

AUTONOMY AND AESTHETIC VALUING

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Forthcoming in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*

Abstract: Accounts of aesthetic valuing emphasize two constraints on the formation of aesthetic belief. We must form our own aesthetic beliefs by engaging with aesthetic value first-hand (the acquaintance principle) and by using our own capacities (the autonomy principle). But why? C. Thi Nguyen's proposal is that aesthetic valuing has an inverted structure. We often care about inquiry and engagement for the sake of having true beliefs, but in aesthetic engagement this is flipped: we care about arriving at good aesthetic beliefs for the sake of the values that arise in the process of doing so. The engagement is the point, so we must use our own capacities in first-hand encounters. Here I challenge Nguyen's account. I argue that it misconstrues the value of aesthetic belief; it conflicts with restrictions on aesthetic testimony; and it has trouble harnessing engagement-value for a theory of aesthetic value. A better approach emphasizes the social character of aesthetic valuing. On this view, aesthetic valuing is a social practice structured around the collaborative exercise and improvement of certain special capacities. The autonomy and acquaintance principles tell us to engage these capacities in forming our aesthetic beliefs. Understood aright, and contrary to consensus, these rules are identical.

1. Introduction¹

Aesthetic valuing is often said to be constrained in the following two ways:

Acquaintance: One's beliefs affirming or denying aesthetic value must be based on one's own engagement with the relevant objects.

This requires one to form one's own beliefs about aesthetic value by engaging directly with the relevant things—hearing the music for oneself, seeing the film, visiting the park, viewing the painting. One consequence is that, within certain parameters, one must refrain from accepting aesthetic testimony, since that would amount to forming a belief about what has or lacks aesthetic value in the absence of personal engagement. (Hopkins 2011, Wollheim 1980)

Another constraint, often discussed alongside *Acquaintance* (Hopkins 2011, Nguyen 2020a), also has this consequence:

Autonomy: One must arrive at one's own aesthetic beliefs through the use of one's own faculties and abilities.

This is Nguyen's formulation (2020a, p. 1130).² Hopkins (2011, p. 149) puts it as: "Having the right to an aesthetic belief requires one to grasp the aesthetic grounds." Both of these

¹ Thanks to Samantha Matherne, C. Thi Nguyen, and Kenneth Walden for helpful comments and discussion.

² I have (innocently) replaced his use of "aesthetic judgment" with "aesthetic belief".

statements, while not quite equivalent, get at the same idea: forming one's aesthetic beliefs requires coming to one's own conclusions.³

Autonomy and *Acquaintance* both put the onus on individuals when it comes to forming aesthetic beliefs, and both entail a strong constraint against accepting aesthetic testimony. However, many philosophers hold that they are importantly distinct. Arriving at an aesthetic belief through an inductive argument requires the use of one's faculties and abilities, and so it might seem to satisfy *Autonomy*. But doing so need not satisfy *Acquaintance* (Hopkins 2011), since at least in principle one can accept an inductive argument that *o* is aesthetically good without having had first-hand experience of *o*.

But in addition to first-hand experience, philosophers have thought that it is important to emphasize the use of one's own capacities because we might be engaging with aesthetic value first-hand while allowing our engagement to be directed by outside sources. By outsourcing the shape of our engagement, we fail to be guided by the use of our own capacities and hold the formation of our aesthetic beliefs hostage to the influence of others. This is especially salient in the digital age, when digital media not only acquaint us with aesthetic value but also direct our engagement in subtle and not so subtle ways, sometimes even telling us how to aesthetically value. Film and music algorithms, content aggregation, TikTok critics, Instagram influencers, Netflix recommendations, targeted Google ads, and so on and on: these sources present us with select aesthetic goods and may even suggest that we value them in particular ways. (Arielli 2018)

Acquaintance and *Autonomy* are different in letter but similar in spirit. Both tell us to engage for ourselves in aesthetic life, one by emphasizing real contact with aesthetic value and the other by insisting that we do so using our own faculties and abilities. It would be surprising, then, if they did not have a common justification.

However, an influential treatment of *Autonomy* holds that the justifications of each are distinct. C. Thi Nguyen (2020a) develops an ingenious proposal according to which aesthetic valuing has an 'inverted' structure. We typically engage in inquiry and exploration to arrive at a correct view because inquiry aims at truth. Nguyen argues that aesthetic valuing inverts this arrangement: we care about arriving at true aesthetic beliefs for the sake of *the activity of forming them*: carefully attending, listening and interpreting, investigating, discussing, and so on. Aesthetic value bottoms out in the value of *aesthetic engagement*—not in whatever value we derive from possessing true aesthetic beliefs—and this is the source of *Autonomy's* legitimacy: you must use your own capacities because that is only what to access aesthetic value, the value of engagement. In this way, the justification of *Autonomy* falls out of the inversion of aesthetic valuing.

One might think that Nguyen would offer a parallel justification for *Acquaintance*. However, he sees the two principles as "arising from different considerations": "[*Acquaintance*] concerns what it is to be an aesthetic judgment, while [*Autonomy*] arises from our purpose in making aesthetic judgments." (2020a, p. 1137) Nguyen's view is that *Autonomy's* justification arises from normative considerations concerning aesthetic engagement, while *Acquaintance* concerns basic truths about the nature of aesthetic judgment. In other words, *Autonomy* is a rule

³For an earlier statement of aesthetic autonomy, see Hopkins 2001. See also Konigsberg 2012, Matherne 2021a, McGonigal 2006, and Moran 2012. The discussion of aesthetic autonomy traces back to Kant's third *Critique*, where he states that "it is required of every judgment [of taste] ... that the subject judge for himself, without having to grope around by means of experience among the judgment of others Taste makes claim merely to autonomy. To make the judgments of others into the determining ground of one's own would be heteronomy" (§32, 5:282). For discussion of Kant's view see Matherne 2021a.

that regulates aesthetic engagement, but *Acquaintance* is a principle, or perhaps a constitutive rule, about the nature of aesthetic judgment.

If *Autonomy* is a practice-governing rule, then we need to know what practice it governs and how it is justified within the practice. A natural thought is that *Autonomy* is a rule that governs aesthetic valuing. This is Nguyen's approach, and I think it is right. However, here I will argue that Nguyen's view faces pressure from three sources, resulting in a sort of Rock-Paper-Scissors dilemma. I begin by laying out the details of Nguyen's view (§2), which consists in the Inversion Account of aesthetic valuing, the theory of Engagement Value, and the Engagement Account of aesthetic value. I then argue that the Inversion Account undermines his engagement-centered justification of *Autonomy* (§3). The idea that *Acquaintance* 'arises from the nature of aesthetic judgment' undermines the Inversion Account (§4). And without the Inversion Account, the Engagement Account of aesthetic value is undermotivated, and so cannot be used to support *Autonomy* (§5). Ditching the inversion account of aesthetic valuing suggests a new engagement theory of aesthetic value (§5, cont.), but the new theory has problems of its own (§6). A theory of aesthetic valuing that emphasizes its social and communal character solves these problems (§7) and offers a straightforward justification of *Autonomy* that is of a piece with the justification of *Acquaintance*. In fact, it turns out that philosophers are wrong to think that these principles are different. When we are clear on the source of their justification, we can see that they are essentially the same rule (§8).

2. Nguyen's Account: Inversion, Engagement, and Aesthetic Value

Let's begin by teasing out the different parts of Nguyen's view—specifically the inversion account of aesthetic valuing, the account of the value of engagement, and the engagement account of aesthetic value. Here is a characteristic statement of the inversion account of aesthetic valuing:

[W]e perform the various aesthetic activities of perception and investigation for the sake of our involvement in the activity of seeking correct judgments, rather than for the sake of actually having made correct judgments. In other words, though the aesthetic activity of appreciation usually culminates in the issuance of aesthetic judgments, that activity is not made valuable by the issuance of those judgments or by their correctness. Rather, we aim at making correct judgments for the sake of engaging in the attempt to get them right...[T]he primary value of the activity of aesthetic appreciation comes from the *process* of generating judgments and not the *end-product*—the judgments themselves. (2020a, p. 1138)

According to Nguyen, aesthetic valuing inverts the relation between inquiry and judgment. In typical empirical inquiry, we engage in inquiry for the sake of arriving at a true belief about the correct answer to the question guiding our inquiry. The ultimate value of the activity of inquiry consists in being in the state of knowing the truth of the relevant belief. In aesthetic valuing, according to Nguyen, this is reversed. In aesthetic inquiry, we inquire into something's aesthetic value by engaging with it aesthetically. But the possession of true aesthetic beliefs—"actually having made correct judgments"—is not the primary value of this activity. Aesthetic inquiry itself is the point, and states of aesthetic belief take a back seat to the value of inquiring: caring about having formed good aesthetic beliefs *facilitates* our access to the true source of aesthetic value, aesthetic engagement. Thus:

(1) The Inversion Account (of Aesthetic Valuing): The primary value of aesthetic valuing consists in the process of generating good aesthetic beliefs and not in possessing good aesthetic beliefs. The value of possessing good aesthetic beliefs is derivative from the value of the activities involved in generating them.

The inversion account says that possessing good aesthetic beliefs has merely secondary value as a game-like placeholder goal whose value consists in the fact that trying to form them enables engagement. The point is not to arrive at such beliefs but to treat arriving at them as important so as reap the benefits of engagement. As Nguyen puts it elsewhere, “We don’t actually care about just having correct judgments about art. We care about being plunged into the process of aesthetic engagement...our real interest in aesthetic appreciation is in the process, and not the outcome.” (2023b, p. 92)

In this way, good aesthetic beliefs are like the goals of many games that also have an inverted structure (Suits 1978; Nguyen 2019): we set up goals and obstacles that are valuable only because they enable valuable activities of trying to meet the goals despite the obstacles. For example, putting a little ball in a little hole in the lawn is easy and uninteresting in itself. Doing so using only metal clubs and hitting the ball across long distances in a restricted number of strokes requires rare skill.

The inversion account of aesthetic valuing requires a theory of the value of engagement: aesthetic valuing is supposed to be driven by the value of engagement, not the value of having good aesthetic beliefs. So what is the value of engagement? In describing the value of “fully autonomous” aesthetic engagement Nguyen writes:

“A crucial part of the activity of aesthetic appreciation lies not only in the content and order of attention, but in the fact that the appreciator actively chooses where to direct their attention. An autonomous appreciator is an agent with respect to their attention. And that agency helps to cultivate a different kind of attention and a different mental relationship with the object of their attention. This is, in a very intuitive sense, what it means to be truly *engaged*. One analyses the input and decides which features to attend to next, which possibilities to explore. One inhabits one’s investigations more fully when one has to guide them from moment to moment.” (2020a, p. 1140)

Part of the value of engagement, then, is a kind of attentional freedom. In other places Nguyen emphasizes “lovely, careful conversations”, even with people we disagree with, as part of the value of engagement (p. 1141). In other places still he talks of “the process of perception, cognition, and interpretation” (2023b, p. 184) and of “deliberations, choices, reactions, and movements.” (2020b)

The engagement values Nguyen lists are many and varied, so let’s begin to fill things out in a pluralistic fashion. One source of the value of engaging with something, if there be any, is the value in appropriately interacting with it. The engagement value in using a well-designed can opener is the value in using the tool to open cans—the way it feels in the hand, the ease with which it detaches the lid—not the value of using it to keep napkins from flying away at a picnic. The engagement value of a yoga mat is the value in using it to do yoga—the feeling of grippiness in the fingertips while in down dog position and the confidence to go deeper—not

the value of using it as a picnic blanket.⁴ Thus part of the engagement value of *o* is the value *in appropriately interacting with o*.

Notice that this specifies the value *in* engaging with *o*. If appropriately engaging with *o* consists in some intrinsically valuable actions, then *o* has engagement value-in. This is narrower than the value *of* appropriately engaging with *o*, for all kinds of goods can arise *from* appropriate engagement, even when they are not present *in* the acts of appropriate engagement, and we might think that an action-type can have some engagement value while having no engagement value-in. Mowing the grass might be generally tedious, so lacking in engagement value-in, but without doing it one cannot enjoy the look of a sheered lawn. Another way to put this distinction is in terms of direct and indirect engagement value. Direct engagement value is the value in first-hand engagement. Indirect engagement value depends on direct engagement and arises from it. Having already seen the film (direct), we can talk about it (indirect); having already heard the album (direct), we can share it with friends (indirect); and so on. Nguyen works with an expansive notion of engagement value that includes both. The values of engaged perception and interpretation arise in the process of engagement, but lovely conversations about a film, for example, ideally take place after the film is over. Thus,

(2) Engagement Value: The engagement value of *o* is the value that can be realized from appropriately interacting with *o*.

Nguyen leverages (1) and (2) into a theory of aesthetic value:

With the rest of life, we are usually interested in getting our judgments and beliefs right. But in aesthetic life, we care more about going through the *process* of engaging with an aesthetic object than we do about actually having the right answers. Call this the *engagement account* of aesthetic value. (2023a, p. 91)

This passage (see also Nguyen 2019 and 2023b) is puzzling because a statement of the inversion account of valuing is not a theory of aesthetic value. So what exactly is the theory of aesthetic *value*? Nguyen never tells us explicitly. But given that valuing aims at the good, and given his emphasis on the goods of engagement as “primary” over having correct aesthetic beliefs—“our real interest in aesthetic appreciation is in the process, and not the outcome”—we can formulate a theory of aesthetic value in terms of Engagement Value. Here, then, is an attempt to capture what Nguyen repeatedly suggests:

(3) The Engagement Theory (of Aesthetic Value): the aesthetic value of *o* is the engagement value of appropriately interacting with *o*.

This coheres nicely with the inversion account of valuing, which tells us that the “process is the point” (2023a, p. 91): If aesthetic value is the value of appropriate engagement, then we can see why one might think that the goal of possessing good aesthetic beliefs is a kind of placeholder goal that is somewhat beside the point.⁵

Some obvious objections would need to be addressed. For one thing, surely there are non-aesthetic engagement values. Wearing comfy pajamas all around town is...comfy, but doing so might seem to be lacking in aesthetic value; Vollon’s *Mound of Butter* might make me

⁴ It is hot outside right now and I want to picnic in a park.

⁵ For another kind of engagement account, see Strohl (2022).

crave butter and seek a croissant, but the pleasure I take in eating it does not redound to the painting; meditating has engagement value but is not obviously aesthetically good; and so on. Secondly, the Engagement Theory owes us an account of “appropriate engagement”. We can profitably engage with things in all kinds of ways but presumably only some of those ways are aesthetically appropriate and confer aesthetic value. For example, I might have fun with a fine art charcoal portrait by folding it into a paper airplane or drawing mustaches on it, but the fun I have with it does not redound to its aesthetic value (and presumably diminishes it, since I am so bad at drawing that I cannot even draw a decent mustache).⁶

We will consider these issues more carefully below. Let’s call (1)-(3) *Nguyen’s Account*. In this way we can see Nguyen’s accounts of inverted valuing and engagement value as steps toward answering the value question—What makes aesthetic value *good*?—without committing to an answer to the demarcation question—What makes aesthetic value *aesthetic*? Perhaps the engagement theorist can insist that engagement value makes aesthetic value good while being pluralistic and open-ended about what makes some engagement good aesthetic.

3. Inversion and Autonomy

Zooming out a bit: recall that Nguyen’s basic idea is that aesthetic valuing is like a game. In many games, the goals are themselves easy to achieve and somewhat pointless—place a ball in a hole, travel a small distance—but we set out obstacles and rules that restrict our actions. Striving to reach the goal under the restrictive conditions creates opportunities for valuable engagement that would not otherwise arise. When it comes to aesthetic valuing, we could obtain good aesthetic beliefs from any number of sources—critics, art historians, friends, audio tour guides, and so on. But we set out various obstacles that restrict such belief-formation, and *Autonomy* is one such obstacle. If there were no such rule, then it would be permissible to arrive at one’s aesthetic beliefs without using one’s own faculties and abilities, thereby missing out on the values of engagement, i.e. the heart of aesthetic value. *Autonomy*, then, buttresses the Inversion Account and promotes access to engagement value.

But from another angle, one might wonder whether Nguyen’s Account really does support *Autonomy*. *Autonomy* entails *Testimony*:

Testimony: One may not accept (pure) aesthetic testimony.

Per *Autonomy* one must form one’s aesthetic beliefs using one’s own capacities. Accepting aesthetic testimony is a way of forming aesthetic beliefs without using one’s own capacities. So one must not accept aesthetic testimony.

Nguyen claims that *Testimony* is justified by the fact that it promotes engagement:

We permit testimony to raise doubt because adopting that norm will drive us toward greater engagement. That norm will generate reasons to look again and increase the likelihood of paying attention to works that can sustain deeper engagement. But we don’t permit deference to testimony in forming our judgment because that would cut off any deeper engagement. The norm that permits doubt from testimony is engagement-enhancing, but the norm that permits deference to testimony is engagement-terminating. The permission to doubt from testimony, but the prohibition on deference

⁶ Is there reason to be more permissive by ditching the ‘appropriateness’ constraint and allowing that engagement value in or from *any* kind of engagement is value-conferring? I doubt it, since some ways of engaging with aesthetic value are simply wrong and some are permissible but obviously not value-conferring.

to testimony, are good norms to have because, together, they sculpt the practice of aesthetic appreciation in a way that supports greater engagement. (2020a, p. 1148)

When it comes to the value of engagement, “getting [aesthetic] knowledge through testimony would defeat the whole point of the exercise.” (2020a, p. 1147)

But here there is a tension in Nguyen’s Account. Why would adopting another’s aesthetic belief “cut off any deeper engagement”? If aesthetic value is engagement value, then a belief about aesthetic value is a belief about engagement-worthiness. Our beliefs about what is engagement-worthy should spur us to *engage*, not stop engagement cold. Why, then, should it matter if the source of our aesthetic beliefs is someone else?

In other words, the *opposite* norm could also be justified by the value of engagement. Consider the following rule:

Acceptance: One may accept the aesthetic beliefs of others.

Let’s assume, as Nguyen does, that it is possible to accept the aesthetic beliefs of others. This might happen straightforwardly—a friend, critic, or curator says something has aesthetic value and you thereby believe it does. Or it might work through some kind of imaginative or empathetic effort—a friend says some film or album is good and you imaginatively adopt their sensibility so as to engage with the film or album as good. Surely adopting new beliefs about aesthetic value and pursuing their objects could be fun, lead to lively conversation, improve our understanding of other aesthetic points of view, and frame our ways of interacting with aesthetic objects in rich and rewarding ways, among other things. By adopting the aesthetic beliefs of others, we could kick off the pursuit of their objects, engaging with any and all aesthetic agents. Even better: in doing so our engagement is guaranteed aesthetic community with the source of our new aesthetic beliefs.

There seems to be plenty of engagement value in accepting the aesthetic beliefs of others, so an appeal to engagement value supports *Acceptance* as well as *Testimony*. The appeal to engagement value thus appears to support conflicting rules.

The problem with this is not necessarily that the rules conflict since there can be exceptions even to stringent rules. The problem is the fact that we should *not* permit the acceptance others’ aesthetic beliefs for whatever engagement value lies therein. But the reason why we should not conflicts with the Inversion Account: many of our aesthetic beliefs are precious to us as the individuals we are because *we* formed them and they partly constitute our sense of self. (Riggle 2015) Many of our aesthetic beliefs anchor and orient our aesthetic engagement across time and context. They are a kind of spring board in the ongoing project that is our aesthetic lives. They articulate our aesthetic selves and orient us in the rich and complex world of aesthetic value. From them we live on, returning to their sources. Through them we express ourselves and commune with likeminded others. We have to care about them, and some of them we care about as if our identity depended on it. Collecting the aesthetic beliefs of others undermines this fact, even if doing so sources aesthetic engagement value.

4. Acquaintance and Inversion

A natural move would be to block this result by leveraging *Acquaintance*:

Acquaintance: One’s beliefs affirming or denying aesthetic value must be based on one’s own engagement with the relevant objects.

Even if there is some engagement-value involved in accepting the aesthetic beliefs of others, *Acquaintance* says that one ought to refrain from doing so. Perhaps *Acquaintance* could then block the justification of *Acceptance*, and resuscitate Nguyen's defense of *Autonomy*.

The good news is that *Acquaintance* seems like an excellent candidate for support via the value of aesthetic engagement: If engagement is what matters in aesthetic valuing, then it is best that we base our aesthetic beliefs on first-hand engagement with their objects, even if adopting the aesthetic beliefs of others is a source of engagement value. Nguyen's Account could then include parallel defenses of *Acquaintance* and *Autonomy* as practice-governing rules, both supported by the value of engagement.

However, Nguyen (2020a, p. 1137) does not take this route and instead sees *Acquaintance* and *Autonomy* as "arising from different considerations": "[*Acquaintance*] concerns what it is to be an aesthetic judgment, while [*Autonomy*] arises from our purpose in making aesthetic judgments." (*ibid.*)

It is prima facie implausible that the two claims would have entirely different sources of support. But more troubling is the fact that if *Acquaintance* tells us what it is to be an aesthetic judgment, then the Inversion Account, which seemed so novel, is in fact trivial. If *Acquaintance* tells us what it is to form an aesthetic belief, then, in the terms of Nguyen's Account, *Acquaintance* says

Aesthetic beliefs must be based on first-hand appreciative experiences of engagement-value.

The Inversion Account says:

We care about forming aesthetic beliefs for the sake of engagement value.

Now interpolate *Acquaintance* into the Inversion Account:

We care about basing our aesthetic beliefs on first-hand appreciative experiences of engagement-value for the sake of engagement value.

This is trivially true given the Engagement Theory, which tells us that aesthetic value just is engagement value. It might look like the Inversion Account is rescued by *Acquaintance* but instead the whole idea of 'inverted' inquiry *goes missing*.

To preserve the novel Inversion Account Nguyen should reject his idea of a 'split-level' treatment of *Acquaintance* and *Autonomy* and treat them both as practice-governing rules. However, trouble with the Inversion Account remains. One might think that Nguyen can simply accept the importance of aesthetic belief by claiming that the value of our personal aesthetic beliefs is engagement value. And perhaps he could make the further case that, on the whole, the engagement value of our personal aesthetic beliefs *outweighs* whatever engagement value we would get out of adopting other people's beliefs. However, while this would preserve *Testimony* it does so at the cost of again threatening the Inversion Account, which requires the value of aesthetic belief to be 'secondary' to the value of engagement.

5. Engagement and Autonomy: A New Engagement Theory

Nguyen might then ditch the Inversion Account, but this is not without consequences. The account is the sole motivation for the Engagement Theory of aesthetic value. In a nutshell:

- (1) Aesthetic valuing is inverted (Inversion Account),
- (2) so engagement is the primary point of aesthetic valuing (Engagement Value),
- (3) so aesthetic value must be engagement value (Engagement Account),
- (4) so *Autonomy* legitimately constrains aesthetic valuing.

If we ditch the Inversion Account of aesthetic valuing, then the motivation for the Engagement Theory is lost and *Autonomy*'s support flags.

Two paths remain: Find another source of motivation for the Engagement Account or find another way to support *Autonomy*. Given the direct link between the Engagement Account and *Autonomy*, the former path is worth a shot. Another way to state and motivate the Engagement Account is to tie it to a theory of aesthetic practices and motivate it by showing how it *unifies* those practices.

Earlier we set aside the question of what makes engagement appropriate when it comes to aesthetic engagement. When we aesthetically engage we are typically acting in some specific aesthetic practice or other—breakdancing, landscape painting, interior decorating, folk song writing—and such practices have their own norms, values, and traditions. An engagement account can then ride atop a theory of aesthetic practices:

The Practice-Engagement Theory of Aesthetic Value: the aesthetic value of *o* is the engagement value of appropriately interacting with *o*, where appropriate interaction is defined by the actions sanctioned by an aesthetic practice in which *o* features.

Two questions stand out: What is an aesthetic practice? And what actions are ‘sanctioned’ by a practice?

As for aesthetic practices, a Practice-Engagement Theory has two options. One is Dominic McIver Lopes's (2018) naturalistic account of aesthetic practices. On this view, social practices are patterns of group action that are explained by the resources and mental states of the group. (p. 120) Among the explanatory mental states are norms, or “rules of action that agents follow given expectations about the actions or attitudes of other agents.” (*ibid*) Norms are established by social expectations about how people will act in the practice. As such these norms “come with minimal sanctions baked in” (p. 121). My action in a practice is appropriate if it satisfies the expectations of fellow practitioners. Those very expectations establish the practice's norms and explain why my actions conform to them when they do (p. 121). If my action fails to adhere to the rules, then I will fail to meet social expectations and I can expect to meet social consequences. The expectation of such social consequences reinforces norm compliance and thereby strengthens the pattern-establishing place of the norm in the practice.

Aesthetic practices in particular are constituted by “aesthetic profiles”, or patterns of correlation between the aesthetic properties of items in the practice and other properties those items have. These ‘other’ properties are typically non-evaluative properties that are more fundamental or that ‘ground’ or ‘determine’ the aesthetic properties. For example, a certain rhyme pattern might be *ingenious* in a rap song but *clunky* in a lyric poem. Or a certain jerky full-body movement might be *angsty* in a contemporary dance performance but *outlandish* in a classical ballet. (Walton 1970) In short, aesthetic practices deploy norms to correlate certain often more fundamental properties—movements, forms, color schemes, image-types, flavors, and so on—with aesthetic properties. The aesthetic properties can change as the more

fundamental properties stay the same, and the sources of change are the naturalistic norms of the aesthetic practice.

Another approach to aesthetic practices is *functional*. (Riggle, *Forthcoming*) On this approach, a practice is a pattern of action among agents that is explained by the values—along with the rules and conventions that serve those values—that the practice functions to realize. Practices have conditions of legitimacy and are justified only if their governing rules, values, or conventions can be justified. The Engagement Theory can appeal to engagement value as the highest practice-structuring good. So aesthetic practices are practices that function in various ways to realize engagement value.

As for sanctioned actions, there are two general options. The *internal view* (I) says that aesthetic practices sanction all and only those actions that conform to the norms or rules of the practice. This view aligns with the notion of minimal sanction that Lopes derives from his notion of a norm. The *external view* (E) expands the set of sanctioned actions. It says that the engagement-relevant actions are all and only those actions that are internal to the practice as well as those that are external to the practice but nonetheless promote it.

To clarify the difference between (I) and (E) consider a pop song. According to the Practice Engagement theory, the aesthetic value of a pop song consists in the value of the actions sanctioned by the practice toward the creation and valuing of the song. The internal view (I) of engagement value would include the values of *writing* the song and *appreciating* it as the aesthetic kind it is, *attending* to its content and configurational nuances, *playing* it in conditions appropriate for playing pop songs. The external view (E) would add a range of actions that promote the practice but are not strictly necessary for the specific practice to carry on: the engagement values involved in *sharing* the song with friends, *discussing* it, *imitating* it in one's own creative activity, *writing* about it, and so on.

If the Practice-Engagement Theory opts for an external view of sanction (E), then it can provide an account of the *unity* of aesthetic practices by providing an account of the unity of external actions. Such an account would seem impossible if the Practice-Engagement theory were to stick with the internal view of sanction (I). Each specific aesthetic practice sanctions very specific actions tailored to the practice: using just the right amount of vibrato in an aria; setting the text in sans serif font; pulling the espresso for exactly 25 seconds; releasing the spit valve on the trumpet during a rest; and so on. The very fact that aesthetic practices proliferate guarantees that no account of the unity of their internally sanctioned actions is possible, and that nothing general and normative binds aesthetic practices together.⁷

But the *external view* includes additional actions that *take up* the strictly required ones, and these are action-types that we see *across* aesthetic practices: discussing aesthetic value, writing about it, imitating and being inspired by it, sharing it with friends, using it as a means of self-expression, and so on. We do this with rap, ballet, abstract expressionism, literary fiction, comics, sculpture, and so on and on. We see these action-types across specific aesthetics practices because they enhance them by deepening, spreading, connecting, and socializing them. (Riggle, *forthcoming*) The proposal then, in sum, is that *external* engagement value is the kind of value that *unifies* specific aesthetic practices. Or, in other words, a practice is aesthetic when, only when, and because its rules, values, and norms can be justified by appeal to external engagement value.

⁷ Lopes (2018) embraces this result but it been the focus of some criticism. See e.g. King 2020, Matherne 2021b, and Riggle 2022 and Riggle *Forthcoming*.

This motivates the Engagement Theory independently of the Inversion Account and secures its justification of *Autonomy*. The spirit of Nguyen's original justification remains: we must use our own capacities lest we miss out on the values of engagement.

6. Aesthetic Belief and the Unity of Engagement-Value

The Practice Engagement Theory is a workable view, but reasons to worry remain. Does the Engagement Theory offer the *best* account of the unity of engagement value? Second, the view seems to inherit some rot from the Inversion Account: does the Practice Engagement Theory explain the value of aesthetic belief?

Take the second question first. To believe that something is aesthetically good is a certain kind of mental state. When we believe that, say, Mexican cuisine or minimalist design are aesthetically good we represent them as having a certain kind of value. As we discussed before, aesthetic beliefs are central to our individuality: it might *really matter* to someone that Impressionist painting, classic cocktails, or Tribe Called Quest are aesthetically excellent, such that if they magically woke up one day without the belief they would be deeply troubled at best, existentially unmoored at worst. We are often *committed* to our aesthetic beliefs in a meaningful, loving, or self-involving way.

The Engagement Theory says that aesthetic value is the value of engagement and engagement is action. So how can it explain the aesthetic value of being in a *state* of belief? Its value must be explained in terms of what the belief allows us to do—the engagement value it enables us to realize—and this thought is not without merit: falling in love with a source of aesthetic value, living with the belief that it is beautiful, opens us up to a wide range of engagement goods.

The problem is that having aesthetic beliefs is valuable in aesthetic life *independently* of any connection to engagement value. The value of being in a state of conviction about one's aesthetic loves is like the value of self-knowledge. It is good in virtue of its authenticity and truth; it is an achievement simply to be in such a worthy self-reflexive state and to cultivate and confirm one's sense of aesthetic self through continued engagement guided by those beliefs. People are worse off for not knowing who they aesthetically are, and people are better off for knowing who they aesthetically are, independently of the engagement values it enables them to access.

Another way to get at this is second-personally. There are certain people who shine as aesthetic individuals. Writers, musicians, dancers, models, actors, photographers, Bowie, Beyoncé, Massimo Bottura, Audrey Hepburn. These people seem to shine with aesthetic self-possession and have a certain value in virtue of possessing the individualities they have cultivated. This value is *aesthetic*—they are aesthetically wonderful individuals who inhabit and enhance the aesthetic world, and this value is grounded in their aesthetic beliefs. But while it is true that possessing such an individuality gives rise to values of engagement, it is doubtful that their aesthetic value as individuals can be *reduced* to such values. In addition to the valuable actions and interactions that their individualities enable, they simply *are* the aesthetic individuals they have crafted and are crafting. And that is a wonderful, indeed beautiful, thing.

The other question concerns the fact that 'engagement value' is not a *sui generis* value. Values of engagement consist in various other values. All the engagement goods that Nguyen mentions are clearly good in virtue of other goods—pleasure, community, freedom, creativity, achievement, experience—and these goods seem to metaphysically interact among themselves in various ways. The engagement theorist owes us an account of what engagement value

consists in and what those values have to do with *aesthetic* value. A quick survey of a few options reveals the challenges an engagement theorist faces:

Engagement Monism: There is a single engagement value.

Engagement Pluralism: There are many engagement values, all on a par.

Engagement Hierarchy: There are many engagement values, but they are hierarchically ordered and at least one is 'highest'.

The engagement monist might have easy enough time motivating their selection of a single engagement-value, since so many of the options have analogues in non-engagement theories of aesthetic value—pleasure, freedom, experience. Suppose that the engagement theorist selects freedom as the sole engagement-value. The challenge, familiar to all value monists, is to show how the many other values that obviously do feature in aesthetic life are either reducible to freedom or not in fact relevant to aesthetic value.

Nguyen's list of engagement values suggests he is partial to engagement pluralism. As we noted previously (end of §2), not all engagement values make aesthetic value good, so he would need to say which values are in and which are out. The obvious worry is that this cannot be done systematically, or non-arbitrarily. The values themselves are not unified. What do the values inherent in sharing, conversation, imitation, and social creativity have in common?

Engagement hierarchy is equipped to deal with the plurality of engagement value because it can say that pleasure-in-action and freedom-in-action are aesthetic good-makers but only one is 'highest'. For example, placing freedom at the top of the hierarchy, they might say that pleasure is good in itself but in aesthetic valuing pleasure matters for the sake of freedom. The challenge is to make the case for a 'best of all' kind of value in aesthetic life.

What the engagement theorist cannot do is appeal to a non-engagement value, for that would undermine the core idea that what makes aesthetic value good is fundamentally engagement-value. As I will argue in the rest of this paper, these two problems—the problem of aesthetic belief and the problem of the unity of engagement value—push us toward a different way of thinking about aesthetic value. On this non-engagement view, *aesthetic communitarianism*, the highest aesthetic good is aesthetic community. It unifies engagement-values in a principled way, affirms the non-engagement value of aesthetic belief, and supplies a compelling justification of *Autonomy*.

7. Aesthetic Communitarianism

Why do we care about aesthetic belief? The straightforward answer to this question is unconvincing: aesthetic beliefs are beliefs, and beliefs aim at truth, so we care about aesthetic beliefs because we care about truth. But if truth is all we cared about when it comes to forming and possessing aesthetic beliefs, then *Autonomy* and *Acquaintance* would be unjustifiable: why make the route to what matters, true belief, circuitous when direct routes abound?

The Inversion Account offers an answer by shifting attention away from possessing aesthetic beliefs and to the values of forming aesthetic beliefs, but in doing so it overlooks the non-aesthetic and non-engagement values of possessing aesthetic beliefs. In addition to truth, aesthetic beliefs have personal and social value. They are personally valuable because they capture something about who one is, providing one with a sense of self and an orientation in a rich, varied, and conflicting world of aesthetic value. Aesthetic beliefs are socially valuable too.

In forming them socially, we can collectively exercise and enhance our aesthetic capacities. And once formed, we can connect with others who have the same, similar, or complementary orientations to aesthetic value. Forming and holding aesthetic beliefs provides opportunities for joint aesthetic exploration, shared aesthetic understanding, valuable working and creative aesthetic relationships, and even productively contentious ones. In other words, among our aesthetic beliefs are our aesthetic convictions, our aesthetic loves and hatreds, our aesthetic interests and anticipations, beliefs that ground our creative and productive styles. As such, aesthetic beliefs constitute or capture something important about who one is, and this is socially significant, a source of valuable connection, social creativity, friendship, intimacy, and love.

Turning attention now to the practice-external engagement values. What unifies the value of sharing aesthetic goods, imitating and being inspired by them, using them as a means of self-expression, discussing and writing about them? Notice the tendency among these action-types: they are all *socially* oriented. Sharing with friends or fans, inspiring or being inspired, expressing oneself to others, conversing, and so on. External engagement values primarily function to promote specific aesthetic practices by *socializing* them.

This suggests that at a very general level aesthetic valuing is a social practice. Recent work in aesthetics makes the case that it is. (Riggle 2022, and Riggle *Forthcoming*). We create and display aesthetic goods for each other; we share the aesthetic goods we discover; we are inspired by aesthetic individuals whose aesthetic lives serve as models for our own; we love to discuss aesthetic goods and engage with them together; we dance, laugh, eat, sing, read, love nature together, and make aesthetic things for each other. Aesthetic life is profoundly social.

If aesthetic valuing is a social practice, then how is the practice structured? What are its norms, rules, or constitutive values? Considering the social character of our aesthetic valuing activities, here is a natural thought: the social practice of aesthetic valuing is governed by the value of aesthetic community. We imitate, share, express, display, and so on because doing so creates, sustains, and enriches aesthetic community.

This of course requires a theory of aesthetic community, and, obviously, aesthetic community is community between aesthetic valuers, or between people with their own aesthetic sensibilities. But putting it this way imports the notion of the aesthetic into the notion of aesthetic community. In fact, it is possible to define aesthetic community in non-aesthetic terms while retaining the distinctiveness of the value of aesthetic community. Here is how: aesthetic community exists between two or more people when, only when, and because their capacities for *discretionary valuing* and *volitional openness* are mutually supportive.

Discretionary valuing and *volitional openness* are technical terms for familiar capacities. While much of our valuing is compulsory in some sense or other, we also have a capacity to value at our own discretion. We can choose what to value and how to value it among wide ranges of options. Our discretionary choices can be as broad as which aesthetic practices to join or as narrow as how to focus one's imagination or direct one's attention when engaged in the practice. As Nguyen puts it, "A crucial part of the activity of aesthetic appreciation lies not only in the content and order of attention, but in the fact that the appreciator *actively chooses* where to direct their attention." (Nguyen 2020a, p. 1139, my italics) Discretionary valuing is present or possible in a range of practices but no practice *centers* the capacity as firmly as the practice of aesthetic valuing. Aesthetic valuing allows, encourages, and rewards choice between styles of dance, genres of music, traditions of painting, cuisines, clothing styles, interior designs, senses of humor, kinds of cars, and so on and on. As we exercise this capacity, we establish patterns of discretionary valuing that constitute our individualities.

The capacity for volitional openness is the capacity to seek out, be immediately responsive to, and engage with the value in one's immediate environment. Doing so typically requires the ability to discount or temper one's everyday modes of agency and open oneself up—in action, feeling, and thought—to present or even potential value. Again this capacity is deployed in other practices, but the practice of aesthetic valuing calls on and cultivates it far more than any other practice. Many artworks are designed to exercise this capacity by absorbing us in images, forms, sounds, sensations, performances, or environments. We love the beauty of many natural environments, for example, because they so easily put us in a volitionally open state.

The social practice of aesthetic valuing yokes these capacities together and calls on us to exercise and improve them *socially*. The practice is essentially a collective recognition of the fact that there is a benefit to deploying these two capacities *in tandem* and there is a benefit to doing so *socially* or together with other practitioners. At the individual level, the capacity for discretionary valuing is benefitted by the capacity for volitional openness: in being volitionally open to value we can expand, deepen, or transform our patterns of discretionary valuing. And having patterns of discretionary valuing can deepen and enhance our exercise of volitional openness—think of the way a chef can engage with the value of random food ingredients, or the way a jazz pianist can improvise with an unfamiliar band. When we exercise these capacities socially, we are confronted with alternative patterns of discretionary valuing and new sources of volitional openness—the sources we create in addition to the sources we *are*, as discretionary and volitionally open valuers. Aesthetic community is the relationship that exists between people whose social exercise of these capacities is mutually beneficial.

Because we can define the practice of aesthetic valuing in terms of aesthetic community and we can define aesthetic community non-aesthetically in terms of the social exercise of discretionary valuing and volitional openness, we can define aesthetic value in terms of the practice of aesthetic valuing: aesthetic value is what is worthy of engagement in the social practice of aesthetic valuing.

This theory retains the thought that aesthetic value is a distinctive value—its goodness does not consist in the goodness of some more generic value like pleasure or achievement. Aesthetic community is a distinctive value in virtue of yoking together and socializing the exercise of distinctive capacities. And the emphasis on the exercise and improvement of these capacities provides a way to unify engagement value: the *aesthetic* values of engagement are those that are community-oriented exercises of discretionary valuing or volitional openness. I might find value in looking more closely at a painting, absorbing myself in an action movie, experiencing and discussing the architecture with you, sharing the new album, cooking for the dinner party I am hosting, and so on.

Finally, the importance of aesthetic belief for the aesthetic communitarian should be obvious. Aesthetic beliefs have personal and social value because they capture how we have exercised the powerful capacities at the heart of aesthetic valuing, discretionary valuing and volitional openness. Individuality is the badge of a practitioner's honor, its cultivation and expression the ticket to aesthetic community. Our aesthetic beliefs reflect our engagement in the social practice of aesthetic valuing and our expressions of aesthetic belief in word and deed are the first point of communal contact.

8. Aesthetic Autonomy in Community

We are now in a position to revisit *Autonomy*:

Autonomy: One must arrive at one's own aesthetic beliefs through the use of one's own faculties and abilities.

The communitarian justification of *Autonomy*, as a rule that governs the practice of aesthetic valuing, is straightforward. While there might be myriad ways to arrive at an aesthetic belief, one must follow the rule: form your own aesthetic beliefs by using your own faculties and abilities. Why? Because the practice of aesthetic valuing *just is* the practice of deploying and developing certain capacities and doing so communally, via the social cultivation, expression, and support of our exercise of those capacities. Aesthetic beliefs matter because the practice requires their social expression and encourages their social development. And it matters that one's aesthetic beliefs be one's own in the sense that they are the product of one's exercise of discretionary valuing and volitional openness. Forming aesthetic beliefs in other ways is, unless it supports the practice in some way or other, simply not engaging in the practice.⁸

It follows that aesthetic autonomy is a social phenomenon—one's aesthetic autonomy depends on the actions and aesthetic autonomy of other aesthetic practitioners.⁹ An individual enjoys aesthetic autonomy to the degree that they form their aesthetic beliefs through the use of their aesthetic capacities, but the development, expression, and typical use of those capacities in the practice of aesthetic valuing is social. Restrictions on the social expression, exercise, or improvement of aesthetic capacities are restrictions on autonomy. This has interesting implications for what we might call aesthetic social justice.¹⁰

One area of such concern centers on the way technology directs the use of our aesthetic capacities. Consider Nguyen's 'Audio Tour' case (2020a, p. 1132):

Brandon considers himself to be an art-lover. Whenever he goes to a museum, he rents the audio tour and explores the museum at its direction. He looks at the paintings he is told to look at, studies those details which are called to his attention, and always assents to the audio tour's judgment of the quality, importance, and aesthetic properties present based on those details. He never looks for any details that aren't specified by the audio tour, nor does he ever form aesthetic judgments without the explicit guidance and suggestion of an audio tour. But he does make sure to look at each specified painting, and to find and note any specified detail, before allowing himself to accept the suggested judgment. And he only accepts the suggested judgment when he sees the relevant aesthetic properties for himself, after permitting his attention to be entirely directed by the audio tour. Furthermore, he conducts his entire aesthetic life in this manner. He does not use the audio tours as a jumping-off point for future exploration, but always seeks expert guidance to direct his engagement with any artwork he encounters. He never attempts to establish his own views when such guidance is unavailable.

⁸ For further discussion of how there can be principled exceptions to these rules, see Riggle (ms).

⁹ Walden (2023), from a different angle, also grounds the force of *Autonomy* in its social import: "The legislation of aesthetic experience requires each of us to make a judgement based on our own best understanding of the relevant aesthetic categories. Without these sincere judgements, there could *be* no genuine aesthetic proposals, just echoes of echoes. And this, I am suggesting, is one source of the demands of aesthetic autonomy: It reflects our responsibility to *do our part* in the collective activity of aesthetic legislation." (p. 1269)

¹⁰ Matherne (ms.) discusses the social theories of aesthetic autonomy in Schiller and Germaine de Staël, with a fascinating emphasis on the latter's aesthetic mistreatment as a woman writing in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Nguyen claims that Brandon is following the *Acquaintance* rule on the grounds that he engages with the works first-hand. Yet something is clearly deficient about the way Brandon lives his aesthetic life. As Nguyen diagnoses the problem, Brandon is ‘aesthetically subservient’:

He is failing to reach his conclusions through the application of his own faculties and resources. He is letting another direct his attention and suggest interpretations and conclusions. Though he is certainly engaging some of his capacities, such as the ones required to see details and to grasp interpretations, he is not engaging his higher-order capacities for aesthetic agency. He isn’t choosing which details to attend to. He isn’t forming his own interpretations or using them to guide his attention and investigation. He is not entirely lacking in aesthetic autonomy, but he is missing a substantial part of it. (Nguyen 2020a, p. 1133)

Nguyen’s diagnosis seems right, but notice that the Engagement Theory does not quite capture what is wrong with Brandon’s behavior. Brandon *is* realizing engagement value. And if you have ever experienced a good audio tour, then you know that Brandon is probably realizing a *whole lot of high-quality* engagement value. Audio guides are often profoundly illuminating, opening us up to works that we would otherwise entirely overlook and putting us in a position to value them in vivid and enriching detail. If *Autonomy* merely requires us to engage some faculties or other so as to realize engagement value, then it is misleading to say that there is something deeply *wrong* with Brandon’s behavior. He is realizing engagement value but could be realizing more, and as such he merely falls short of an ideal that we all frequently fall short of. And yet, something *does* seem rather deeply *wrong*, not merely less than ideal, with how Brandon is living his aesthetic life. The Engagement Theory does not fully capture it.

Aesthetic communitarianism does. It does not highlight some capacities or other—it specifically emphasizes discretionary valuing and volitional openness. It thus suggests a more specific version of *Autonomy*:

*Autonomy**: One must arrive at one’s own aesthetic beliefs through the use of one’s own aesthetic capacities.

This formulation makes it crystal clear that *Autonomy* is a rule specifically for the practice of aesthetic valuing. The relevant capacities are the aesthetic capacities that are central to the practice of aesthetic valuing: discretionary valuing and volitional openness. The communitarian emphasis on these capacities is independently motivated. Furthermore, it is possible to arrive at aesthetic beliefs via alternative routes—or, at least, nothing in aesthetic communitarianism rules the possibility out and within certain constraints allows it (Riggle (ms)). Therefore, we can say that *Autonomy** is a substantive rule, one that provides a legitimate constraint that is possible to violate by arriving at aesthetic beliefs without using one’s aesthetic capacities.

*Autonomy** allows us to say that Brandon is not merely falling short of an ideal. By relying exclusively on the directives of the audio guide he is violating an important rule of aesthetic life. He is failing to deploy and develop his own capacity for discretionary valuing, and we can read much of what Nguyen says in this light: “[Brandon] isn’t choosing which details to attend to. He isn’t forming his own interpretations or using them to guide his attention and investigation.” (Nguyen 2020a, p. 1133) The problem is not that he is not engaged; it is that he is engaged in a way that fails to deploy the capacity for discretionary valuing. Perhaps to some extent he is exercising his capacity for volitional openness—he is, after all, open to the values that the audio guide emphasizes—but only in a way that is highly constrained and entirely

directed by outside sources. By *always and only* following the guide, Brandon systematically rules out being volitionally open to any values that are not highlighted by audio guides. In this way we can say that his practice of aesthetic valuing is systematically and diachronically defective. He is failing to use his aesthetic capacities; he is violating *Autonomy**.¹¹

This is compatible with the thought that audio guides and other technologies can improve our aesthetic lives by directing the use of our aesthetic capacities and helping us develop them. Audio guides are not unlike critics, art teachers, or friends who invite us to engage in ways they find worthy. Dangers arise when we treat these invitations as requirements and (like Brandon) neglect to create our own.

One might think that at least Brandon is satisfying *Acquaintance*:

Acquaintance: One's beliefs affirming or denying aesthetic value must be based on one's own engagement with the relevant objects.

After all, he is engaging first-hand with the works in the Audio Tour. But a rule that tells us merely to engage first-hand is a nearly empty rule: there are myriad ways of engaging first-hand with sources aesthetic value that fall well short of the practice of aesthetic valuing. Again, what matters is not some engagement or other but specifically engagement that deploys aesthetic capacities. So we can also reformulate this rule to be specifically about the practice of aesthetic valuing:

*Acquaintance**: One's beliefs affirming or denying aesthetic value must be based on engagement with the relevant objects using one's aesthetic capacities.

Now notice what these slight revisions do: they reveal that *Acquaintance** and *Autonomy** are the same rule. Both come down to the claim that if you are going to engage in aesthetic valuing and form beliefs about aesthetic value then you must do so by using the aesthetic capacities that are central to the practice of aesthetic valuing. The rule prevents you from taking testimony from others (use your own aesthetic capacities!). It tells you not to accept even good inductive inferences whose conclusions concern sources of aesthetic value you have yet to experience (use your own aesthetic capacities!). And it tells you not to be like Brandon (you get the picture).

Conclusion

Autonomy is a rule that governs aesthetic valuing, and so its justification should be grounded in a theory of the normative structure of aesthetic valuing. Nguyen's general approach gets that right. But trouble lurks in the details: his Inversion Account of aesthetic valuing misses the importance of aesthetic belief; his theory of Engagement Value seems to conflict with *Testimony*; and even an improved version of the Engagement Theory of aesthetic value faces serious challenges.

Perhaps there are good ways of handling these problems within the general contours of Nguyen's Account. Alternatively, Nguyen might take up a less ambitious position that sees aesthetic valuing as any valuing governed by the rules of *Autonomy*, *Acquaintance*, and *Testimony*

¹¹ The problem with Audio Guide also arises with a range of digital technologies that direct our aesthetic activities by automating and externalizing our aesthetic decisions in ways that are conditioned by a non-aesthetic market incentive to keep users engaged with the platform. See Arielli (2018) for discussion of digital aesthetic technologies.

(and perhaps others), along with a mere genealogical account of how those rules came to preside over the practice. But a better route is to opt for aesthetic communitarianism, which embraces the social and personal value of aesthetic belief and has no trouble unifying aesthetic engagement value. There is even a signing bonus in the offing: stop fussing about supposed differences between *Acquaintance* and *Autonomy*. They are sourced in the same goods, and, in fact, they are one and the same rule.

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