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Does a Plausible Construal of Aesthetic Value Give us Reason to Emphasize Some Aesthetic Practices Over Others?

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ABSTRACT. I propose a construal of aesthetic value that gives us reason to emphasize some aesthetic practices over others. This construal rests on the existence of a central aesthetic value, namely apprehension-testing intricacy within an appropriate domain. I address three objections: the objection that asks how an aesthetic value based on intricacy can account for the value of minimalism; the objection that asks about the difference between intricacy within a medium and intricacy between media; and the objection that asks about the danger of a regress. I then say that, although this central aesthetic value can in principle allow us to adjudicate between aesthetic practices, we have epistemic limits (about the potential of certain artistic domains to allow for apprehension-testing intricacy) that prevent adjudication in some cases. Even if there is a difference between the vastness of the potential-intricacy-fields somewhere down the line, it is too far for us to see.

1. Introduction

Kubala (2021) raises the question of whether there are '*specific* practice-external [aesthetic] requirements, which can ground rankings of particular aesthetic practices that all agents are required to participate in' (409). If there is a single or central source of aesthetic normativity, then we can see a way to 'rationalize aesthetic practice-choice' (409). So, is there a single or central source of aesthetic normativity? I will use the word 'central', rather than 'single', because 'central' conveys that there might be secondary aesthetic values, which can be explained in terms of the central one. My talk of centrality also leaves open the question of whether there are other aesthetic values that are not to be explained in terms of the central one.

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Some, the hedonists, think the central aesthetic value is pleasure. Others, the non-affectivists, disagree. Network theorists, for example, do not invoke a central aesthetic value but argue that the source of aesthetic normativity is achievement (Lopes, 2018, p. 127). Gorodeisky, 2021 points to a third way, the Value-Meriting-Pleasure (VMP) view: according to the VMP-theorist, there is some kind of aesthetic value that *merits* pleasure, but the aesthetic value itself does not derive from pleasure-giving capacity or from the hedonic attitude evoked in an experiencer of the aesthetic object (p. 261). For Gorodeisky, the aesthetic value that merits pleasure is '"basic value", where this refers to a value that need not be analyzed further '(pp. 277-8). My view is closest to Gorodeisky's, but with an important adaptation: I am going to provide a distinctive description of what I think the central value, approximately, is.

The term 'emphasize' will go largely unanalyzed here, in order to focus on the proposed central aesthetic value and some objections to it.[388] In brief, 'emphasis' on certain aesthetic practices over others would mean allocating our finite time and resources in such a way that the appreciation and creation of certain works would be prioritized over the appreciation and creation of certain other works. Another term, 'artistic practices', is here stipulated to refer to the three main areas of human artistic activity: the visual arts (including every artistic sub-practice for which the raw material is in the visual field: painting, sculpture, architecture, and the visual aspect of film), music, and the linguistic arts (including every artistic sub-practice for which the raw material is language and the things it expresses: everything from stand-up comedy to Greek tragedy).[389]

So, what is the central source of aesthetic normativity? What is a plausible candidate to be the central aesthetic value that gives us reasons to pursue actions and adopt attitudes?[390]

2. Apprehension-testing intricacy within an appropriate medium

The central aesthetic value I am going to put forward is a compound one: apprehension-testing intricacy within an appropriate medium. There are three aspects to this. First, intricacy: the number of aesthetically-significant relations between the elements of an artwork, a number that

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[388] Kubala (correspondence, 12.20.22) suggests 'the thin decision-theoretic language of "preference"' as an alternative to talk of 'emphasis'.
[389] Among the things that language expresses are concepts.
[390] I assume here that it is value that gives rise to reasons in this normative domain. Thanks to Kubala (correspondence, 12.20.22). See also Lopes, 2018, p. 7.

will be determined by the character and arrangement of those elements. The level of intricacy will be determined by the number of intricacy-relations evoked by the artwork (for an account of some kinds of intricacy-relation, see §2.3). Second, apprehension-testing: the intricacy should fall in a certain range in relation to our capacity for apprehending intricacy. (Specifically, the intricacy should fall in the range of what is on the periphery of our apprehensive capacities.) Third, sharing an appropriate medium: the parts related in intricate ways should share an appropriate medium, such as sound (for music) or language and the things it expresses (for the linguistic arts) or shape and colour (for the visual arts). (This sharing-an-appropriate-domain clause is an interesting one: it prevents me from having to say that total art, known in German as *Gesamtkunstwerk*, is most valuable. What is *Gesamtkunstwerk*? Some films, some operas, and other multimedia aesthetic projects.)[391] So that is what I mean by apprehension-testing intricacy within an appropriate medium. With this proposed central aesthetic value, I may be off-target in some ways. If so, I hope that what I have described at least approximates what the central aesthetic value is.

Some emphasis on intricacy as I have stipulated it, and probably limited as I have limited it, is commonsensical. What distinguishes the excellence of Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata* from the relative non-excellence of the melody of Toploader's 'Dancing in the Moonlight'? Some consideration about intricacy is likely to feature in the explanation. This is one reason to think I have presented a plausible construal of the central aesthetic value. I will discuss intricacy as a property of individual artworks and then, in order to answer the question of whether the proposed central aesthetic value can give us reasons to emphasize some aesthetic practices over others, I will discuss the intricacy-affordances or intricacy-possibilities of aesthetic practices.

2.1. Objection: Intricacy against minimalism?

I will now consider an objection to my view, one that focusses on the 'intricacy' aspect of the proposed central aesthetic value. The objection goes: how can an account with a central aesthetic value that, in some way, emphasizes intricacy make sense of the aesthetic value of

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[391] I will provide justification for the 'sharing-an-appropriate-domain' clause, and the correspondent relegation of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, in §2.2.

minimalism? In response, I say that minimalism is a kind of intricacy. Consider the following argument (the minimalism-as-intricacy argument):

    1. If intricacy can be taken to refer not only to what is included in an artwork but also what is left out, then intricacy can account for the aesthetic value of minimalism.

    2. Intricacy can be taken to refer not only to what is included in an artwork but also what is left out.

    3. Intricacy can account for the aesthetic value of minimalism.

In support of the second premise, there is evidence from ordinary speech in commonplace scenarios: as in, for example, 'I wish the film had included [insert putatively lacking aspect here].' Or testimony could be drawn from the commonplace experience of first learning to draw: one has to choose what to draw and what to omit; what to draw in detail and what to draw in less detail.

2.1.1. Challenge: What is left out of what is left out?

Premise 2 of the minimalism-as-intricacy argument is that intricacy can be taken to refer not only to what is included in an artwork but also what is left out. But what is left out of what is left out? Let us say that 'what is left out' or 'the left-out' refers to those unincluded elements that are relevant to the artwork's intricacy. Let us say that 'what is left out of what is left out' refers to those unincluded elements that are not relevant to the artwork's intricacy. So, the challenge is this: where does what is left out end and what is left out of what is left out begin?

    The answer is that it is difficult to know where what is left out stops, but that it will almost certainly stop somewhere. Despite this difficulty, there are reasonable inferences that can be made about what will be included in the left-out. One likely determiner for what is included in the left-out is *expectedness*. If a note is expected to fall in a particular place, but is withheld, then that note can be said to be more clearly part of the aesthetic effect of a musical piece than some other note that was also left out but not expected.

    There may well be other criteria determining the boundaries of what is left out, distinguishing it from what is left out of what is left out. Here, I simply offer the category of the 'expected but withheld' as proof of concept for such criteria.

2.2. Objection: Is there really a difference between intricacy within a medium and intricacy between media? If so, what accounts for it?

This objection focuses on the 'within an appropriate medium' clause. The theory I have presented suggests that there is a difference between intricacy within a medium and intricacy between media. The objection expresses skepticism about that view.

2.2.1. Lifeform-relative apprehension-capacity

The simple response to the objection is that there is a difference between intricacy within an independent medium (e.g., sound, the visual field, or language and what it expresses) and intricacy between those media because intricacy within such domains is more natural than intricacy between them. What do I mean by 'more natural'? I mean that we have evolved to have distinct senses or apprehension-capacities focused on these domains: respectively, for sound, the visual field, and language, we have hearing, sight, and linguistic processing. There are not normally leaps between these, unless the experiencer is systematically synesthete. Such cases are exceptions to the normal rule for human experiential capacities.

So, there is a difference between intricacy within a medium and intricacy between media. What accounts for it is what I will call 'lifeform-relative apprehension-capacity'. We have developed certain capacities for apprehension on account of being the kind of lifeforms that we are. We have apprehensive capacities suited to particular domains, such as the domains of the visual, the auditory, and the linguistic and what it expresses. These are naturally-occurring apprehension-capacities. An area of natural artistic activity can also be hybrid, combining multiple independent domains: the two media of song are language (and the things it expresses) and music. This is natural, growing out of language and fluctuating intonation during speech, but also second-order, in the sense that it unites two more basic domains (the domain of music and the domain of the linguistic arts).[392] We could perhaps create non-natural arts: e.g., auditory-gustatory-art. This would consist in hearing certain sounds while tasting certain flavors. This does not seem as natural for humans as linguistic art and song do, but it might well be more natural for other lifeforms, and it might come to be appreciated by some humans through practice, though probably not to the degree that the three independent and lifeform-

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[392] See Kant for discussion of 'the art of tone' (1790/2000, p. 205).

relative naturally-arising artistic practices are appreciable (the visual, auditory, and linguistic arts).

So, this is what I call lifeform-relative apprehension-capacity. I leave open the possibility of the existence of lifeforms for which auditory-gustatory, olfactory, echolocatory, magnetic-field-related, or any-medium art allows for as high a degree of aesthetic value as, say, musical art does for humans.[393] Lifeform-relative apprehension-capacity is important to my argument because it demarcates intricacy-within-a-medium from intricacy-between-media. It thereby supports the 'within an appropriate medium' clause.

2.2.2. More on the difference between intra-domain intricacy and inter-domain intricacy

I will call intricacy-within-a-domain 'intra-domain intricacy', and domains that allow for intricacy-within-a-domain 'independent domains'. I will call intricacy-between-domains 'inter-domain intricacy', and domains that can be situated to allow for intricacy-between-domains 'lateralisable domains'.

Consider the case of a filmmaker who makes a film that makes artistic use of visual effects, linguistic effects, and musical effects. This filmmaker, if she is to create a coherent artwork, must select and arrange her materials in such a way that there are lateralisations (intricacy-relations) between these independent domains, and perhaps also, at the more intricate levels of filmmaking, intricacy-relations between intricacy-relations themselves (see §2.3 for more on this).

Now consider the case of a writer or painter or musician. The focus for these figures is on intra-domain intricacy. A writer or painter or musician selects and arranges her materials in such a way that there are intricacy-relations within the medium. This is a task for which our capacities as the kind of lifeform we are are naturally suited. The mind, due to the typical self-containedness of the visual system, compares and contrasts colour and shape with colour and shape far more naturally than it compares and contrasts colour and shape with sound. What is the evidence for this? I have already mentioned the evidence of the independence of the senses. Perhaps more compellingly, there is the evidence of human specialization: there are

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[393] Nagel mentions' the quality-structure of some sense we do not have' (1986, p. 25).

accomplished linguistic artists, accomplished visual artists, and accomplished composers; but there are very few who reach a high level of accomplishment in more than one of these domains.

The filmmaker may unite considerations about the visual, the auditory, and the linguistic, but the filmmaker's degree of specialization in these independent domains need not be deep or equally deep, and she may well have specialization in none of them. It seems likely that there has not been, and probably never will be, a filmmaker who simultaneously possesses the musical ability of an accomplished composer, the visual-artistic ability of an accomplished visual artist, and the linguistic-artistic ability of an accomplished linguistic artist. Even if such a person were to exist, these three aptitudes for intra-domain intricacy would by no means automatically translate to an aptitude for inter-domain intricacy (though they would almost certainly help). Instead, what is typically found is that films, as a predictable result of being multimedia creations (following in the footsteps of theatre and opera), are multi-artist creations. This raises a perhaps-surprising consideration about film: the director need not be an accomplished visual artist, accomplished musical artist, or accomplished linguistic artist. So, the task of being a film director is only contingently to be an artist of intra-domain intricacy. What an accomplished filmmaker must be, however, in order to be correctly described as an 'artist', is an artist of at least some kind of intricacy. Being only an artist of inter-domain intricacy would suffice. This is why the making of films often involves collaboration. As Orson Welles wrote, 'To practice his art, a poet needs a pen and a painter a brush. But a film-maker needs an army.'[394] These reflections can be generalized to cover other multimedia arts. Not due to its compositeness, combining multiple independent artistic domains, but due to the possibility that an accomplished practitioner might have expertise in none of the three independent artistic domains that it typically seeks to unite, multimedia-directing might well be described as an 'artistic meta-practice'.

2.3. Objection: Is there a danger of a regress of intricacy?

I will now consider a further objection about intricacy: is there a danger of a regress of intricacy? There is intricacy within a domain (call this intricacy$_x$). There is intricacy between

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[394] Quoted in Schlesinger, 2000, p. 154.

domains (call this intricacy$_y$). There is presumably also intricacy between intricacy$_x$ and intricacy$_y$ (call this intricacy$_z$). Is there intricacy between intricacy$_z$ and intricacy$_x$, and/or between intricacy$_z$ and intricacy$_y$? Is there intricacy between the intricate parts, local intricacy-cells, of particular domains and the intricate parts, local intricacy-cells, of other domains (a kind of intricacy$_y$), and/or the intricate parts, local intricacy-cells, of intricacy$_y$ and intricacy$_z$? The questions could go on. Let us adopt the term intricacy$_\xi$ for any intricacy between intricacies; intricacy$_{\xi+1}$ means intricacy that includes one instance of intricacy$_\xi$; intricacy$_{\xi+n}$ means intricacy that includes n instances of intricacy$_\xi$. Here is an argument (which I call the 'intricacy regress argument'):

> 1. Intricacy$_n$ and intricacy$_m$ are possible.
> 2. Intricacy between intricacies is possible.
> 3. If intricacy$_n$ and intricacy$_m$ are possible, then intricacy between them is possible (intricacy$_\xi$). [1, 2]
> 4. If intricacy$_\xi$ is possible, then intricacy$_{\xi+1}$ is possible. [1, 2, 3]
> 5. If intricacy$_{\xi+n}$ is possible, then intricacy$_{\xi+n+1}$ is possible. [1, 2, 3, 4]
> 6. There is a potential regress of intricacy. [5]

What is the way out of this regress? The simple answer is that there can be intricacy-relations between intricacy-relations, but only some of these intricacy-relations are going to be aesthetically valuable. Finding those aesthetically-valuable intricacy-relations is the work of the artist. If it sounds like difficult work at the higher levels of artistic achievement, then that is not a point of implausibility. On the contrary, it is a plausibility consideration in favour of a theory that somehow centralizes intricacy, because the higher levels of achievement in art are widely accepted to exact difficult work in order to be accessed.

3. Argument for emphasizing some aesthetic practices over others

So, does this give us a reason to emphasize some aesthetic practices over others? Consider the following argument:

1. If the central aesthetic value is apprehension-testing intricacy within an appropriate medium, then we have reason to emphasize those aesthetic practices that allow for the aforementioned value to be instantiated to a greater degree than those that allow for it to a lesser degree. (Motivation: we ought to pursue that which allows for the instantiation of our aesthetic values. More, there are degrees of aesthetic value and we ought to pursue the appreciation and creation of works that allow for the instantiation of the highest degree of aesthetic value possible.)

2. The central aesthetic value is apprehension-testing intricacy within an appropriate medium.

3. We have reason to emphasize those aesthetic practices that allow for the aforementioned value to be instantiated to a greater degree than those that allow for it to a lesser degree.

If this argument is accepted, the question follows: which artistic practices does it favour? This is a question that requires much longer treatment. On reflection, having considered the possibility that music or the linguistic arts might be particularly favoured, I am moved to conclude that distinction between the three main domains of artistic practice (the visual arts, music, and the linguistic arts) is stymied because it is difficult to marshal sufficient evidence for comparison about the intricacy-fields and the human apprehension-capacities for the different domains. Even if there is a difference between the vastness of the potential intricacy-fields somewhere down the line, it is too far for us to see. It might seem more promising to try to assess human apprehension-capacity for intricacy in these different domains. On reflection, however, it is very difficult to say where human apprehension-capacity for any of these domains might end. A competent critic can get to the point at which aesthetically-significant minutiae are appreciated over vast distances, not just within works but between them. Apprehension-capacity expands not only in the relatively-predictable way traced by the average course of human development from childhood to adulthood, but also in the course of adult specialization.

Intricacy allows for more strands to be brought into play. One might point to human linguistic capacity and the vast field of permutational possibility afforded by language to support the view that linguistic art allows for the greatest degree of intricacy. But one could say something similar about music or perhaps the visual arts. There is an epistemic block when it comes to deciding which of these artistic practices might, ultimately, allow for the highest degree of apprehension-testing intricacy. So it is not a plausibly surmountable task to try to hierarchize these artistic practices according to their potential to allow for the highest degree of intricacy.

Conclusion

I proposed that there is a plausible construal of aesthetic value that gives us reasons to emphasize some aesthetic practices over others. The construal points to a central aesthetic value. I did not propose that this is the only aesthetic value, but rather that it is the central one, the one in light of which all or most of the others are to be explained. As said, I think I have only approximated this central aesthetic value here.

The proposed value is apprehension-testing intricacy within an appropriate medium. I said that, even if we accept the argument for emphasizing some aesthetic practices over others, it is still difficult to see how the central aesthetic value might allow us to adjudicate between the possibilities afforded by the three main artistic practices under discussion (music, the visual arts, the linguistic arts).

The argument of this paper has rested on a number of defeasible assumptions for which I have sought to provide justification. Many of these would benefit from longer treatment. I hope that, in addressing them as I have done, I have given an overview of their importance in motivating a broad view of what the central aesthetic value is, and what implications that value might have for aesthetic practice-choice.

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