is no principled way to distinguish among the aesthetic pleasures taken in everyday objects and activities and the *aesthetic* pleasures taken in works of art.

But is there no way to distinguish between verdictive claims that are aesthetic and verdictive claims that are artistic? A more successful attempt is made at the level of verdicts by Robert Stecker in a series of essays beginning at least as far back as 2007. The "test"—as he calls it—for whether a verdict is aesthetic or artistic is this:

> artistic value derives from what artists successfully intend to do *in* their works as mediated by functions of the art forms and genres to which the works belong. [So] does one need to understand the work to appreciate its

> being valuable in that way? If so, it is an artistic value. If not, it is not. (Stecker 2012: 357)

And, in a later essay still, he has "proposed fleshing out 'understanding' in terms of the kind of insight we gain through interpretation or a certain kind of interpretation" (Stecker 2015: 395).[3]

In this context, consider this evaluative statement:

(3) "*Star Wars Episode VII: The Force Awakens*, is a better movie than *Star Wars Episode 1: The Phantom Menace*."

It is certainly possible to express this judgment and, when asked to support or defend it—by, say, someone who actually *liked* Jar Jar Binks—to simply stare as if to say, "how can you possibly ask me to defend *a preference*?!" This would be to take the expression "is a better movie than" as merely indicated a comparative preference, much like your preference for spinach over broccoli; or even simply for okra. In that case, given Stecker's test, you would be uttering an *aesthetic* evaluation.

But of course, you are likely instead to be tempted to say things about the plot structures of the two movies, the characters and the roles they play, even the acting.[4] But notice that *now* you are discussing the descriptive features of the movies and of movies, as works of art. That is, you are calling attention to features of the movies *qua* made-objects, perhaps even giving an interpretation of the movies, so as to justify the comparative judgment you have made. Your verdict will be, as Stecker's test proposes, an *artistic* verdictive judgment.

What this suggests is that, in certain cases, both aesthetic and artistic verdictive judgments can be professed about the same things. But a further point is that usually artistic verdicts concern man-made, craft-based works of art.

Finally, consider these claims.

(4) "That was a gorgeous sunrise."
(5) "That sunrise was quite good."
(6) "That was a better sunrise than the one yesterday."
(7) "Sunrises in this part of the country are more rewarding than those at home."

I would not dispute that you could make comparative judgments of these latter two sorts. But what is crucial is that you *need not understand* how sunrises occur—including how clouds of dust, for example, affect their vibrancy—in order to make such judgments. And I conclude that, at the verdictive level, we do have a distinction—between aesthetic and artistic verdicts—that is worth drawing and worth paying attention to.

A good deal of confusion is caused by not keeping these straight. For example, Jerrold Levinson writes this:

[3] The "certain way of interpreting" he refers to here relects his commitment to "work meaning," discussed above, at the end of the previous section.

[4] Of course, should you make disparaging remarks about Liam Neeson's acting in *The Phantom Menace*, I confess I would have to agree.

> In this short article I explore two related themes, between which there is, I hope to show, a curious tension. The first is the fact of there being demonstrably better and worse artworks. The second is the undeniable importance of personal taste as regards preferences among works of art.
> What should be the relationship between what one as an individual prefers in the realm of art and what is objectively artistically superior? To what degree should the former be aligned with the latter? Might there be a conflict between these two apparent values, that is, on the one hand, one's own taste in art and, on the other, what is truly better art? If there is such a conflict, in what way might it be resolved or reduced? (Levinson 2010: 225)

This question posed by Levinson depends on the acceptance to two facts: a) that there are demonstrably better and worse artworks with b) that our tastes—what we prefer—differ with respect to works of art. One thing this points to is that there is a bifurcation in our understanding of "verdicts," between the verdict we would make on behalf of everyone and the verdict we would make on our own behalf.

5. *Three theories of criticism*

Many people believe that, because the verdict we make on our own behalf is ineluctably inflected by our personal preferences, there really is no possibility of rendering verdicts on everyone else's behalf. For that seems to require a level of objectivity (or at least intersubjectivity) that the second fact shows, it is sometimes said, we cannot aspire to. On the basis of accepting the second of the facts that Levinson refers to, many people deny that the first fact claim is actually true. This observation about what many people have had to say has given rise to at least three different theories of criticism, or of evaluation, i.e., of verdictive judgments.

The first "solution"

In Hume's famous essay "Of the Standard of Taste" we have the first possible solution (Hume 1757). This solution allows for the two fact-claims to be true and resolves them by holding that we have good reason to appeal to "ideal critics" who possess good taste and who can discern which objects are worthy of aesthetic attention. There are a number of problems with "the ideal critics solution," as it has been called. But one advantage it has is that it seems to square with the fact we are able to learn from others, others whose judgment we trust, and so whose good taste should lead us to choose the right things. It also squares with the fact we do seem to acquire "taste" from following the judgments of others whom we trust.

But these advantages form a two-edged sword: for at least some of those others whom we trust may just be snobs. That, at any rate, seems to be the current view of most undergraduates—and their teachers—in university level institutions in the USA. And they are not alone, of course (Kieran 2010). Of course, this attitude on the part of many may be nothing more than prejudice; and there is no reason to think that

we should follow the advice of the ignorant over that offered by the educated. However, we will make no progress by tossing about insults.

There are, as already indicated, some other, and more severe, problems with "the ideal critics solution." Briefly they concern two things: Does the artistic appreciation of a work of art depend on first-hand acquaintance with that work of art? There is independent, empirical, evidence that this appeal, to the need for first person experience in order to support any verdictive judgment, is false (Robson 2013). However, if there were such a need, then there is considerably less pressure to accept the ideal critics solution. For no one, we might think, not even a truly *ideal and reliable* critic, could tell *me* what kind of experience I will or should have with any given work of art. And, secondly, how does the ideal critic come to her/his views in the first place? It is either by a process of learning from others whom *they* regard as ideal critics or it is by a process independent of the existence of ideal critics. If the latter, then we don't need them; all we have to do is undergo that independent process. If the former, then we have a "vicious infinite regress"—that is, there is no rational starting place in this chain.

The second "solution"

The second solution is concerned with analyzing more closely what is involved in the second of the two facts Levinson cites. This fact, remember, is that our *individual* preferences are considerably diverse when it comes to works of art. The question then becomes, absent an ideal-critic solution, can an individual come to change her preferences *rationally* so as to make them line up with the judgments made on behalf of everyone (that even she is inclined to make) that some works of art are simply better than others?

This should be seen as engaging with some features of the by-now standard analyses of preferences. Among those features will be that any two alternative preferences are called "incomparable" whenever the preference relation is incomplete with respect to them and they will be called "incommensurable" whenever it is impossible to measure them with the same unit of measurement. To be sure, cases of irresolvable incompleteness are often also regarded as cases of incommensurability. In moral philosophy, irresolvable incompleteness is usually discussed in terms of the related notion of a *moral dilemma*. In aesthetics and philosophy of art, irresolvable incompleteness is often discussed in terms of the related notion of no-fault differences in preferences. But the feature of these analyses that is likely to draw most attention is the feature of *transitivity* of both strong preferences, indifference, and weak preferences.[5] Transitivity is a controversial property, and many

[5] $A \succcurlyeq B \wedge B \succcurlyeq C \rightarrow A \succcurlyeq C$ (*transitivity* of weak preference)
The corresponding properties of the other two relations are defined analogously:
$A \sim B \wedge B \sim C \rightarrow A \sim C$ (*transitivity* of indifference)
$A \succ B \wedge B \succ C \rightarrow A \succ C$ (*transitivity* of strict preference)

examples have been offered to show that it does not hold in general. These examples can be used to show that actual human beings may have cyclic preferences. It does not necessarily follow, however, that the same applies to the idealized rational agents of preference logic. Perhaps such patterns are due to irrationality or to other factors, such as lack of knowledge or discrimination, that prevent actual humans from being rational in this sense. There is a strong tradition, not least in economic applications, to regard transitivity as a necessary prerequisite of rationality. One crucial argument for this rests on the importance of preferences for choosing. Preferences should be *choice guiding*. They should be used to guide our choices among the elements of a given set of preferred objects or activities. But when choosing, for example, from the set, {A, B, C}, a preference relation that is not transitive does not guide choice at all: any or none of the alternatives should be chosen according to that relation. This is also why a good case can be made for running a so-called "dutchbook" argument against someone whose preferences are not transitive. The transitivity of preference, it seems, is a necessary condition for a meaningful connection between preferences and choice.

Crucially, for the second solution, preferences have been interpreted as expressions of value. "$A \succ B$" then means that more value is assigned to A than to B, and "$A \sim B$" that the same value is assigned to the two. As noted above, there is a strong tradition, particularly in economics, to equate preference with choice. Preference is considered to be hypothetical choice, and choice to be revealed preference. And, in the aesthetic conception of verdicts, we *should* think of preferences as strongly connected to our choices. After all, in daily life we ask each other things like this: "Which painting do you like?" or "Do you like Jay-Z's music video of 'Empire State of Mind'?" We think of these as connected to choices about what to buy, look at, and listen to. Even when we ask a further question that pushes us to use descriptions to support our verdicts, the question is "What was it about X that you liked?" And that question too is about what *kinds of things* we would choose to purchase, to look at, and to listen to.

For us to be fully responsible for our choices—especially if we are going to offer verdicts on everyone's behalf—we must answer the following three questions affirmatively: (A) Can we have reasons for our preferences? (B) Can preferences be rationally criticized? And (C) can we really change our preferences? Whether we can do all three of these things is a difficult and highly technical issue. But here are some observations.

We rarely consider those who justify their choice only by saying "Because I preferred to do this" as giving reasons. So, if choices (and hence preferences) are justifiable, we have to be able to give reasons for them. And one promising way to think of this is in terms of so-called "second order" preferences, the preference to be the kind of person who would prefer a particular kind of thing or to engage in or disengage from some particular kind of activity.

In practical reasoning, it is an important issue whether preferences can be criticized *rationally*. Preference sets as discussed so far are open to rational criticism only insofar as (i) they are inconsistent or (ii) they, in combination with beliefs, commit the agent to inferences that make the resulting preference sets inconsistent. But we should not be content with this if we really want to see why an individual might rationally seek to change her *intrinsic* preferences.[6]

There are several, largely empirical reasons, for thinking that people's preferences really do change over time. So, the second solution to the problem Levinson points out takes its cue from this discussion and concludes a) that we *do* change our intrinsic preferences, b) that they *can* be criticized from the point of view of taking on board a second-order preference for higher aesthetic experiences, and c) that therefore we *can* offer reasons, *from an aesthetic point of view*, about the aesthetic aspects of our first-order preferences. Whether we do so, of course, depends on how much we are ready to adopt the second order preference for "appreciative experiences worth having." But the point is, according to the proponents of this solution, we *can*.

The third "solution"

The third solution—which I favor—also agrees to the two facts, but thinks there is no real tension between them. For it assumes that philosophical aesthetics can account for the second of the facts and philosophy of art can account for the first one. Most of its focus is on the first fact: for it offers an "achievement view" of the nature of artistic merit, not an aesthetic view that is grounded in first-person experience, the quality of that experience, and preference sets. That is, contrary to the assumption shared between the Humean/Levinsonian solution and the second solution as well, it does not assume that the *artistic merit* of a work of art is to be explained by its "capacity..., in virtue of its form and content, to afford appreciative experiences worth having" (Levinson 2015: 226).

The third solution assumes there really are differences between philosophy of art and aesthetics. But it does not agree with the assumption that artistic merit depends on the capacity to provide aesthetic experiences of some kind.

Crucially, it holds that the first and second facts that Levinson describes have two very different kinds of explanations. The first kind of claim—that there are demonstrably better and worse artworks—asserts the *artistic* merits of a work of art on behalf of everyone by reference to the *achievements* made or not made in the particular work of art. Whether such achievements are or are not made in the work is an objective question of fact. The second kind of claim—that our tastes

[6] A clear and interesting discussion of extrinsic and intrinsic preferences, and the reason this demand is placed on intrinsic preferences can be found at (Hansson and Grüne-Yanoff 2012).

differ with respect to works of art—asserts the *aesthetic* value of a particular work of art to some individual or group on the basis of the aesthetic qualities that that individual or group *prefers*; and preferences are usually subjective or intersubjective.

This third solution squares with our standard ways of dealing with the lack of *artistic* value of forgeries. For, despite the fact they may provide *more* "appreciative experiences worth having" than even the originals may, they may still be objectively less valuable, in the same way that a piece of property may be less valuable, from a realtor's point of view, than some potential homeowners feel it is because of their preference to own it. It squares also with everyday kinds of remark about the aesthetic value of some works of art being merely opinions, because those comments are explicitly about what we like, and are not really about what is better or worse. Claims that are genuinely about what is better or worse in a work of art rest on considerations of the achievements in them, not on our varying preferences for or against them. Moreover, this solution is better positioned to explain why some works of art do not aim to provide high-quality aesthetic experiences. And, finally, it results in no contradiction between either finding that a work is good but not to one's liking or finding that a work is bad but is something one really likes (like a so-called "guilty pleasure").

This solution does *not* seem to explain why we have and continue to have the practices of art making and reception that we do have. One standard story, one that initially seems plausible, is that art practices arise in any culture because of a human preference for aesthetic experiences deemed worth having. A second part of that standard story is that art occurs in every culture because people will develop ways to ensure we have access to that kind of experience—and art is the most promising way to do that (Matthen 2013, 2015). I should caution that we must tread carefully here because there simply is very little actual direct evidence that this story, plausible as it is, is true (Nadal *et al.* 2018).

One way to address this issue is suggested by Noel Carroll (Carroll 2016).

> As an appreciative heuristic applied to art…the…approach proposes that, in order to appreciate a work of art, one must 1) identify its intended purpose or purposes and 2) determine the adequacy or appropriateness of its form—its formal choices—to the realization or articulation of its intended purpose (or purposes) (Carroll 2016: 4–5).

Moreover, "although, by laying out these elements sequentially, it may seem as though I am suggesting that they must be performed sequentially—first find the purpose, then see how it is or is not implemented successfully—these operations need not be performed in any specific order" (Carroll 2016: 5).

By "identifying its intended purpose" Carroll shows, I believe, how we might answer the challenge posed by the standard plausible stories about the evolution of art. This is because, according to Carroll and oth-

ers, the intended "purpose" of a work of art needs to be construed very broadly so as to include discovering an intended meaning, or discovering an intended aesthetic effect, discovering the purpose of providing cognitive experiences, discovering the purpose of providing certain specific affective experiences for an audience, and so on. And there is nothing incompatible within the idea that art—as a set of human practices of making and appreciating (including evaluating)—grew out of an initial impulse to provide aesthetic experiences worth having and then *outgrew* that, historically, to become a set of practices having purposes that are not necessarily aesthetic, or not only aesthetic, in nature.

6. *Achievements and artistic verdicts*

Aesthetic and artistic values and verdicts are different, not only because their targets are different, but also because one involves the values associated with preferences and the other involves the values of artistic achievements. David Davies articulates the commonly accepted alternative to this view (which he and others call "aesthetic empiricism" and with which he disagrees) as follows: "the basic principle of empiricist axiology [is] that the artistic value of a work of art resides in qualities of the experience it elicits in an appropriately primed viewer" where "experience" is understood not only to refer to direct perceptual encounters but also imaginative engagement with a work of art (Davies 2003: 255).

In contrast, Davies and Carroll both urge us to think of verdicts—the evaluations of works of art—on the achievement model. Carroll puts the point—which he calls "appreciation-as-sizing-up"—this way:

> This sense of "appreciate," in contrast to the "appreciation-as-liking" sense, is impersonal. Clearly, one can assess the value of something without liking it. One can assess the value of a piece of property without being attracted to it, for example, a decrepit tenement building. Furthermore, if "depreciate" is the opposite of "appreciate," one can surely estimate the diminished or diminishing value of something, while still regarding it with affection. I still cherish my old cashmere sweater although I realize its diminished value—not only is it somewhat tattered, but it has no more use-value for me, since I (unfortunately) outgrew it long ago. (Carroll 2016: 2)

Still, we can see why we might need more details about artistic achievements (Dorsch 2014). So, I offer the following considerations.

In a paper she initially delivered at the Central Division Meeting of the American Philosophical Association in 2014, Gwen Bradford was concerned about the question of whether claims about the meaning of life can ever be "objective," that is, whether a life can have "objective worth." One way to think about this is to suggest a way that "achievements can have objective worth" (Bradford 2015: 1).

Among the background assumptions in this paper is "that achievements are valuable in virtue of *challenge*, inter alia." (1) Bradford assumes this here, although she has argued for it elsewhere (Bradford 2016). The structure of achievements is this: "an achievement involves a

process that culminates in a product, outcome, or goal" (Bradford 2016: 796). Her assumption is based on the fact that not every achievement is of a worthwhile goal. Some simply are not—for example, climbing a mountain or peeling a banana—while others of course are—for example, painting the Sistine Chapel ceiling or creating the small pox vaccine. So, the intrinsic value of achievements, if they have any, probably lies elsewhere than in the fact they culminate in worthwhile goals. And the assumption she makes here is that the value has something to do with the difficulty, or challenge, that the adopter of a goal presents to herself.

Using J. S. Mill's famous "crisis" over imagining that all his life projects might be realized, Bradford notes that "Mill subsequently has something of a breakdown, overwhelmed by the sense that his aim has now "lost its charm" and seems worthless and "tragic" (Mill, 1989 [1873]. *Autobiography*: 112)" (Bradford 2015: 2). Bradford uses this story, in part, to motivate the claim that "there is something significant about the *pursuit* that is distinctive from the finished product" (Bradford 2015: 3).

But if there is something significant about pursuit beyond the value of the product, what precisely is that source of significance and value? It does not consist in the outright impossibility of a goal, such as squaring the circle. That Sisyphean picture of a goal is, perhaps, "the archetype of meaninglessness" (Bradford 2015: 4). However, there are other reasons a goal might be difficult or seem unreachable, and not be a paradigm of meaninglessness. Suppose "the goal develops and expands as we approach it," where this means both that "new aspects of the goal emerge and so the pursuit expands" and that "our understanding of what would amount to completion of the goal changes as we progress" (Bradford 2015: 4). Tellingly, the examples Bradford gives to illustrate this conception of what she calls "self-propagating goals" are the goals of a scientific understanding of some phenomena and *the goals of artists*. These seem both to have value that is independent of whether the goal is arrived at and to lend value to activities in pursuit of such goals. For, as Bradford comments, in such cases "the more you accomplish, the more is possible for you to accomplish" (Bradford 2015: 6).

So it is, one might well think, with works of art. Consider now two aesthetic evaluations and two artistic evaluations of the same object.

(8) "The Ennead Architect's design for the Natural History Museum of Utah, which once I loved, no longer appeals to me; and I do not enjoy looking at it."

(8*) "The Ennead Architect's design for the Natural History Museum of Utah fails because it is a hodge-podge of architectural styles and no effort is or has been made to integrate those varying styles either into a whole in which the styles seem to reflect on each other or into a whole in which the styles can be seen to complement each other."[7]

[7] Neither of these is true, by the way. I offer them only as examples.

(2) "The Morris Louis painting in the Nelson-Atkins really makes me weak in the knees."

(2*) "The Morris Louis painting owned and displayed by the Nelson-Atkins Gallery is one of his *Veil Paintings*, a "stain painting" consisting of waves of brilliant, curving color-shapes submerged in translucent washes through which separate colors emerge principally at the edges; and in the stain paintings Louis was concerned with the classic problems of pictorial space and the flatness of the picture plane."

One thing that is immediately evident in the two verdicts is that one does not need to understand anything about the museum or the painting to have aesthetic reactions like (8) and (2). In contrast, it is difficult to see how one could have reactions like (8*) or (2*) without such understanding or mis-understanding.

So, what is to be understood/misunderstood in these latter two cases? It's fairly natural to say that (8*) holds there was a manifestly possible goal that was not even aimed at and (2*) holds there was a possible goal that was aimed at and achieved. And what was understood or misunderstood on the part of she who asserted (8*) and (2*) was the nature of the achievement, what was there to be aimed at, so to speak, and the effort it would have taken or did take to achieve it.

This, however, is not the final word. For consider the achievements imagined in the following two cases:

(8*) "The Ennead Architect's design for the Natural History Museum of Utah fails because it is a hodge-podge of architectural styles and no effort is or has been made to integrate those varying styles either into a whole in which the styles seem to reflect on each other or into a whole in which the styles can be seen to complement each other."

(9*) "The Ennead Architect's design for the Natural History Museum of Utah fails because the function of a natural history museum is to be programmable in such a way that its patrons can get the information they seek; and this building is not programmable in that way."[8]

(8*) is clearly about styles and combinations of styles in architectural design; and (9*) is about the functions that architects must think about in developing and executing their designs. If, following Stecker, we hold that what has to be understood in works of art is expressed in the interpretations we give of works, *and* if we hold—as I do—that interpretations are either about what a work of art *is for*, what it *is about*, or what it *means*, then we should say that (8*) is more about *work meaning* and (9*) is more about *function*, i.e., what the object *is for*.

Are these in the kind of tension that Forsey seems to think? I think, rather, that we should be pluralists about what it takes to evaluate a

[8] Neither of these is true either.

work of art and that to render an artistic verdict, as opposed to rendering an aesthetic verdict, one must show how one *understands* the object or activity being evaluated. But that requirement can be met in a variety of ways, by any kind of interpretation of the art object or art activity or even by a placing an art object in a category for descriptive purposes (so long as the category itself is sufficiently action- or belief-guiding).

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