

Aesthetic Obligations  
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“I *must* hear the new Lady Gaga album.” “You *have* to play all the notes.” “He *shouldn’t* wear those colors together.” “We *ought* to fund more arts programs.” “The moral *rights* of the author have been asserted.”<sup>1</sup> Can sentences like these express genuine normative requirements, or obligations? If so, what could account for their binding force?

These are the two major questions about aesthetic obligations: whether there are any and what their source would be if so. Philosophers tend to have two motivations, broadly speaking, for asking these questions. One is defensive, aiming to resist the pervasiveness of the moral. Obligations, and normativity more generally, have historically been theorized primarily in the moral domain, and the fact that its commands seem to have such powerful force implicitly prioritizes morality on the theoretical agenda. If there are aesthetic obligations, then that would put the aesthetic domain on a par with morality, at least in that respect. But this is a dubious motivation, as it is increasingly recognized that—or at least seriously debated whether—obligations can arise in many non-moral normative domains, including etiquette, the law, prudence, and epistemology.<sup>2</sup> And it is in any case possible that moral obligations always defeat non-moral obligations.<sup>3</sup> A better, second motivation is therefore simply to explore the landscape internal to aesthetics as a normative domain, before attempting to make cross-domain comparisons. We might wonder: what kind of aesthetic life do we have most reason to live?<sup>4</sup> To what extent are aesthetic choices even governed by normative considerations? Do any of those considerations ever have the force of obligations?

Asking whether there are any aesthetic obligations requires knowing about their alleged contents: what are these purported obligations *of* or *to*? One initial possibility to set

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<sup>1</sup> Examples like these are all discussed in the literature: the first in Cross (2017a) and Kubala (2018), the second in Rohrbaugh (2020) and Kubala (2020), the third in Goldman (2010) and Chisholm (1991), the fourth in Beardsley (1970) and Elgin (2009), and the fifth in Hick (2017) and Gover (2018).

<sup>2</sup> On etiquette, see, e.g., Foot (1972), Buss (1999), and Woods (2018). On the law, see the papers in Plunkett, Shapiro, and Toh (2019). On prudence, see, e.g., Dorsey (2013) and Fletcher (2019). On normative epistemology, see, e.g., Feldman (1988) and Ryan (2003).

<sup>3</sup> This is the thesis of *moral rationalism*: we always have most overall reason to do what we are morally required to do. Alternatively expressed, if we are *morally* required to  $\phi$ , then we are *normatively* (or *rationally*, or *all-things-considered*) required to  $\phi$ . Notice that the truth of moral rationalism is compatible with the existence of non-moral requirements. For defense of moral rationalism, see Darwall (2006) and Portmore (2011); one important challenge is Dorsey (2016).

<sup>4</sup> This is my version of what Lopes (2018) calls the ‘primitive question’ of aesthetics. Lopes’ primitive question is: what is the place of aesthetic value in the good life? He takes the notion of a primitive question from Mothersill (1984), who asked: why does this object move me?

aside is that aesthetic obligations are obligations *of liking* or *to like*.<sup>5</sup> Consider the widely endorsed normative claim that ‘one ought to appreciate the beautiful’. The relevant notion of appreciation is plausibly construed as a kind of affective liking. But obligations of liking face two major objections. First is the principle of ‘ought implies can’: many believe that we cannot have an obligation to appreciate an object we are not capable of appreciating.<sup>6</sup> A related objection is that aesthetic liking must be spontaneous, or undetermined by what anyone commands. These objections motivate a reanalysis of obligations to appreciate the beautiful as obligations to put oneself in a position to appreciate.<sup>7</sup> We can extend this reanalysis more broadly and focus on obligations not to *feel* but to *act*, where the relevant action-types include mental actions such as attention and judgment. If there are aesthetic obligations to act, then the domain of the aesthetic is a *practical* one.<sup>8</sup>

Section I examines the general, domain-neutral notion of an obligation. Section II presents a critical discussion of six quick arguments often discussed in the literature: three against the existence of aesthetic obligations, and three in favor. Section III considers the sources of aesthetic obligation and the question of whether there are aesthetic obligations not ultimately grounded in moral norms. Section IV closes with questions for future work.

## I. General Features of Obligation

Assume that there are aesthetic reasons: aesthetic considerations that count in favor of actions and/or attitudes.<sup>9</sup> There is a thin notion of aesthetic obligation or requirement that simply consists in doing what the balance of aesthetic reasons says (Whiting 2020; Kubala 2020). The debate about aesthetic obligations I focus on here

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<sup>5</sup> For debate about the prior question of whether there are even *reasons* for liking, and other affective attitudes, see Maguire (2018), who argues there are not, and Faraci (2020), who argues there are.

<sup>6</sup> There is an enormous literature on ‘ought implies can’. One important recent overview is King (2019), who ultimately rejects the principle.

<sup>7</sup> Press writes, in one of the earliest papers on the topic, “What is *deliberate* in the judgment of taste and what sustains the character of obligation is that we seek out the impression and attend to it with our full powers; that we put ourselves in the way of appreciating it and then, as it were, stand out of the way and become receptive” (1969: 523). Hein (1967) is also skeptical of obligations of liking, and Whiting (2020) provides general arguments against aesthetic obligations of feeling.

<sup>8</sup> For examples of the growing consensus that aesthetic values can provide reasons to act as well as to feel, see Cross (2017b), McGonigal (2017), Hills (2018), King (2018), Kubala (2018), Lopes (2018, 2019), Nguyen (2019), and Whiting (2020). One notable exception to this trend is the position defended in Gorodeisky and Marcus (2018), Gorodeisky (2019a), and Gorodeisky (2019b), on which aesthetic reasons bear fundamentally on *appreciation*, understood as a hybrid cognitive-affective contentful state of pleasurable liking, and only derivatively on action.

<sup>9</sup> The assumption is, as stated, largely uncontroversial. For more extensive discussion of foundational issues concerning aesthetic reasons, see King (forthcoming).

concerns a more full-blooded notion. I will discuss four classes of features—semantic, logical, deliberative, and reactive—and suggest that the deliberative and reactive features are the identifying features by which we can tell whether a consideration has the status of an obligation. The idea will be that obligations are deliberatively *binding* and entail susceptibility to *blame* and other reactive attitudes in a way that acting on the balance of reasons alone is and does not.

Semantically, the existence of an obligation is often expressed by statements about what an agent ‘must’ do, ‘has to’ do, is ‘required’ to do, has a ‘duty’ to do, or ‘ought’ to do. But the set of such statements will fail to pick out some expressions of obligation (e.g., ‘I promised’, ‘it’s the law’), and not all such statements will in fact pick out obligations. For instance, some philosophers use ‘ought’ in such a way that it contrasts with ‘obligation’.<sup>10</sup> So semantic features are not indefeasible for signaling obligation.

Logically, obligations are often categorical in form and universal in scope. The categorical form ‘ $x$  must  $\phi$ ’ is distinct from the hypothetical form ‘if  $\delta$ , then  $x$  must  $\phi$ ’. In particular, categoricity entails that obligations have force independently of an agent’s particular desires or interests ( $\delta$ ). While this entailment is paradigmatic of moral obligations, it *prima facie* applies to aesthetic obligations, at least those like ‘one ought to appreciate the beautiful’. The universal scope captures the sense that obligations apply to every agent subject to a given domain: legal obligations (‘everyone must pay federal taxes’) apply to every agent bound by a community’s laws, and moral obligations (‘everyone must keep their promises’) apply to every agent bound by a shared moral code.

But there are problems with taking these logical features to signal *aesthetic* obligation in particular. Categoricity is complicated by the existence of conditional obligation, which has the form ‘if one chooses  $A$ , then one is required to do  $B$  rather than  $C$ ’.<sup>11</sup> ‘If you’re going to watch *2001: A Space Odyssey*, then you must watch it on the big screen, not on your laptop’. Many aesthetic obligations are conditional in this way: having chosen to appreciate some object, there are better and worse ways of doing so, and we are plausibly required to choose the best way of doing so. While such obligations are categorical in the relevant sense, they retain the surface form of hypothetical obligations. Universality is complicated by the role of sensibility. Obligations of appreciation are plausibly conditional on an agent’s being appropriately situated, and in possession of the appropriate cognitive and evaluative background to be capable of

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<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., Chisholm (1991) and Portmore (2019). Broome (1999) uses ‘subjective ought’ as an alternative term for ‘normative requirement’, but he intends only the thin notion of ‘requirement’.

<sup>11</sup> Conditional obligations are usefully theorized by Rulli (2020), who argues that they are to be expected in any moral theory that allows for options and permissions. It seems clear that a theory of aesthetic normativity should also allow for options and permissions.

appreciating the object. But sensibilities can be individuated in an extremely fine-grained way.<sup>12</sup> ‘You must appreciate the sunset at this precise location on the beach at this precise moment’. While such obligations of appreciation may still be universal in the relevant sense, they will in practice apply to domains as small as one. These complications make the logical features less reliable when it comes to identifying obligations.

Deliberatively, obligations are presumptively decisive: considerations with obligatory force are not weighed against, but block the force of, other considerations (Wallace 2012; Owens 2012). If I promise you that I will attend your piano recital, then the fact that I hate your playing has no force when deliberating about what to do tonight. Since obligations tend to affect what we ought to do other than by weighing reasons, they are easiest to spot when competing considerations initially appear weightier. I have only a trivial reason not to step on your lawn, but I may have a legal obligation not to do so (Green 2003). Still, obligations are only ‘presumptively’ decisive because obligations within a domain may themselves be defeated by obligations outside that domain. Thus, it would be no objection to the existence of aesthetic obligations if it turns out that moral obligations always defeat aesthetic obligation.<sup>13</sup>

Reactively, obligations make certain attitudes appropriate, notably reactive attitudes of *blame* from others, and *guilt* from ourselves, when we fail to live up to them. As Douglas Portmore writes, “it is only when a subject fails to do what she is obligated to do that she is blameworthy (or otherwise accountable) absent suitable excuse” (2019: 11). The nature of blame and other aesthetic reactive attitudes will be considered further below.

The challenge for any philosopher in positing a domain-neutral notion of obligation is that the term is so frequently associated with moral theorizing, and so one has to import enough content from the moral domain to make the notion recognizable without begging the question in favor of reducing all obligation to moral obligation.<sup>14</sup> I believe that the deliberative and reactive features give us a sufficiently clear grip on a minimal notion of obligation that is workable in the aesthetic domain.<sup>15</sup> In the next section, I discuss six quick arguments concerning issues specific to *aesthetic* obligation.

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<sup>12</sup> Indeed, some emphasize the value of having a *unique* aesthetic sensibility. See Levinson (2010) for more on this value, and Riggle (2015) for an argument against.

<sup>13</sup> Indeed, this would be entailed by the truth of moral rationalism. See note 3.

<sup>14</sup> Williams (1985: Ch. 10) famously rejects the notion of obligation precisely because of its association with what he calls the ‘morality system’. The existence of non-moral obligations suggests this is too fast.

<sup>15</sup> Owens (2012: 89) also takes the deliberative and reactive aspects to characterize obligation in non-moral domains, notably in his discussion of obligations of friendship.

## II. Six Quick Arguments

Each of these arguments offers a fast route to the existence or nonexistence of aesthetic obligations, based on two substantive premises that entail the existential conclusion. In each case, I will sketch the argument and objections to it, with an eye to points of further development. The first three are negative and the next three positive arguments.

1. The *problem* argument holds that aesthetics is not a practical domain, that there are obligations to act only if a domain is practical, and thus there are no aesthetic obligations to act.<sup>16</sup> The argument is typically developed by contrast with the moral domain and is well illustrated by Stuart Hampshire, who holds that “there are no problems of aesthetics comparable with the problems of ethics” (1954: 162). In particular, Hampshire argues that aesthetic choices, by contrast with moral choices, are (i) gratuitous and (ii) not in need of justification. By gratuitous, he means that artists create their “own technical problems” to solve in their works, which they can always abandon, whereas “from the moment of waking, [a moral agent] is confronted with situations which demand action” (1954: 162). By not in need of justification, he means that it does not make sense to “ask for [artists’] reasons,” and that “there is no need to find grounds of preference” for one work over another (1954: 164).<sup>17</sup>

A concessive response might allow that aesthetic choices are less urgent, in the relevant sense, than moral choices, but still insist that artists face practical choices for which they must give reasons: playing a Bach fugue with the damper pedal, or staging an opera in outer space, surely call for normative explanation. A more robust response would hold that aesthetics and morality are actually on a par with respect to the pervasiveness of assessment: every action can be assessed along both moral and aesthetic dimensions, and to choose not to attend to aesthetic features is still to make an aesthetic choice. A broader objection is that Hampshire focuses solely on artistic creation and spectatorial judgment, without considering the wide variety of practical problems that aesthetic agents face: which film to watch, which ballet school to enroll in, which painting to hang and where, which photo to share on social media, and so forth.

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<sup>16</sup> This argument, or at least its first premise, can be found in Hampshire (1954), Kivy (1980), and Sinnott-Armstrong (2010); see Eaton (2008), Lopes (2018: 39-40), and King (2018) for critical discussion.

<sup>17</sup> Hampshire assumes that a moral choice cannot be justified except by general principle, and that there are no critical principles in aesthetics. As Eaton (2008: 2) notes, Hampshire’s argument here begs the question against the moral particularist. For a classic defense of aesthetic particularism, see Isenberg (1949), and for a classic defense of aesthetic generalism, Sibley (2001). Shelley (2017: 2.2) gives a useful overview of that debate.

2. The *reactive attitudes* argument holds that there are no warranted aesthetic reactive attitudes, that there are obligations only if there are warranted reactive attitudes, and thus that there are no aesthetic obligations.<sup>18</sup> Like the problem argument, this argument is typically developed by contrast with the moral domain and is suggested by an observation from Martha Nussbaum, who writes, “If one day I spend my entire museum visit gazing at Turners, I have not incurred a guilt against the Blakes in the next room; nor have I failed in a duty toward Bartok by my loving attention to Hindemith. To live with works of art is to live in a world enormously rich in value, without a deep risk of infidelity, disloyalty, or any conflict which might lead to these” (1990: 132).<sup>19</sup> This feature of aesthetic life, for Nussbaum, distinguishes it from moral life, which is characterized by “conflicting attachments and obligations” (1990: 37) to which attitudes of guilt and regret are appropriate. Notice that Nussbaum does not strictly hold that there are no aesthetic obligations, just that they never come into conflict.

As with Hampshire’s observations, Nussbaum’s also seem to focus too narrowly on artistic spectators. Creators can experience a sense of disloyalty or conflict when they violate their artistic integrity (Mills 2018), and audiences as well as artists can feel as though they have let themselves down in their aesthetic lives (Moran 2012; Kubala 2018). Another response might be to model our relationships to artworks along the lines of our relationships to persons, which are famously characterized by conflicting obligations (Cross 2017a). The strongest response to Nussbaum, however, would be to develop a clearer picture of the aesthetic reactive attitudes and when they are warranted.

3. The *enticing reasons* argument holds that aesthetic reasons are all and only enticing reasons, that enticing reasons do not give rise to obligations, and thus that there are no aesthetic obligations.<sup>20</sup> Introduced by Jonathan Dancy, enticing reasons contrast with what he calls ‘requiring’ or ‘peremptory’ reasons, in that they take us to ‘bests’ rather than ‘oughts’: enticing reasons “make the action they recommend worth doing, fun, exciting, attractive, and so on,” without giving rise to duties (2004: 99). To borrow an example from R. Jay Wallace, if you choose to stay in and watch television reruns rather than go

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<sup>18</sup> This argument’s major premise is suggested by Nussbaum (1990). See Eaton (2008) for critical discussion.

<sup>19</sup> Morgan (1950), interestingly, makes the same observation as Nussbaum but nonetheless holds that there is such a thing as aesthetic blame. Matthen (2018), in passing, also expresses skepticism that failing to enjoy any token great work of art violates any obligation.

<sup>20</sup> The notion of an enticing reason is developed by Dancy (2004), applied to an aesthetic example by Wallace (2013), and made the basis of an argument that there are no aesthetic obligations in Dyck (n.d.).

out to see a rare film on the big screen, you haven't violated any requirement: the reasons in question "count in favor of the actions they recommend in a way that leaves the deliberating agent with some discretion to ignore or to discount their claims" (2013: 139).

The very existence of enticing reasons is controversial, and some have argued that they do not exist (Raz 1999; Broome 2013).<sup>21</sup> A concessive response would accept the first premise but maintain there are other sources of aesthetic obligation: even if aesthetic values cannot give rise to obligations, perhaps moral or prudential values can give rise to obligations with aesthetic content, such as the obligation to see the rare film. A more robust response would be to argue that there are normative requirements in the aesthetic domain (Whiting 2020; Kubala 2020), and therefore at least some aesthetic reasons are not enticing. Our reasons to comply with musical scores—to play all the notes, at least in Western classical performance practice—have what Guy Rohrbaugh calls "a surprising deontological character" (2020: 86). The defender of enticing reasons will have to find a different way of explaining the appearances here. And the defender of aesthetic obligations need not deny that some aesthetic reasons are enticing, only that all are.

4. The *rights* argument holds that artworks have rights, that rights entail obligations, and thus that there are obligations to artworks. This argument comes from Alan Tormey (1973), who holds that artworks appear to have interests that generate rights and entail obligations on the part of those who must respect those interests.<sup>22</sup> These interests are revealed in our experiences of "aesthetic pain": in watching an awkward amateur ballet dancer, or hearing an embarrassingly inaccurate musical performance, we treat artworks *themselves* as having been distorted or debased in certain instantiations. Accordingly, "we tacitly attribute or ascribe rights to them" (1973: 169 n. 3).

This argument has received much criticism. The most obvious objection is that, as Tormey himself admits, we can explain the appearances without appealing to rights. Another is that Tormey's argument is a *reductio*: the same considerations would show, absurdly, that parking meters, money, clocks, and other non-art artifacts would have rights as well, at least to the extent that they have interests (Goldblatt 1976; Cross 2017a).<sup>23</sup> Still, even if artworks themselves are not rights-bearers, there might be other sources of artistic obligation.

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<sup>21</sup> Lopes (2018: 36-41) seems to side with Raz and Broome in assuming that reasons are constitutively deontic: they always lend weight to what an agent *should* do.

<sup>22</sup> These interests are thought to give rise to rights not to be destroyed or defaced, and rights to be performed or interpreted appropriately (Goldblatt 1976: 71).

<sup>23</sup> For further discussion of the rights of artworks, see Hein (1978), Sparshott (1983), Feldman (1998), and McWhinnie (1999).

5. The *supererogation* argument holds that there are aesthetically supererogatory acts, that acts are supererogatory only if they surpass what we are obligated to do, and thus that there are aesthetic obligations.<sup>24</sup> Acts are (aesthetically) supererogatory if and only if they are (i) (aesthetically) optional, i.e., neither required nor forbidden, and (ii) (aesthetically) better than the minimum required. Alfred Archer and Lauren Ware (2017; 2018) give a number of examples of aesthetically supererogatory acts, including the nature-lover who goes above and beyond their obligation to appreciate the beautiful by spending every weekend traveling to sites of natural beauty.

One response would be to reanalyze the allegedly supererogatory acts as cases of especially strong enticing reasons. A second is that the argument is unpersuasive without a positive account of the ‘erogatory’ to be surpassed, i.e., our basic duties. Unlike the rights argument, where we have some idea of what our responsibilities to artworks would be, we have, at least so far, a less determinate idea of what our general aesthetic obligations would be, apart from appreciating the beautiful. Finally, a claim of aesthetic supererogation will face the many objections to supererogation in general (Archer 2018). Still, developing a theory of aesthetic supererogation is a promising way forward.

6. The *dilemmas* argument holds that there are aesthetic dilemmas, that there are dilemmas only if there are obligations, and thus that there are aesthetic obligations. Marcia Eaton (2008), who formulates this argument explicitly, proposes two classes of aesthetic dilemmas: burning museum cases and restoration cases. In burning museum cases, an agent can save only one painting when there are several of comparably high artistic value. In restoration cases, a curator has to decide whether to preserve an artwork in its weather-worn condition or to irreversibly alter it through touch-ups.<sup>25</sup> Eaton’s dilemmas constitute a response to the problem argument, the enticing reasons argument, and the reactive attitudes argument: these are cases of non-gratuitous problems that call for justification; that an agent has no discretion to ignore; and that, no matter what one chooses, will leave some warranted affective residue in response to the option not taken.

The biggest challenge for Eaton’s argument is that her aesthetic dilemmas may actually stem from moral obligations. Indeed, probably the strongest objection to aesthetic obligations is that they are really moral obligations with aesthetic content. That is, although they concern aesthetic acts, or make reference to aesthetic values, their

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<sup>24</sup> Archer & Ware (2017; 2018) actually run their argument the other way around, from the existence of aesthetic obligations to the existence of aesthetic supererogation. I find the inverse argument more compelling, because it starts from intuitively praiseworthy cases and argues that they conceptually entail obligations: going above and beyond the call of duty entails that there is a call of duty.

<sup>25</sup> A canonical restoration case is that of the Sistine Chapel; see Danto (2013: Ch. 2) for discussion.

ultimate source is moral. I consider this objection in greater detail in the next section, which asks: in virtue of *what* would aesthetic obligations exist? Still, it is clear that each of these six quick arguments is eminently open to further challenge, as well as to further development.

### III. The Source of Aesthetic Obligations

The claim that aesthetic obligations are ultimately moral dates back at least to Hampshire, who claims that when the art critic makes judgments of what ought to be read, seen, or heard, “at this point the critic has actually become a moralist, and the arguments supporting his recommendations are the subject-matter of ethics” (1954: 169).<sup>26</sup> In this section, I examine how far the moral approach can be taken, and survey three non-moral views of the source of aesthetic obligations.

The most congenial class of examples for the moral approach comes from artistic obligations. Although, as we have seen, it is doubtful that artworks are rights-bearers, we do generally treat *artists* as rights-bearers. Four prominently debated areas concern respect for copyright, preservation, artistic intention, and cultural integrity. Some questions are ontological: what is the nature of the artwork, and what kind of relation does the artist bear to it? Others concern the scope of artists’ rights. How far do copyright protections extend, particularly in an era of remix and appropriation (Hick 2017; Gover 2018)? When, if ever, is it permissible to destroy an artist’s work (Young 1989; Korsmeyer 2019)? To what degree are we obligated to respect artistic intention, not just when it comes to display or performance, but even in the interpretation of their works (John 1997; Carroll 2001; Davies 2006)? Are artists obligated to avoid appropriating the work of artists from other cultures, and what is cultural appropriation anyway (Young 2008; Matthes 2016)? However these local debates are settled, the skeptic about aesthetic obligation should have no objection to such obligations in principle, since they are readily understood as moral obligations owed *to* other persons, *with respect to* artworks.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> A similar claim is made by Kivy: “I have not been convinced by any of the recent suggestions to the effect that there are ‘artistic’ or ‘aesthetic’ obligations apart from the obvious moral obligations we put ourselves under in our transactions with works of art and aesthetic objects, any more than I think there are any special sexual obligations apart from the obvious moral ones we put ourselves under by engaging in sexual activity” (1980: 359). For an early attempt to distinguish moral from aesthetic obligation, however, see Frye (1941).

<sup>27</sup> Even defenders of non-moral aesthetic obligation, such as Cross (2017a), admit that morality is the source of most of our obligations with respect to artworks. These bipolar, directed obligations are especially congenial to those who advocate a relational interpretation of morality, on which obligations are grounded in a constitutive connection to the legitimate claims of others (Wallace 2019).

Other putative aesthetic obligations pose more of a challenge to the moral view, particularly in cases where there is no artist's claim at stake. In defending aesthetic dilemmas, Eaton offers this burning museum case: "Suppose you have two paintings that you believe are equal in moral value—will provide equal amounts of pleasure, are equally enlightening, will serve equally to further feelings of respect for one's fellow human beings, and so on. I believe that you have an uncontroversial, nonconditional aesthetic obligation to save one rather than the other, namely, the more beautiful painting" (2008: 5). The defender of the moral view could dispute Eaton's description of the case by committing to welfarism about moral value and hedonism about aesthetic value, on which the more beautiful painting will be the one that affords more pleasure, thereby grounding its greater moral value. But hedonism's popularity is increasingly waning, and so the defender of the moral view might push back more effectively by claiming that (a) playing a tiebreaking role is not sufficient to give aesthetic considerations obligatory force and (b) the reason to save the more beautiful painting is still moral, because it appeals to whatever benefits beauty brings to others who will experience the painting.<sup>28</sup>

The most serious challenge for the moral view comes from obligations of appreciation, whether for beautiful objects generally or particular such objects. (Recall that 'obligation of appreciation' is taken here as shorthand for 'obligation to put oneself in a position to appreciate'.) There are, broadly speaking, two ways for the moral view to analyze such obligations: consequentialist and deontological.<sup>29</sup> As in their response to Eaton's burning museum case, the welfarist consequentialist could try to ground obligations of appreciation in the greater pleasure expected to be afforded by more beautiful objects.<sup>30</sup> This neo-Humean strategy, often based on a controversial reading of Hume's "Of the Standard of Taste" (1777), has been defended by Levinson (2002) but recently come in for extensive attack.<sup>31</sup> On the deontological side, the most promising strategy is Kantian in form. There are many interpretive questions concerning Kant's famous claim that beauty is a "symbol of morality" (1790/2000), but one possibility is that the capacity to take disinterested pleasure in the beauty of nature is obligatory because it prepares us somehow for the moral life (Cohen 1982; Guyer 1993; Rogerson

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<sup>28</sup> One relevant defense of non-hedonism about artistic value is given by Wolf (2011). See also Van der Berg (2020) for an overview of arguments against hedonism, and Archer & Ware (2017: 105 n. 11) for further support of Eaton's case in particular.

<sup>29</sup> A virtue ethical view also seems possible, but aesthetic virtue theorists have not yet discussed obligation in any detail. For discussion of the relation between virtue and obligation generally, see O'Neill (1996).

<sup>30</sup> See Kubala (2020: 11) for brief discussion of how this strategy could give rise to requirements as well as reasons.

<sup>31</sup> Lopes (2018: Ch. 4) offers the most detailed set of objections. See also Nehamas (2007), Kieran (2008), Shelley (2011), and Riggle (2013).

2004).<sup>32</sup> A more straightforward alternative is to ground obligations of appreciation in the imperfect moral duty to cultivate one’s talents (Press 1969). But intuitively, there are cases of appreciation where we have no expectation of cultivating our talents, and are in no way further prepared for morally worthy action.<sup>33</sup>

A rival, non-moral view claims that aesthetic obligations hold in virtue of facts about an individual agent’s *practical identity*. An agent’s practical identity is, roughly, the description of themselves under which they find their lives worth valuing (Frankfurt 1999; Korsgaard 2009). Some actions become obligatory when carrying them out is required to avoid threatening the integrity of one’s practical identity, i.e., where failing to act would in part destroy the self that one values (Wallace 2012). Practical identity views are clearly suited to account for obligations that are owed neither to other persons nor to aesthetic objects as such. Views in this family differ with respect to the specific features of practical identity that are the source of obligations: Anthony Cross (2017a) points to the commitments one incurs in *loving* artworks, while Robbie Kubala (2018) points to the commitment one incurs in making *self-promises* concerning aesthetic objects. Julianne Chung (2019) also discusses practical identity views and suggests a neo-Confucian interpretation with a more expansive conception of the self as interconnected with other people, artifacts, and the natural world. One challenge for these views, in individualizing aesthetic obligations, is to account for how, if at all, one’s practical identity ought to reflect the impersonal aesthetic value of objects. This challenge is mitigated somewhat by Andrew McGonigal’s (2018) pluralist objectivism about aesthetic value, which holds that there is a wide range of aesthetic sensibilities that it is permissible for individuals to have. Each of these views would benefit from further clarification about what it is to have an aesthetic practical identity, and whether or not obligations of appreciation can be involuntarily incurred.

A distinct non-moral view claims that aesthetic obligations hold in virtue of facts about *social practices*. A practice is a shared form of activity partially constituted by norms that govern actions and attitudes, and might be thought of as roughly a communal practical identity. Some theorists have recently developed practice-based accounts of the aesthetic domain (Wolterstorff 2015; Lopes 2018), and others have argued that aesthetic practices generate their own internal requirements—such as the obligation on musical

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<sup>32</sup> As Moran writes, however, “the very diversity and inconclusiveness of the relations Kant suggests between beauty and morality indicates to me that they have a tentative or at least unresolved status in his overall argument” (2012: 325).

<sup>33</sup> For a contrary take, on which Kant is the inspiration for at least four arguments *against* the possibility of aesthetic obligation, see McGonigal (2018). And for the idea that obligations of appreciation might be sourced in Kantian autonomy, or self-legislation, see Lopes (2020).

performers to play the notes accurately, or on literary readers to respect authorial intention—that will be genuinely normative if and only if the practice is all-things-considered justified (Rohrbaugh 2020; Kubala 2020). The notion of a practice might be given a more full-blooded sense in terms of a *community* that serves higher non-aesthetic functions, such as the mutual appreciation of individual style within an autonomous political community, as in Samantha Matherne and Nick Riggle’s recent interpretation of Schiller (2020a; 2020b). Practice-based approaches can ground a wider range of aesthetic obligations—*qua* curator, but not *qua* private individual, one is obligated not to hang a painting upside down—but need further clarification about what it is to be a practitioner and to what extent aesthetic practices are escapable.

All three classes of view considered so far—the moral view, the practical identity view, and the social practice view—deny that, at the most fundamental level, aesthetic obligations hold in virtue of aesthetic value(s). To be clear: on all four views, aesthetic value facts constitute the *content* of aesthetic obligations. The fact that Lady Gaga’s voice is a wondrous combination of vulnerability and steeliness is a reason for me to listen to her new album. But on the first three views, that reason has obligatory force only because it relates in the right way to a moral duty, to an individual practical identity, or to a social identity. Facts about those non-aesthetic sources *enable* the aesthetic value facts to count as obligations.

The fourth class of views attempts to make good on the thought that we have obligations of, e.g., appreciation simply *because* some objects are beautiful. Richard Moran explores the Kantian idea that “it belongs to the beautiful but not to the agreeable ... that there can be types of responses or ways of treating the thing that are called for, merited by, or owed to it” (2012: 321). But it is hard to see how aesthetic objects *themselves* can be sources of obligation, particularly once we deny that aesthetic objects are bearers of rights or have interests in a non-metaphorical way, and even Moran registers the objection that “we create an unnecessary air of mystery by speaking of something normative or demanding as issuing from the beautiful itself” (2012: 323). One final possibility, therefore, is a *primitivist* position on which there is no true explanatory value-claim to be had about how aesthetic value is reason-giving, just as there is no true explanatory value-claim about how, say, well-being is reason-giving (Shelley 2011; Ginsborg 2015; Gorodeisky 2019a). But such a view would seem to be dialectically unable to defend the existence of aesthetic *obligations* as opposed to reasons, at least not without supplementation by some of the resources canvassed in this section.

#### IV. Conclusion

I close by suggesting three promising directions for future work. As the range of examples considered in this article suggests, a first useful task would be to taxonomize further putative *types* of aesthetic obligation. With reference to its five opening examples, this article has considered obligations of aesthetic appreciation (1), practice-based obligations on action (2, 3), and artistic obligations with moral sources (4, 5). Any such classification will be contentious, and probably not exhaustive, but would also be helpful for further work on how those distinct types might be grounded, and whether we should in fact expect a hybrid-source view of aesthetic normativity (Kubala 2019; 2020).

A second issue concerns the nature of praise for living up to aesthetic obligations and sanctions for failing. A certain liberal cosmopolitan ethos of toleration would suggest that blaming people for their aesthetic choices is inappropriate.<sup>34</sup> But there are compelling counterexamples. Archer & Ware (2017: 111) discuss the vandalism of a rural area of natural beauty, and claim that in such a case we experience negative reactive attitudes over and above the moral ones. Similarly, Dana Nelkin (2020; in press) discusses a widely condemned statue of Lucille Ball commissioned by her hometown as an example of a non-moral attitude of aesthetic blame.<sup>35</sup> Both Nelkin and Susan Wolf (2016) want to argue that there is a distinctive kind of aesthetic responsibility that creators bear for their artistic works. More systematic work on aesthetic blame and praise would be useful.

Finally, and related to the issue of whether there is a distinctive form of aesthetic blame, there is a metanormative question underlying the discussion in section III: what turns on aesthetic obligations having a moral source, or any kind of non-aesthetic source? Alex King worries that any reduction to a non-aesthetic source “does not look like a vindication of aesthetic normativity as much as a concession that there really is not such a thing” (2020: 102). But Andrew McGonigal claims that “it isn’t helpful to type duties solely in terms of their ultimate source of rational authority or binding force” (2018: 920). To borrow his example, the Kantian proposal that the authority of duties of citizenship is ultimately derived from the value of individual rational agency does not entail that there is no interesting explanatory category of political duty. Similarly, even if all aesthetic obligations had non-aesthetic sources, that might not itself debunk the idea of aesthetic

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<sup>34</sup> See Lena (2019), however, for an intriguing sociological argument that cultural omnivorousness is just another manifestation of an elite class position.

<sup>35</sup> The reader is invited to consider their own reactive attitudes upon seeing the original sculpture, reported on here: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/10/arts/design/scary-lucy-statue-is-replaced-on-anniversary-of-comedians-105th-birthday.html>

normativity. More careful work on normative explanation is needed to settle this question.

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