

AESTHETICS AND THE INTELLECT

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AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE AND INTELLECTUAL PURSUITS

The main aim of this paper is to examine the practice of describing intellectual pursuits in aesthetic terms, and to investigate whether this practice can be accounted for in the framework of a standard conception of aesthetic experience. Following a discussion of some historical approaches, the paper proposes a way of conceiving of aesthetic experience as both epistemically motivating and epistemically inventive. It is argued that the aesthetics of intellectual pursuits should be considered as central rather than marginal to our philosophical accounts of aesthetic experience, and that our views about the relation between the aesthetic and cognitive domains should be reconfigured accordingly.

Beauty is diverse in character: beautiful objects include works of art as well as views of nature, beautiful bodies as well as beautiful voices and beautiful thoughts.

— Władysław Tatarkiewicz (1980, p. 153)

I

To regard the world aesthetically is to engage with the aesthetic character or aesthetic value of the objects of our experience. Most of the things we relate to aesthetically have shapes, colours, sounds and sizes, and are available to us through ordinary sense perception. Sculptures, gardens, furniture, flowers, paintings, sunsets and more form the backbone of the modern conception of aesthetic experience on which our philosophical theories rest. Let us call the practice of enjoying or engaging with these kind of objects aesthetic practice (a). Many other objects of aesthetic appreciation, however, seem to differ in this respect, and do not afford straightforwardly sense-perceptual manifestations. When we describe, say, philosophical reasoning, mathematical and scientific demonstrations, and certain works of conceptual art in aesthetic terms, we attribute aesthetic

value to objects of experience which are knowledge-oriented and which do not have such perceptual presence.¹ Let us call this aesthetic practice (b).

In our everyday lives, the broad span of our aesthetic attributions is largely unproblematic, in virtue of clashing with neither our natural inclination to discern aesthetic qualities in many different kinds of context nor our ability to communicate efficiently with each other about them. From a philosophical perspective, however, the same variety presents us with a serious difficulty. Driven by the ambition to provide a unified definition of the concept at the heart of such a diverse set of practices, our standard conception of the aesthetic effectively disavows (b) as a genuine instance of aesthetic experience. According to this standard conception, to experience something aesthetically we need to have first-hand perceptual acquaintance of the object of appreciation—we need to see, touch, hear, or otherwise directly perceive it. What is more, we need to enjoy the distinct pleasure or feeling taken in the aesthetic value of this object. The foundations of this standard conception, laid principally in philosophical theories of the eighteenth century, reflect a commitment to versions of aesthetic empiricism and aesthetic hedonism undoubtedly better suited to capturing and accounting for aesthetic practice (a).

One of the main questions this paper sets out to address is the extent to which a standard conception of this kind and its inherent proclivity towards (a) serves us well in aesthetics. In particular, what room (if indeed any) does it leave for the putative objects of aesthetic experience which fall short of the requirements on which it rests? More pertinently, is there a place for (b) in our philosophical understanding of the aesthetic?

Prima facie, two solutions seem available to us. One might argue that it is just a mistake to describe objects of appreciation that are not available to us in ordinary sense perception in aesthetic terms. Given that (b) fails to meet the perceptual requirement, we are to conclude that it must be discounted as a genuine case of aesthetic experience. Alternatively, one might deem the practice to be derivative or secondary in some way, and downgrade (b) by consigning it to

¹ Although some of these cases do afford sense-perceptual manifestations, such as a geometric proof of the Pythagorean theorem or the material objects exhibited in Joseph Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs* (1969), for example, they are not the appropriate target of aesthetic appreciation. Our aesthetic attention is rather to be directed at the intellectual pursuit or process driving the formulation or materialization. For more on this point, see for example, [Davies \(2003\)](#) and [Schellekens \(2007\)](#).

the realm of figures of speech. Characterizing such objects of experience aesthetically then becomes a matter of metaphor or hyperbole. Clearly, neither of these options takes (b) seriously as an aesthetic practice in its own right.

Can we offer a better philosophical explanation of (b)? Why has this practice been referred, broadly, to the margins of our aesthetic experiential field, and are we right to accord it such a peripheral role? This paper will examine what it is to engage aesthetically with objects of experience that are not available to us in ordinary sense perception, or objects of appreciation characterized mainly by their intellectual character. As we shall see, the absence of perceptual availability is not the only feature which counts against mathematical and scientific demonstrations, philosophical reasoning, conceptual art and more being treated as bona fide objects of aesthetic experience. For the standard conception of the aesthetic tends to endorse the pleasure requirement in a way which drives a wedge between such objects of appreciation and any primarily intellectual or knowledge-oriented activity.² The strategy endorsed here will thus be to examine (b) in greater detail with a view to problematizing the precepts which underlie the standard conception of the aesthetic. The wider aim of this will be to move towards a revised account of aesthetic experience, which not only accommodates (b) but accords it a significant place in aesthetic theory. The aesthetic practices reflected in (b) can thus be taken as important to aesthetic experience in general rather than merely tangential or analogous to it.

II

A well-established standard conception in analytic aesthetics proposes the following two claims as axiomatic:

- i. Aesthetic experience must be grounded in first-hand perception.
- ii. Aesthetic experience must be characterized by pleasure.³

² Most famously, perhaps, we find this idea in Kant (2000, §1).

³ This standard conception is evident in a large proportion of the literature. For accounts which give particular emphasis to (i), see, for example, Sibley (1959, 1965), Mothersill (1984), Eaton (2001), Pettit (1983), Tormey (1973), and Wollheim (1980). For accounts which focus more on (ii), see, for example, Budd (1995), Dickie (1988), Goldman (2006), Gorodeisky (2019), Levinson (1992, 2002a), Mothersill (1989), and Walton (1993). Kant (2000) places equal emphasis on both.

Whereas (i) formulates a condition which must be met for aesthetic experience to arise, (ii) serves primarily as a qualifying feature of such experience, or as a condition for the experience to be, specifically, aesthetic.⁴ The two precepts are, however, deeply intertwined since on this approach it is only on the basis of first-hand perceptual experience that what is taken to be the relevant kind of pleasure occurs, a pleasure which is frequently thought, in turn, to serve as the basis for aesthetic judgement. The first precept thus delimits the kind of pleasure taken in aesthetic experience to one directly related to how the object of appreciation is presented to us perceptually. Similarly, once in place, the second precept generates reasons that underwrite the idea that aesthetic experience requires first-hand perception of the object of appreciation.⁵

While these tenets remain by and large axiomatic to our conception of the aesthetic, taken together they give rise to several problems. Most notably, it becomes difficult to provide satisfactory explanations of some commonplace aesthetic and artistic phenomena. These difficulties include, but are not limited to, the following four areas of concern. First, a commitment to this standard conception makes it difficult to specify exactly the role played in aesthetic experience by such things as relevant (art-historical) knowledge, aesthetic expertise more generally, and the testimony of others in the formation of aesthetic beliefs (Goldman 2006; Matravers 2005; Nguyen 2020). Second, the standard conception offers no straightforward account of the ways in which contextual factors such as socio-political backdrops or historical origins bear on aesthetic appreciation (Danto 1985; Livingston 2003; Silvers 1991). Third, it leaves little or no room for aesthetic experiences marked by displeasure, or indeed the lack of either pleasure or displeasure

⁴ Describing this view as standard is not to say that all philosophers working in aesthetics adhere to both precepts in this generalized way, nor necessarily to one of them in an unqualified way. Nonetheless, these precepts underlie a large proportion of the philosophical literature on aesthetics and the general terms within which we discuss aesthetic experience in general.

⁵ In a similar vein, Shelley (2019) has argued that what he calls the ‘default theory of aesthetic value’ arises from combining our assumptions about the perceptual requirement and aesthetic hedonism. This, as Shelley shows, leads to many of the problems which contemporary philosophers of aesthetics are engaged in trying to solve. While Shelley’s emphasis is on the conceptual fault line in the default theory in general, my own focus will be on how the example of non-perceptual aesthetic experience can help us revise our underlying conception of the aesthetic.

(Korsmeyer 2011; Schellekens 2007). Fourth, a commitment to the standard conception severely impedes our efforts to explain and integrate aesthetic practice (b), as well as the habit of attributing aesthetic character to other objects of experience which do not afford straightforward sense-perceptual manifestations, such as moral character (Paris 2018), or indeed literature (Lamarque and Olsen 1994).

In light of these concerns, much recent philosophical work has been directed at revising, adjusting, and further qualifying (i) and (ii) in order to render the concomitant problems less severe. On the one hand, we find suggestions of how to amend the perceptual requirement so as to accord a limited role to testimony in the formation of certain aesthetic beliefs (McKinnon 2017; Meskin 2004), allow for some degree of inferential reasoning in aesthetic judgement (Dorsch 2013), and extend what may be conceived as our perceptual resources in appreciating conceptual art (Shelley 2003). On the other hand, we find work attempting to broaden certain definitions of aesthetic pleasure (Gorodeisky 2019) as well as mitigating specific aspects of the hedonist approach in relation to aesthetic expertise, agency, and response-dependence (Davies 2003; Levinson 2002b; Lopes 2015, 2018; Shelley 2019; Watkins and Shelley 2012). The fact that these areas of concern are now prominent topics of research in our field bears witness to how influential the standard conception is.

In the context of these critical debates, this paper will address the specific issue raised by the fourth problem above, namely, accommodating (b) in our accounts of the aesthetic. My contention is that many of the difficulties that arise in connection with trying to make sense of the widespread intuitions about the putative aesthetic character of intellectual pursuits derive from a prejudice which, though fundamental to the standard conception of aesthetic experience, is not well-founded.⁶ The problem, it will be argued, comes from misconstruing the relation between aesthetic and cognitive activity, which can be seen as more closely related than the standard conception seems to allow.

⁶ This prejudice is the idea that because aesthetic experience is conceived as fundamentally sense-perceptual, and we as a result have little or no means of explaining the attribution of aesthetic character to things which do not afford straightforwardly sense-perceptual manifestations, it follows that our experience of such objects of appreciation is in fact not aesthetic.

III

How does (b) get sidelined in our philosophical accounts of aesthetic experience? A large proportion of the discussions central to analytic aesthetics locate their origins in two eighteenth-century theories, namely, those of David Hume and Immanuel Kant.⁷ As is well known, for Hume aesthetic pleasure is a response to the perceptual impressions afforded by objects around us. Importantly, the perception of beauty is phenomenologically indistinguishable from the experience of aesthetic pleasure, such that beauty is said to ‘belong entirely to the sentiment’ (Hume 1965, p. 9) through which we identify something as beautiful. Aesthetic pleasure is thus primarily conceived as a sentiment of approbation, a ‘peculiar delight’ (Hume 1964, p. 349), different from other kinds of pleasure in virtue of the endorsement it implies.

Kant also emphasizes the importance of pleasure in direct perceptual acquaintance. Indeed, formulations of the perceptual requirement often take their starting point from Kant’s analysis of the judgement of taste, and his observations to the effect that ‘whether a dress, a house, or a flower is beautiful is a matter upon which one declines to allow one’s judgment to be swayed by any reasons or principles. We want to get a look at the object with our own eyes’ (Kant 2000, §8). Aesthetic pleasure, for Kant, is also indispensable to the equation, characterized in his account in terms of its disinterestedness.⁸ In contradistinction to other kinds of pleasure, which have their cause in the satisfaction of a desire (or ‘interest’), aesthetic pleasure is understood as independent of any such desire or interest on the part of the subject. Crucially, it is this disinterested pleasure which anchors our aesthetic judgement, and which in turn leads Kant to uphold a fundamental distinction between aesthetic judgements and cognitive judgements (for example, Kant 2000, §1). That is to say, for Kant the difference between cognitive and aesthetic judgement is structural, reflecting two contrasting ways in which the subject relates to the objects of its experience.

⁷ The point here is one about the *foundations* of the standard conception as we tend to think of it today, rather than a historical observation about Hume’s and Kant’s aesthetic theories and the ways they may be interpreted.

⁸ That is to say, the pleasure does not depend on the subject’s possible desire for the object of appreciation (Kant 2000, §§1–5).

To be sure, both Hume's and Kant's aesthetic theories are far too rich to be reduced satisfactorily to the condensed axioms identified here with the standard conception as we think of it today.⁹ Nonetheless, we can easily see the main precepts of this conception at play in the way both accounts rely squarely on commitments to direct perceptual acquaintance with the object of experience and to the necessity of pleasure. Although the two requirements are integrated in different ways, both theories hold in common that the absence of the one or the other rules out bona fide aesthetic attributions—if something is not given to perception, or if it is not a source of pleasure, our judgements about it cannot be said to be aesthetic.

A rather different picture emerges, however, if we cast our historical net a little more widely. For it is worth bearing in mind that during the larger part of the history of philosophical explorations of aesthetic experience, non-perceptual objects of experience have generally been accorded a more important role than the one allowed it in contemporary accounts. For most ancient Greek and medieval philosophers, the conception of beauty advanced is one in which there is no contradiction implied by ascribing beauty to objects intelligible to the mind alone. Indeed, for Plato and Plotinus, for example, the beauty which we ascribe to objects of sense perception is understood to be inferior in quality to the beauty we ascribe to such exclusively intelligible objects (Plato 1978; Plotinus 2017). Similarly, while Augustine's conception of beauty is primarily theological, the transcendent idea of God being understood as 'beauty itself' (Tatarkiewicz 2005, pp. 59–64), Thomas Aquinas distinguishes physical beauty from spiritual beauty in order to privilege the beauty of souls over that of bodies (Tatarkiewicz 2005, pp. 257–62).

An interesting figure in this connection is the German rationalist Christian Wolff, for whom the experience of beauty consists first and foremost in the awareness of perfection, to be understood as the 'harmony' or 'concordance' (*Zusammenstimmung*) of a manifold or multiplicity of parts (Wolff 1965, §503). Aesthetic pleasure, for Wolff, 'consists in the perception of a perfection, where perfection is a completely rational quality: harmony, unity-in-variety, the unification of many particulars under a single universal concept or rule'

⁹ After all, neither account is committed to a simple aesthetic subjectivism, in that bona fide aesthetic judgements are held to enjoy a considerable degree of normativity, and both philosophers are eager to distinguish aesthetic pleasure from merely sensory gratification.

(Beiser 2009, p. 49).¹⁰ Crucially, for my present purposes, Wolff observes no fundamental distinction between the experience of beauty in relation to objects of the senses and that of beauty in connection with objects of the intellect: whether we find a sculpture or a mathematical equation beautiful, the phenomenology and epistemology is basically the same. Approached in this way, aesthetic pleasure is not, *pace* Hume, a mere sentiment which refers to nothing beyond itself (Hume 1964) (and so has not truth value). Rather, it is a pleasurable representation of a quality of that object, namely, its perfection. Importantly, these pleasurable representations can be true (when based on real perfection) or false (when the perfection proves illusory) (Wolff 1965, §513–15). In the words of Frederick Beiser, for Wolff as for some other rationalists, ‘[aesthetic] pleasure is a cognitive state’ (Beiser 2009, p. 9). The mind perceives harmony in variety or unity in diversity, a cognitive judgement through which the object of appreciation is experienced as beautiful.

Wolff’s account of beauty is not without its problems. Indeed, it is in many ways the difficulties inherent in the rationalist conception of aesthetic value that both Hume and Kant were trying to overcome in formulating their accounts of aesthetic judgement. The rigid distinction which Kant and Hume maintain between aesthetic and cognitive modes of engaging with the world, a distinction which has proved so decisive in the development of the modern standard conception of the aesthetic, is simply not apparent in Wolff’s understanding.¹¹ For Wolff, aesthetic judgement is in essence a kind of cognitive activity, one specifically directed toward the apprehension of perfection.

Undoubtedly there is an interesting historical story to be told about the way in which the marginalization of (b) seems to coincide with the emergence of aesthetics as a distinct area of philosophical inquiry in the second half of the eighteenth century, in particular in response to the formulation of aesthetics as the science of senses (Baumgarten 1970). Equally thought-provoking would be to consider the history of twentieth-century philosophical aesthetics and the apparent need for at least some analytic aestheticians to mark

¹⁰ Wolff is not unique in proposing a definition of beauty in relation to the notions of perfection and harmony in diversity. For a detailed discussion of Wolff and the rationalist tradition, see Beiser (2009). For more on the notion of perfection in aesthetics, see Tatarkiewicz (1980, 2005).

¹¹ Again, Wolff is not alone in this; see Goldie and Schellekens (2009).

out their territory and stave off the institutional danger, so to speak, entailed by the possibility of reducing aesthetics to a function of epistemology. For the present purpose, however, it will suffice to restrict ourselves to an analysis of the challenge to the standard conception implied by (b) more specifically in relation to aesthetic pleasure.

IV

Few would deny that engaging with intellectual pursuits can give rise to what seem to be aesthetic experiences. Bertrand Russell, for example, writes:

Mathematics, rightly viewed, possesses not only truth, but supreme beauty—a beauty cold and austere, like that of sculpture, without appeal to any part of our weaker nature, without the gorgeous trappings of painting or music, yet sublimely pure, and capable of a stern perfection such as only the greatest art can show. (Russell 1919, p. 60)

For Plato, philosophers should aim to ‘procreate beautiful discourses’ (Plato 1978, 210ab), whereas Polykarp Kusch, a Nobel Prize laureate in Physics, states that ‘Science shows us truth and beauty and fills each day with a fresh wonder of the exquisite order which governs our world’ (Kusch 1955). In a similar vein, for G. H. Hardy, ‘The mathematician’s patterns, like the painter’s or the poet’s, must be beautiful; the ideas, like the colours or the words, must fit together in a harmonious way. Beauty is the first test: there is no permanent place in the world for ugly mathematical truths’ (Hardy 1940, p. 14).

Of course, there is no shortage of similar reports about the putative aesthetic character of scientific discovery and intellectual pursuits in general, and the preceding quotations are merely an arbitrary if telling sample. The problem that confronts us, however, is whether the ascriptions should be understood as genuinely aesthetic.¹² Cain Todd, for example, refers to them as ‘masked epistemic assessments’, and claims that if we consider rationality to be founding and guiding in scientific enterprise, ‘appeals to aesthetic factors in theory assessment look to be entirely out of place’ (Todd 2008, p. 4). Ever since Kant, Todd points out, philosophers have been ‘suspicious of the

¹² For a recent discussion critical of the role accorded to beauty in some natural sciences, see Hossenfelder (2018).

aesthetic claims of scientists', raising the objection that because 'aesthetic judgements are unconcerned with truth and utilitarian ends, they must not be based on cognitive interest in attaining knowledge about something nor with assessing an object in relation to some purpose which it serves' (Todd 2008, p. 9). On this line, it is the disassociation of aesthetic experience from all cognitive interest which gives grounds for being sceptical about describing intellectual pursuits in aesthetic terms. The ascription of beauty to intellectual inquiry is, then, simply a category mistake. Let us call this the conflation problem.

Is the conflation problem intractable? Much here will depend on how we conceive of the relation between the experience of aesthetic value and the intellectual inquiry in question. From the handful of examples quoted above, while the various authors are keen to stress that the pursuits they are referring to should indeed be characterized in aesthetic terms, it will be clear that aesthetic experience is explicitly invoked as a kind of epistemic measure. As Hardy puts it, 'beauty is the first test' for mathematics, a gauge of truth. Aesthetic experience thus serves to evaluate intellectual discovery; if the ideas or patterns do not prove to be beautiful, they are not true. Although Russell avoids making a logical connection between the experience of beauty and the truth or otherwise of the mathematical phenomenon to hand, he nonetheless posits an intimate connection between the two. Equally, in Kusch, the picture which emerges seems to be one in which the beauty of science is ascribed to the knowledge the scientist has acquired, a knowledge which finds its confirmation partly in the pleasure we take in observing the 'exquisite order which governs our world'. For Plato, more generally, the supreme kind of beauty is directly connected to knowledge. As Socrates asks of Hippias, is not wisdom 'the most beautiful of all things'? (Plato 1871, p. 400). In each case, aesthetic character is primarily ascribed to truth attained or knowledge possessed.

We can now begin to see why such formulations about the putative aesthetic character of intellectual pursuits become susceptible to the conflation problem. In so far as scientific inquiry is understood as the pursuit of knowledge, in the sense that it has a defining interest in the cognitive products this pursuit yields, it runs against the common intuition that our aesthetic engagements are by definition disinterested and thus conceived in opposition to the cognitive domain in general. Given that most of the accounts mentioned above

seem to posit a necessary connection between truth and beauty, the conflation problem does indeed begin to look severe.

V

Any argument to the effect that our attributions of aesthetic character or qualities to intellectual pursuits are not genuinely aesthetic but, rather, epistemic ones, would draw considerable strength from the assumption that the putatively aesthetic pleasure which arises in connection with intellectual pursuits stems first and foremost from the attainment of truth or possession of knowledge. But is this the only way in which aesthetic pleasure can arise in connection with intellectual inquiry, or indeed the only way in which we describe such inquiry in aesthetic terms? The first thing to note is that there seems to be more to an intellectual pursuit than its epistemic yield. Of particular relevance here is the notion of process. After all, the idea of an intellectual pursuit covers a range of knowledge-oriented activities; we talk of demonstrations, thought processes, hypotheses, proofs, arguments, procedures, explorations, systems, (thought) experiments, and more. These are processes which unfold over time, and in which the ‘lived’ aspect—while dispensable from the point of view of knowledge gained—is an inextricable part of how we eventually come to acquire that knowledge. Although such activities remain for the most part reined in by an overriding teleology (ultimately that of gaining new knowledge), they cannot be wholly identified with their final result. They encompass a striving, a moving towards an understanding, where an incremental epistemic gain is characterized by the gradual unfolding of insight. Let us call this process of understanding ‘coming-to-know’.

What does this ‘coming-to-know’ consist of? Although an exhaustive account exceeds the remit of this paper, a sketch can be offered. The following aspects seem central: coming to see particular associations and interrelations; coming to discern how to establish new or wider connections and hypothesize about further ones; coming to feel or ascertain the weight of a specific factor or component, or of the broader implications of an idea; coming to apprehend events and phenomena in the context of a different theoretical framework. Roughly, this is a process whereby we come to perceive an order of

things, grasp proportions, and recognize how individual parts can be made to fit into a whole (Tatarkiewicz 1980, pp. 126–9). Coming-to-know thus has a strong experiential character. When we speak of ‘seeing’ what someone means or ‘feeling’ that something is right, we aim to communicate not just *that* we understand, but also that this gaining of insight has a certain phenomenology, where our ‘seeing’ is analogous to a kind of process of realization.¹³

It will be instructive at this point to return to Wolff and his approach to aesthetic experience. As has already been shown, Wolff’s rationalist account portrays aesthetic pleasure as continuous with our cognitive engagement with the world. The source of aesthetic pleasure is perfection; that is to say, a specific form of order or structure, the correspondence of a manifold or harmony in variety conceived in terms of how all the parts work together in the service of a governing idea. Since the highest good is the constant movement towards perfection, the closer we get to our goal, the more pleasure we feel.¹⁴ Aesthetic experience is thus driven partly by this process of striving. Wolff illustrates his theory with various examples, among them the human eye—considered in virtue of the way its constituent parts operate in unison in order to produce an accurate retinal image—and the clock (Wolff 1965, §503). In the latter, the aesthetic aspect of the experience is identified with the pleasure we take in coming to see the perfection of the object, with its cogs, levers, springs and framework all integrated seamlessly into the service of the object’s governing idea, that of measuring time. This ‘coming-to-know’ of the clock’s perfection is an experience gradually shaped by observing each individual part in action, grasping how they all work together, and thereby eventually comprehending how energy is converted into motion and motion converted into a measurable constant. Finding the clock beautiful is in this sense fundamentally connected with coming to understand how it works and discerning what the implications of its existing as such might be.

What can we learn from this example?¹⁵ The case of the clock might seem old-fashioned and be taken to suggest that Wolff’s

¹³ For more on the etymology of seeing as a form of cognition in, among others Aquinas, see Tatarkiewicz (2005, pp. 246–50).

¹⁴ For more on this point, see Beiser (2009, p. 48). Wolff’s account of this constant movement strongly recalls Plotinus’ conception of the experience of beauty in terms of a longing for a state of harmony and equilibrium.

¹⁵ In what follows, I do not claim to mirror Wolff’s philosophical intentions to the letter but, rather, to develop an explanation influenced by some aspects of his theory.

aesthetic approach is just another instance of the rationalist's typical delight in the idea of the world as a divine mechanism. However, at the time Wolff was writing his *Ontologia*, in the 1720s, the technology of clockwork was very much at the forefront of intellectual progress. The idea of a perfectly reliable clock was therefore an ideal, the achievement of which would represent a genuine advance in the field of human knowledge. The ability to measure the passage of time accurately, glimpsed in the aesthetic experience of appreciating the perfection of the design and execution exemplified by the timepiece, represented an opening up, as it were, of a new intellectual horizon. (Indeed, given that it was Wolff's contemporary John Harrison's perfected timepieces which solved the problem of longitude and revolutionized the safety and reliability of trans-Atlantic navigation, the horizon could even be construed as a literal one.) On an approach of this kind, then, the pleasure we take in piecing all the components together in order to understand the perfection in the clock's design can be considered aesthetic in the sense that it accompanies the 'seeing' process by which the perfection is eventually fully comprehended. The source of aesthetic pleasure is, in other words, the harmonious structuring of the different elements, or the propensity of these elements to cohere and unite. The richer the web of connections and the greater unity we discern, the more pleasure we experience.

The first feature of the aesthetics of intellectual pursuits which begins to emerge, then, is one whereby aesthetic experience can be *epistemically motivating*.¹⁶ That is to say, aesthetic experience can be part of what motivates our cognitive ambitions. Aesthetic experience might be said, on this line, to shadow our desire to understand the world around us, and play an important role in how such insights become available to us. By actively deploying one's beliefs and suppositions about the world and its contents, we stand, little by little, to expand and enhance our epistemic relations to it.

That aesthetic experience can be epistemically motivating in this way is, arguably, reflected in the fairly limited set of aesthetic

¹⁶ In social psychology, epistemic motivation is what drives our inclination to engage in theory-building and the generation of hypotheses, but also our need for cognitive closure. The underlying idea here is that an agent's epistemic motivation influences the process of acquiring knowledge. In interpersonal relations, epistemic motivation is the desire to process information thoroughly, and thus grasp the meaning behind other people's emotions. For more, see, for example, Boyle, Magnusson and Young (1993) or Amit and Sagiv (2013).

qualities we tend to employ in (b), or when we describe intellectual pursuits aesthetically. Besides the term ‘beautiful’, which figures prominently, we find adjectives such as ‘unified’, ‘coherent’, ‘harmonious’, ‘graceful’, ‘clear’, ‘subtle’, ‘elegant’, ‘cogent’, ‘balanced’, ‘symmetrical’, ‘precise’, and more. On the whole, these are terms which can be seen to capture a certain facilitation or promotion of epistemic progress, broadly conceived. No less interesting in this context are the more negatively valenced aesthetic qualities we tend to ascribe to intellectual pursuits, such as ‘clunky’, ‘discordant’, ‘gauche’, ‘stumbling’, ‘heavy-handed’, ‘one-dimensional’, and of course ‘ugly’. These, by contrast, are terms which tend to be associated with obstructing an epistemic process. At the very least, they are adjectives referring to qualities which testify to some form of engagement with the ‘machinery’, the mechanism or underlying structure of the object of appreciation.

The second feature has to do with a certain kind of creativity, or the way in which aesthetic experience can be connected to being *epistemically inventive*. For the pleasure we take in moving towards perceiving the clock’s perfection occurs not simply in relation to the delight in seeing that everything adds up, so to speak, but in the way we begin to glimpse the implications of this harmony in variety or unity in diversity for our epistemic associations with the rest of the world. The aesthetic awareness of such harmony or unity, in this sense, can be conceived as closely connected to a kind of coming-to-know the world in a new light, a light shed in large part by what we have come to understand in virtue of experiencing the particular object of appreciation and putative source of pleasure. To this extent at least, aesthetic experience seems to involve a pleasure taken in the ‘branching out’ of our thoughts and of new exploratory possibilities opening up in ways which at least sometimes lead us to alter or reset our individual perspectives on the world; the world around us takes on a different conceptual shape, and priorities and hierarchies are reconfigured accordingly.

This idea translates rather effortlessly to the domain of conceptual art, or perhaps even all art requiring a primarily intellectual engagement. For in our experience of such works we also find potential for epistemic inventiveness and perspective-shifting. As Noel Carroll has argued, to appreciate a conceptual work aesthetically is to engage in a process of seeking to understand the way in which the various constitutive elements of the work contribute and conspire to make the

work what it is (see also [Goldie and Schellekens 2009](#)). For this reason, we can ‘get’ an artwork without experiencing it directly; we can

have ... an aesthetic experience of it because [we] have had it reliably described in sufficient detail ... to comprehend the way in which the elements that comprise it suit (indeed facilitate) the purpose of the whole. ([Carroll 2004](#), p. 416)

Engaging aesthetically with conceptual art can, then, be conceived as getting involved in a thought process where novel connections and resemblances are suggested or pointed out in more or less coherent and credible ways. What the artwork brings or how it enriches us, on this line, is something akin to presenting a new point of view on the world in relation to a specific issue or topic. Relying on ingenuity or wit, works of art often prompt us to relate to a particular problem, phenomenon or theme in a different light.¹⁷

If aesthetic experience can be epistemically motivating and inventive in the ways described here, it becomes much harder to simply dismiss the practice of describing intellectual pursuits in aesthetic terms because of an alleged underlying incompatibility between the aesthetic and the cognitive. Wolff’s clock provides a helpful illustration of the way in which the aesthetic dimension of an intellectual pursuit can be conceived to include an incremental process of gaining insights and understanding which construes the object of appreciation also in relation to the world around it.

Aesthetic experience as we find it in (b), but also elsewhere, is not specifically targeted at knowledge acquisition. Rather, it has an open-ended character, not necessarily constrained to the achievement of a specific and communicable proposition or ambition, but instead better understood in relation to the perspective or epistemic environment it opens up for us. Even when we know every note of a Beethoven symphony, for example, or every line of T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, our aesthetic experience of these works can take the form of a process which we work through step by step with no

¹⁷ It is interesting to note that wit was central to the conception of aesthetics during the first half of the eighteenth century, when it was conceived of as the study of all branches of knowledge about human nature where beauty is central to self-improvement and self-understanding. For Wolff, all the arts belong to the art of discovery (*ars inveniendi*), and the main faculty required for engaging with such arts is, precisely, wit or ingenuity. According to Beiser, for Wolff, wit ‘consists in the power of noting the resemblances between things’ ([Beiser 2009](#), p. 55). For more on the role of wit in the emergence of modern aesthetics, see [Goldberg \(1958\)](#).

particular epistemic goal in mind (other than experiencing the work itself). After all, we often return to artworks we have already seen, heard or read, and we do so not just in order to reach the end of the work again, but so as to experience and enjoy the journey one more time; we rehearse a process we are already familiar with, often discovering something new—about the work, the world, or ourselves.

Let us briefly return to the relation between aesthetic experience (or beauty) and truth. It will be remembered from the claims made by Russell, Hardy and Kusch that beauty in science or mathematics is often considered a quality or characteristic *of* truth. In apparent contradistinction to this approach, Wolff holds that although aesthetic pleasure involves some epistemic awareness, it is not thereby identical to cognition *per se*, since it can arise from merely apparent perfection too (Beiser 2009, p. 61). To take pleasure in something, it is not necessary that we perceive a real perfection; aesthetic pleasure can also occur when we are in fact mistaken.¹⁸ This can be interpreted to suggest that the harmony or beauty attaches rather to the experience of intimating that something is or seems to be perfect, and not to any confirmation of this intimation. In this sense, as we have seen, aesthetic experience can be found at the level of the coming-to-know of intellectual inquiry, where the striving mind opens itself to the manifold possibilities of a representation rather than closes in around its certainties.

Consider a case in which our discernment of a particular clock's perfection is mistaken, and we learn that the clock loses several minutes a day. Typically, it might be argued, one might find it less beautiful on account of its failure to be the perfect timepiece we imagined it to be. In other words, we may still find it pleasing or beautiful in respect of the way the different components work together in order to measure time with sufficient accuracy to allow us to keep our appointments on any given day, but our pleasure will be diminished by the realization that it is insufficiently accurate to allow for, say, reliable calculations about longitude. What this tells us is that while we might find many intellectual pursuits to have an aesthetic character, such experience tends to be deepened or intensified by the way in which, as has already been mentioned, the pursuit in question opens up new epistemic environments to us. That is to say,

¹⁸ An example of a scientific hypothesis generally considered beautiful long after it has been proved false would be Kepler's explanation of the distances between the planets around the sun.

our aesthetic experience may well be enhanced when we feel the boundaries of our current epistemic environment yielding, as it were, in the light of our engagement with the object of appreciation. In this sense, it seems at least feasible to contend that Wolff's experience of mechanical perfection in a clock had a more profound character in the 1720s than today, in an era when accurate clocks are mass-produced, and indeed need have no moving parts whose relation to the whole can be experienced; and that what strikes us as aesthetically pleasing can be importantly entangled with the knowledge we possess at any given time.

VI

The basic premiss of the conflation problem is that aesthetic and cognitive activities have opposing aims. Where the first is understood to yield the kind of disinterested pleasure associated with aesthetic experiences more generally, the second aims for the acquisition of knowledge. The conflation problem thus holds that our aesthetic descriptions of intellectual pursuits must be mistaken, on the grounds that their aim is knowledge rather than aesthetic pleasure.

One need not deny, however, that pleasure can arise in knowledge-oriented pursuits. The conflation problem does not imply that such pursuits cannot yield pleasure, only that any pleasure they do yield is not aesthetic. Rather, such pleasure is understood in terms of a cognitive outcome, as pleasure taken in the solution of a problem or the determination of a concept. If the pleasure in question always coincides with the cognitive outcome yielded by the inquiry, or if that inquiry is exclusively characterized in relation to its product (and its truth-value), there is little conceptual room to argue against the charge that this kind of pleasure is, in fact, a kind of cognitive gratification. The conflation problem still has bite, in other words, if the pleasure—or indeed the experience—is exclusively conceived in terms of its cognitive outcome.

In the light of the preceding examination of the pleasures associated with the epistemic environments termed 'coming-to-know', we are now in a better position to see that at least some of the pleasures involved in intellectual pursuits cannot be accounted for solely in terms of cognitive gratification. One of the main ways in which aesthetic pleasure tends to be distinguished from other sensory

pleasures in standard accounts is in reference to its disinterested nature. While cognitive gratification can be conceived in terms of interested pleasure, the pleasure we find in coming-to-know seems to have a much more open-ended character, closely associated with the experience of enjoying ‘seeing’ the things which our intellectual pursuits make available to us. As such, it can only with difficulty be described as pleasure taken in the achievement of a desired outcome, or in virtue of a function fulfilled; rather, it can more aptly be described as a pleasure in the absence of these things, or in virtue of valuing the object of appreciation for itself. That is to say, as a kind of pleasure much closer to the kind of disinterested pleasure generally taken to be central to aesthetic experience.

Viewed in this way, the major obstacle to ascribing aesthetic status to the pleasure of intellectual pursuits loses its force. If intellectual pursuits are indeed capable of affording disinterested pleasures, then the grounds on which they must be excluded from the aesthetic fall away. This, in turn, should lead us to wonder what conditions could underlie our continuing to deny that the pleasure we take in intellectual pursuits, evoked by qualities such as harmony, unity, clarity, balance, and more, is indeed aesthetic. That is, we should ask what now motivates the claim that we conflate aesthetic pleasure with some other kind of pleasure. Given that we have distinguished at least some of the pleasures associated with (b) from cognitive gratification, and also identified at least a strong similarity between these pleasures and what is commonly meant by aesthetic pleasure, it seems that the only remaining motivation is the general prior commitment to a stringent separation of the aesthetic domain from the cognitive.

VII

The general aim of this paper has been to defend the view that it is possible to make room for (b) in our philosophical accounts of aesthetic experience. That is to say, describing intellectual pursuits in aesthetic terms need be neither a mistake nor a mere metaphor. In fact, our study of (b) so far suggests that aesthetic experiences can be closely connected to epistemic processes and encompass the yielding of a certain awareness or understanding. This, in turn, could help us

to see how at least some aesthetic experiences can be epistemically motivating and inventive without thereby necessarily losing their distinct aesthetic character. Of course, much remains to be said, and several aspects of the model sketched here require more detailed treatments. But central to the discussion has been the idea that the tendency to drive an uncompromising wedge between aesthetic and cognitive activity has led to a philosophical cul-de-sac which prevents us from being able to adequately explain many of our aesthetic attributions.

Reconfiguring our view of the relation between the aesthetic and the cognitive is no mean task. While there are important theoretical and phenomenological differences to uphold, some very well-established conceptual boundaries will have to be shifted or redrawn, and this will unsettle the order imposed by the central precepts as we tend to find them in the standard conception. Clearly, separating the aesthetic neatly from the cognitive has significant advantages, not least that of keeping the spectre of conceptual reductionism firmly at bay. Yet safeguarding through isolation is too high a price to pay if the resulting concept of aesthetic experience is one which fails to incorporate certain key practices.

In this respect, examining practice (b) may be instructive for how we conceive of aesthetic experience in general. For the way in which a certain development of our epistemic relations to the world can be part of such experience in connection with intellectual pursuits may also capture at least some aesthetic experiences occurring in different kinds of context. As touched upon above, many aesthetic engagements with the processes central to our experiences of particular artworks also encompass the gradual yielding of new perspectives and insights. On this line, such a development need not be considered the end product directly resulting from our aesthetic experience of the work—the aesthetic experience enabling the subsequent cognitive experience, so to speak—but rather, be part of that aesthetic experience itself.

Finally, let us return to the standard conception. Although what has been argued in this paper can undoubtedly be taken as a rejection of this conception, it is worth revisiting the issue in order to ask whether the intellectual pursuits we have been discussing really are as incompatible with the standard conception as tends to be assumed. This conception was originally characterized by two

precepts, namely, that aesthetic experience is (i) grounded in first-hand perceptual experience, and (ii) characterized by pleasure. Much here comes down to our willingness to accept the arguments above to the effect that at least some of the pleasures we attach to intellectual pursuits, and the coming-to-know process at the heart of our experience of them, can be understood as genuinely aesthetic in character. Certainly, where we can distinguish such pleasures from instances of cognitive gratification (and thus parallel the distinction between disinterested pleasure and appetite satisfaction), and also observe that they remain targeted at aesthetic qualities such as balance, harmony, and more, there are good grounds for understanding these pleasures as aesthetic. Accepting such an argument would then remove at least one obstacle for incorporating (b) into our standard conception.

The other obstacle to overcome relates to (i). To be sure, in so far as our engagements with the coming-to-know processes at the heart of our investigation rely on the point of view of a thinking and feeling subject, the obstacle already looks surmountable. More importantly, it will be remembered that, to some degree at least, the nature of the aesthetic experience of coming-to-know has been cast in broadly perceptual terms. It makes sense to characterize this kind of experience in such terms because, roughly as in practice (a), we seem to be involved in ‘seeing’, ‘discerning’, ‘feeling’, ‘apprehending’, and ‘grasping’ objects of appreciation. Depending, then, on the extent to which one is willing to extend the notion of perception to the cases described in §V, the phenomenology of aesthetic experience can, arguably, be held to retain its first-hand perceptual character regardless of whether the object of our experience is made available to us through our senses or not (see, for example, [Shelley 2003](#)).

On this approach, the reasons for restricting ourselves to concepts of aesthetic experience devoid of meaningful connections with even limited cognitive aspirations (such as being epistemically motivated and inventive) seem insubstantial and unconvincing. As we have seen, the current tendency to treat the aesthetic and cognitive domains as exclusive and opposing is, in many ways, something of a historical anomaly. One of the aims of this paper has been to argue that there is at least room to construe the standard conception in such a way that the relation between the aesthetic and cognitive is shown to be less clear-cut than is usually assumed, while at the same time retaining the distinct character and phenomenology of aesthetic

experience. This suggests that the real philosophical advantage may lie in taking (b) as a central rather than marginal aesthetic practice, and that formulating a systematic aesthetics of intellectual pursuits may be the key to unlocking a richer understanding of the value of aesthetic experience.

VIII

What started off as a critical inquiry into how we might accommodate the practice of describing intellectual pursuits in aesthetic terms in our conception of the aesthetic has led to an investigation of the aesthetic experience of knowledge-oriented pursuits and the relation between aesthetic and cognitive activity more broadly. The investigation began by pointing to how less historically mainstream philosophical approaches can offer ways of conceiving of aesthetic experience which are not hostile to the connection with intellectual pursuits but, rather, sympathetic to a notion grounded in the process of striving towards an enhanced understanding of how things may fit together and cohere into a greater whole. This idea was freely interpreted in more contemporary terms as a process of working our way towards a possible epistemic gain, a coming-to-know. What is at stake in examining practice (b) is, then, not merely the ambition of trying to incorporate peripheral or ‘rogue’ cases of aesthetic experience into theoretical explanations which suit practice (a) but, rather, of doing justice to the epistemically explorative dimension of aesthetic experience in general.

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