

PLEASURE AND BEAUTY

David Owens

It has often been suggested that the value of beautiful things lies in our ability to enjoy their beauty. In this paper, I'll develop and defend that suggestion. My main objective is to produce a version that is at least formally adequate. A full defence would take us far beyond the rather abstract issues discussed here. In the first section I formulate a pleasure-based theory of aesthetic value, of the value things have in virtue of their beauty. In the second section, I defend this theory against one line of objection.

Conditional Value

I shall argue that aesthetic value is a form of conditional value, so we'll start by explaining that notion. Take the following claims: interesting news is valuable only if it is accurate, a marriage is a good marriage only if it has been chosen. I'm not presently concerned with the truth of these claims, though I take it neither is palpably absurd. In each case we have a condition whose satisfaction is extrinsic to the valuable thing and which is supposedly needed to ensure that the thing in question has the relevant sort of value. Two observations.

First, conditional value must be distinguished from what might be called defeasible value. Almost all values are defeasible in that they can be spoilt or tarnished by conditions extrinsic to the valuable item. So, for example, the value of information which is both interesting and accurate is spoilt when accompanied by evidence which suggests that the information is unreliable. But where such misleading evidence is absent, we would not say that its absence is a source of the value of the information, is part of what gives that information its value. By contrast, the accuracy of the information is a source of the information's value. Similarly, the fact that a marriage has been chosen is something that gives that marriage its distinctive value, not just the absence of something which would tarnish the marriage.

Note that though the accuracy of interesting news is a source of its value, news

may not be valuable simply in virtue of being accurate. It may be that accuracy is a good thing only when the news concerns something that matters to us. Similarly, the fact that a marriage was chosen is a source of the marriage's value but it is not clear that a marriage has any value simply in virtue of being chosen. Perhaps it is a good thing that you choose your marriage only if your marriage is itself a good thing. Again I don't want to debate the truth of these claims, only to note that they are not absurd. Their non-absurdity indicates that the following idea creates no formal difficulty: *the value of X may have its source in condition C even though the satisfaction of C has no value independently of the value of X.*

My second observation is that conditional value need not be instrumental value. Some things derive their value from the value of their good effects, where the value of these effects is independent of the value of what causes them. Such conditional value is instrumental. This is not the case in our examples. True the condition of value is, in these cases, extrinsic to the valuable thing, extrinsic to the news and the marriage, but in neither of them is the value purely instrumental. Of course, interesting news which is accurate and a good marriage freely entered into can have instrumental value. But they are rightly valued for their own sake; they are among the things that make life worth living. Instrumental value, value which has its source in the occurrence of certain independently valuable effects, is only one form of conditional value (Korsgaard 1996: 250-3).

I'll illustrate this second point by contrasting the value of ice cream with the value of music. Ice cream has the value that it does only because we like the taste of it, only because we react to ice cream with pleasure. And such innocent pleasure is plausibly valuable for its own sake. Thus we can offer what I'll call a *reaction-based* account of the value of ice cream by observing that the value of ice cream is conditional on our reacting to it in a valuable way. But the value of the ice cream is arguably instrumental. Eating ice cream has the value that it does because it tends to produce gustatory pleasure and the value of the pleasure which we derive from ice cream need not depend on its deriving from high quality ice cream. Perhaps this isn't quite right. Perhaps there are aspects of the ice cream experience that depend for their value on the quality of the ice cream eaten. In any case, there are other aesthetic phenomena which invite a reaction-based treatment

even though their value clearly is in large part non-instrumental. The value of these phenomena is conditional on the occurrence of the relevant reactions.

Listening to a Bach Cantata is a source of great pleasure and that pleasure is a main source of its value. But to suppose this is not to suppose that the value of one's enjoyment is quite independent of the value of the thing enjoyed. On the contrary, the pleasure of listening to great music has the value it does because it is a case of taking pleasure in great music. Of course, there are ways of enjoying the sound of the Cantata of which this isn't true. For instance, one might find the sound of the Cantata rather relaxing and the (non-instrumental) worth of the pleasures of relaxation should not be denied. But the possibility of this form of enjoyment gives the work no aesthetic value. Elevator music of little or no aesthetic value would be even more relaxing. In so far as our Bach Cantata is aesthetically valuable, it is not valuable solely as a means to producing independently valuable auditory experiences. As I shall now argue, it has aesthetic value only because it is (or can be) enjoyed – its value is conditional on the occurrence (or possibility of) of such valuable experience – but it is not therefore valuable as a means to an independently valuable enjoyment.

I shall call the value a beautiful thing has in virtue of its beauty its aesthetic value. I don't want to deny that a work of art may have value because it is shocking, disturbing, even horrifying. But there is a distinctive form of value which things have in virtue of being beautiful and 'aesthetic value' is the most suitable label I can come up with for that value. I propose that this aesthetic value is a form of conditional value, namely value conditional on the enjoyment of the thing's beauty.

Pleasure or enjoyment can enter into one's account of beauty in several ways. One might offer to explain what it is for something to be beautiful in terms of its tendency to give pleasure to an observer of a certain sort. Or else one might explain what it is to *judge* something to be beautiful in terms of its actually giving such pleasure. I use pleasure to explain neither the nature of beauty nor the psychology of aesthetic judgement. Rather pleasure is invoked to answer a third question: what makes beauty valuable?

Beauty matters to us in the way that it does because and in so far as we can enjoy it. To put the point another way, beauty is valuable for its own sake on the condition that

we can enjoy it (Korsgaard 1996: 264-5). There are nice questions about whether things whose beauty is never actually enjoyed retain their aesthetic value so long as there is some possibility of our enjoying them. Avoiding these questions, I simply endorse Sidgwick's observation that 'no one would consider it rational to aim at the production of beauty in external nature, apart from any possible contemplation of it by human beings' (Sidgwick 1981: 114). True we might choose to preserve something with the relevant value, even where it would make little sense to create it from scratch but the underlying point still stands. We would have no reason to preserve a beautiful world simply in virtue of its beauty 'apart from possible contemplation' by creatures capable of appreciating its beauty. The relevant sense of 'possible' is whatever what make sense of choice. Value makes sense of choice and where it would make no sense to choose either to create or preserve something, that thing must lack value.

Moore denies Sidgwick's claim. He allows that a beautiful world containing creatures capable appreciating its beauty has hugely greater value than one devoid of them. Nevertheless he maintains that, faced with a choice between creating an imagined world of exquisite beauty and one of unrelieved ugliness, we would have some reason to choose the former, even if no human being could live in either world (Moore 1959: 83-5). Let's assume that human beings alone are capable of deriving pleasure from the contemplation of natural beauty. What could be the point of choosing beauty over ugliness apart from their benefit? True, we might prefer to imagine beautiful rather than ugly worlds though both are devoid of human life. That choice does make sense. But the choice of the worlds themselves. Would it be unreasonable simply to take no interest in this issue? Moore attempts to interest us by describing the beautiful world as without any 'jarring elements' and the ugly world as 'containing everything that is most disgusting to us'. But why should the presence of what jars and disgusts matter apart from any possibility of its being found jarring or disgusting?

Things possess aesthetic value only on the condition that we can enjoy their beauty. The most obvious explanation of this fact is that our enjoyment is the source of their aesthetic value, that the value of beauty derives from the value of the pleasure we take in it. This isn't the only possibility. For example, one can spoil something's beauty, perhaps by displaying it against the wrong background. So something's beauty has value

only if it is displayed in the right context. But, I take it, beauty's value does not depend on its being enjoyed in this way. A thing's beauty is not spoiled by inaccessibility, rather inaccessibility neutralizes the value of beauty by cutting it off from its source in the value of pleasure. Beauty is a conditional and not just a defeasible value.

Aesthetic Pleasure

I have suggested that the aesthetic value of an object has its source in our enjoyment of it, in the aesthetic pleasure it generates, an enjoyment whose value is itself dependent on the value of the object enjoyed. It is tempting to think that more can or must be said on the matter, even at this rather high level of generality. In particular, where aesthetic value is in question, it may be wondered *how* the value of our enjoyment depends on the value of the thing enjoyed. In this section, I want to explore one form of answer to that question and suggest that no answer of that form can be satisfactory.

The idea to be considered is this: *to take aesthetic pleasure in an object is to enjoy (in both senses) an experience as of something which would make the object aesthetically valuable and such an experience is a suitable source of aesthetic value – i.e. itself has the right sort of value – just when it accurately reflects the character of the object enjoyed.* How we understand this proposal depends on how we take the phrase 'an experience as of something which would make the object aesthetically valuable'. On one construal, to take aesthetic pleasure in something is to experience it as possessing aesthetic value. On a second, to take aesthetic pleasure in something is to experience it as being beautiful. On a third, to take aesthetic pleasure in something is to experience it as having certain features (namely those features which make it beautiful). I shall argue that, though each sort of experience is possible and indeed common, none can help us to understand how the value of aesthetic pleasure depends on the value of the thing enjoyed.

On our first account, the concept of aesthetic value enters into the very content of the pleasure so that taking aesthetic pleasure in a Cantata is a matter of reveling in the Cantata's aesthetic value. Walton traces aesthetic value to aesthetic pleasure so understood:

One *appreciates* the work. One does not merely enjoy it; one takes pleasure or delight in judging it to be good ... Its value consists in part in its propensity to induce observers to judge it valuable (Walton 2008: 10)

let's define *aesthetic pleasure* as pleasure which has, as a component, pleasure taken in one's admiration or positive evaluation of something; to be pleased aesthetically is to note something's value with pleasure (Walton 2008: 11)¹

Now the experience Walton describes here is both perfectly possible and rightly valued for its own sake. But aesthetic pleasure so understood could not be a source of aesthetic value. An experience (or indeed judgement) of something's aesthetic value can't be the source of that very value.

It may be replied that this objection misses the point of the account. While the account is of no use in explaining aesthetic value to someone who does not already know what aesthetic value is, it does tell us something important about aesthetic value, namely that it is possessed by things in virtue of their giving rise to a valuable experience of a certain sort. Its circularity notwithstanding, the proposal indicates the experiential source of aesthetic value.² I agree that a theory of aesthetic value which served this purpose would earn its keep but there remains a formal problem with the proposal's specification of the relevant experience.

The claim is that to enjoy seeing something as having aesthetic value just is to enjoy seeing it as being the sort of thing which gives rise to experiences of aesthetic value. What is the content of such an experience? Supposedly all that can be said is that it is an experience as of something which gives rise to experiences of aesthetic value. The problem here is not merely a lack of information about the distinctive content of aesthetic pleasure. On this account, an experience of aesthetic pleasure has a content which regresses upon itself. It is as if one tried to explain who Sam is by saying that Sam is the father of Sam's father. Sam cannot stand in this familial relation to himself and nor can

¹ Walton's notion of aesthetic pleasure is rather capacious. For example, a piece of information can be valuable because it is interesting and one might take pleasure in how interesting the information is. On Walton's account this pleasure would count as an aesthetic pleasure, regardless of topic. I'll assume that some suitable restriction to enjoyment of aesthetic value can be introduced.

² For analogous move made in defence of a formally similar proposal see (Wiggins 1987: 188-9).

aesthetic value stands in the relevant experiential relation to itself.³ But, as already noted, it is perfectly possible to see something as having aesthetic value, so the present account of what it is to have aesthetic value can't be correct. Since the concept of beauty and the concept of aesthetic value are distinct, we can avoid the regress problem just identified by focusing on beauty: to take aesthetic pleasure in an object is to enjoy experiencing that object as beautiful and we can see something as beautiful without seeing it as having aesthetic value.

This second account of the content of aesthetic pleasure risks saying either too much or too little. It says too little if we suppose that one can experience a beautiful thing as simply beautiful. To see something as beautiful, one must see (hear etc.) it as having features *F* and *G* which make it look (sound) beautiful. For example, symmetry, vibrant colouration, delicate sketching can all contribute to the beauty of a painting, dynamic contrast, elegant phrasing and contrapuntal effects to that of a piece of music.⁴ Aesthetic pleasure requires more than an experience of beauty. On the other hand, to take aesthetic pleasure in seeing the object as having features *F* and *G*, we need not see the object as being beautiful in virtue of those features. One can take aesthetic pleasure in a painting simply by enjoying the experience of its symmetry, vibrant colouration and so forth. Of course one can see these features without enjoying them, as when an ascetic is disgusted by the charms of youth. And one can also enjoy experiencing their beauty: paintings and pieces of music are often seen or heard not only as delicately drafted or well phrased but also as beautiful. Yet this is not, I think, an essential part of aesthetic enjoyment. It is enough if one takes pleasure in the very features which make this object beautiful.

This suggests a third way of reading the claim that to take aesthetic pleasure in an object is to enjoy an experience of whatever makes the object aesthetically valuable. On this reading, the phrase 'what makes an object aesthetically valuable' refers to those features *F* and *G* in virtue of which the object is beautiful. So understood, we are being told that aesthetic pleasure is pleasure taken in an experience of those features which render the object beautiful. What are these features? In giving instances of *F* and *G*, I mentioned symmetry, vibrant coloration, delicate line and so on. Is it the case that

³ The example comes from (Boghossian and Velleman 1989: 89).

⁴ And one's experience of those features must be accurate. If the phrasing is clumsy and the counterpoint a train wreck, our enjoyment of the Cantata loses its aesthetic value, however wonderful it may seem.

aesthetic pleasure is valuable just when it correctly represents the object enjoyed as having those which make it beautiful?

A problem with this is that there are various ways of enjoying such features. One might enjoy the symmetry of a face in being sexually aroused by it and one might enjoy the vibrancy of a colour because it was a welcome change from all the pastel shades in the hospital one inhabits. But these forms of enjoyment are not plausible sources of aesthetic value. Perhaps the problem is that pleasure is not being taken in the way symmetry, delicacy etc. contribute to something's *beauty*, in which case we should revert to the previous proposal and allow the notion of beauty to enter into our specification of the content of aesthetic pleasure. If so, aesthetic pleasure will after all be an experience of connoisseurship, of taking pleasure in seeing how its symmetry, delicacy etc. make something beautiful. But there is an alternative. Reactions like sexual arousal or sheer relief from repetition have a value which is independent of the value of their objects, whilst the aesthetic enjoyment of delicacy, grace etc. has a value which is conditional on that of its objects. That fact alone is sufficient to distinguish the way objects of aesthetic value are a source of aesthetic pleasure from the way objects of excitement or distraction are a source of non-aesthetic pleasure. The aesthete and the leech in the life drawing class differ not in whether their experience of the model deploys the concept. In fact they might both enjoy seeing the model as beautiful. They differ rather in how the value of their experience depends on the value of what they see. And the relevant mode of dependence cannot be captured simply in terms of the accuracy of the experience.⁵

David Owens

22/05/10

Bibliography

⁵ Thanks to Michael Martin, Aaron Meskin, Matthew Kieran, Roger White and Robert Hopkins for helpful comments.

Boghossian P. and Velleman D. (1989) – ‘Colour as a Secondary Quality’ *Mind* 98: 81-103.

Korsgaard, C. (1996) – *Creating the Kingdom of Ends* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

Moore, G. (1959) – *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

Sidgwick, H. (1981) – *Methods of Ethics* (Indianapolis: Hackett).

Walton, K. (2008) – ‘How Marvelous!’ in his *Marvellous Images* (Oxford: Oxford University Press): 3-21.

Wiggins, D. (1987) – ‘A Sensible Subjectivism’ in his *Needs, Values and Truth* (Oxford: Blackwell).