The Pleasure of Art

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Human beings make and do things for aesthetic enjoyment; these artefacts give us a special kind of pleasure. I shall argue that this aesthetic engagement for pleasure is a distinct psychological structure, marked by a characteristic self-reinforcing motivation. Pleasure figures in this structure in two ways: In the short run, when we are in contact with particular artefacts on particular occasions, pleasure keeps aesthetic engagement running smoothly. Over longer periods, it plays a critical role in shaping how we engage with objects to get this kind of pleasure from them.

I yoke my approach to a broadly functional understanding of *art*: it is not the nature of the object that makes it art, but the nature of the response that it is designed to elicit (see Beardsley [1958]). But my view does not rest on individual psychology alone, as some other functional accounts do. Crucially, I contend that shared cultural context is a key determinant of the pleasure we derive from aesthetic artefacts. In my view, the pleasure of art is always communal and communicative.

It has often been noted (e.g. Weitz [1956], Moravcsik [1993], Dutton [2006], and many others) that it is impossible to say in advance what kinds of objects might count as art. The way I see it, this is because many different kinds of object serve aesthetic engagement in different cultures at different times. Because I focus on the response not the object, I do not strain to accommodate the diversity of objects valued by primitive art, ‘low’ art, ‘barbaric’ art, folk art, pop art, found art, ‘anti-art’—and also, of course, high European art. My conception is therefore an alternative to purely psychological accounts, and also to institutional approaches (which define art by conventional validation; Dickie [1974]) and ‘cluster concept’ views (which reject any attempt to find commonality; Gaut [2000]).

I aim to illuminate the psychological foundations of aesthetic norms. In his seminal work *The Natural and the Normative*, Gary Hatfield [1990] showed how 19th century vision-scientists recast in psychological terms what Kant had earlier intended as a normative claim about the epistemology of spatial perception. Kant made certain assumptions about the form of perception as such; these scientists attempted to investigate empirically whether human perception satisfies Kant’s *a priori* conception. Though my methods are philosophical, I intend a similar pivot. Empirical investigations of sympathy and eusociality have given us reason to view these psychological attitudes as paralleling ethical norms [Wilson 1975]. Similarly, I contend, the psychology of hedonic evaluation in a cultural context is a good match for *a priori* aesthetic norms.[[1]](#footnote-1)

## Part I: Facilitating Pleasure

There are many kinds of pleasure. I now distinguish two broad varieties, *r-pleasures* and *f-pleasures*, and discuss the characteristics of the hitherto little-noticed f-pleasures. In Part II, I argue that *aesthetic* pleasure is a species of f-pleasure.

### Pleasure, Motivation, and Facilitation

To begin, let us take note of pleasures that are quite different from the sort we find in art. Certain bodily or mental states are departures from normal resting equilibrium, and though some are pleasant, all are physically and psychologically costly to prolong indefinitely. Pain, physical exertion, sexual arousal, and mental concentration are examples. When these states come to an end, the return to a normal resting condition is attended by pleasure. Once equilibrium is restored, this pleasure quickly ebbs away. These are pleasures of *restoration* or *relief.* I call them *r-pleasures*. Michael Kubovy [1999] includes in this category sneezing, coughing, defecation, and orgasm. We also feel r-pleasure when a source of discomfort—an annoying noise or an itch—is removed.

R-pleasures are *passive*. Because they are *retrospective*, they have no forward motivational force. An orgasm, for example, is a source of intense bodily pleasure; but it is not an impulse to follow some specific action. It has motivational force in the teleological manner of a reward one aims for; it can serve as an Aristotelian final cause, but it is not motivational in the sense of an ‘efficient cause’. (To make the point clearer, sexual desire *is* an efficient motive cause, as are other drives, including hunger and thirst.) R-pleasure exemplifies how many philosophers conceive of pleasure *in general*: in effect, they think that it is a bodily feeling that arises out of and welcomes a bodily event, but which motivates only as a goal does.

My concern in this paper is with a different class of pleasures. [[2]](#footnote-2) For reasons that will be apparent in a moment, I characterize them as *facilitating*, and call them *f-pleasures*. As we shall see, these pleasures are like urges or drives; they motivate prospectively. More specifically, they motivate the continuation of the activity that gives rise to them. Here is one example of an f-pleasure:

**Thirsty drinking.** After a long walk home, you are hot, sweaty, and thirsty. You drink a glass of pure cool water. You are perceptually aware of drinking the water and of its pleasure-giving qualities. It’s fantastic!

Thirsty drinking brings a big benefit, but not without cost. It consumes energy and takes up attention; it demands the coordination of a number of bodily actions. It requires motivation and coordination. Every costly event demands motivation: your enjoyment of thirsty drinking prepares you to bear the cost of undertaking this physical act. As well, thirsty drinking is a coordinated activity (much like walking or talking): your gullet is wide open, your muscular control is smooth and rhythmic; your mouth takes water in and it is conveyed to your stomach. Thirsty drinking is therefore controlled by what I shall call a *facilitating nexus* or *f-nexus*: a coordinated group of mental and bodily ‘preparations’ that encourage, ease, and optimize the physical act of drinking. The pleasure of drinking the water is a *conscious* feeling that activates this f-nexus.

Historically, the f-pleasure of thirsty drinking was identified with the r-pleasure of relieving thirst; but the genuine difference becomes clear when we consider *hungry eating*, a somewhat more complex parallel to thirsty drinking. When you are hungry (but not literally starving) and eat with pleasure, you enjoy savouring the food *and* you enjoy no longer being hungry. These are connected, but distinct. Savouring is simultaneous with eating; relief from hunger is a result. The first is coordinated, cognitively demanding (it is heightened by analytic attention to the flavours), and deliberate; the second is automatic and passive. (Think of making do with a sandwich made of stale bread and tasteless filling, just so you can get on with your writing.) Similarly, in the case of thirsty drinking the f-pleasure of enjoying the coolness and purity of water may be distinguished from the r-pleasure of relieving thirst. Relief from thirst is r-pleasurable even if the water is warm or even tainted, but in this case you don’t have the f-pleasure described earlier. The historical failure to make this distinction demoted all pleasures to passive sensations—all to be treated on the same normative footing. I would argue that some of the criticisms of ‘hedonism’ and ‘hedonistic aesthetics’ arise from this conflation.

We can appreciate the connection between f-pleasure and f-nexus by considering what happens when thirsty drinking has taken its course. After you have consumed enough water and you are no longer thirsty, the pleasure vanishes. You will still be aware of drinking, and still perceive the qualities of the water; but the facilitating nexus ceases to be active. You may still have reason to drink: you may have been told to drink a litre of water for an ultrasound examination, or before a marathon. But then, drinking becomes difficult: your psychological state is now one of reluctance and has to be overcome. You have to force the liquid down; at some point, your gullet starts to spasm; *in extremis*, you might even gag or throw up. It is as if the conductor has stepped off her podium. Pleasure leaves the stage, and the bodily symphony of thirsty drinking disbands.

It is much the same for pleasures that have no natural end or point of satiation. For as long as you enjoy reading, it is easy to concentrate on your book and absorb its content. This too is costly: you attend to your book at the expense of meeting other needs. And it is difficult: the cognitive load is steep. Pleasure motivates you to continue reading and helps you optimize the load; but once you become sleepy or hungry or distracted, it departs and you don’t have the help you need. Reading now requires effort and the uptake of information is far less smooth.

Psychologists call this reversal of pleasure *alliesthesia*. It shows the close connection between f-pleasure and facilitation; when f-pleasure ends, one is no longer motivated to assume the cost of the activity. That cost increases as the facilitating nexus falls away, making the activity more difficult to execute.

One last point about f-pleasure. It is, in a tradition that goes back to Plato, a sub-personally generated *felt evaluation*—it is a conscious state that signifies approval (see Cutter and Tye [2011]). Felt evaluation is different from reasoned appraisal. There is, however, a normative connection. The fact that you feel pleasure in something is, other things being equal, a reason for valuing it. The connection here is analogous to that between perception and perceptual belief. Perception is a conscious state that provides a defeasible basis for reasoned belief. In the same way, pleasure is a felt evaluation that provides a defeasible basis for *reasoned positive appraisal*. It is important, then, to keep three things separate: awareness of an activity, pleasure in that activity, and reasoned approval of that activity.

To summarize, f-pleasure is a felt positive evaluation of the activity from which it arises; it is prospective, cost-alleviating, and facilitating.

### Learning a Pleasure Nexus

In the case of thirsty drinking, the facilitating nexus is assembled by nature. The pleasure of thirsty drinking does not arise because you have worked out that it is good for you. Nor must you figure out that you need to keep your gullet open when you drink. This just happens. Nature simply delivers pleasure along with the f-nexus.

But animals and humans also *learn* f-pleasure. You can learn to like something new. You acquire a taste for bitter melon; it now gives you pleasure. You no longer pucker as you did at first. In the intellectual domain, new pleasures come from curiosity pursued. When you began to read for pleasure, you were perhaps satisfied with racy adventures that provide little by way of psychological insight or linguistic creativity. But as you are introduced to these delights, you learn new pleasures and begin to choose your reading accordingly. These are learned pleasures.[[3]](#footnote-3)

You can also learn a nexus. A facilitating nexus is an automated behaviour pattern. Nature provides you with a few of these. You can also learn such a pattern by repetition and coaching. Athletes and artists learn to do things in more effective ways: they may learn to keep their heads down when they swing a club; they can be taught how to use a paintbrush or bow a violin. Once they have learned these things, they do them automatically, without willing each component action separately.

Crucially, certain nexuses are learned (or acquired) by pleasure.[[4]](#footnote-4) When we first drink wine, we may treat it as a thirst-quencher—like cool water or lemonade. This has disastrous consequences. Later, by trial and error or through instruction, we may learn that there is pleasure in drinking it in a quite different way—we inhale the bouquet, sip, hold it in our mouth, and wait for the flavour to develop. The resultant pleasure reinforces the new way of drinking; gradually, we begin to do it in the new way because it has given us pleasure. Drinking wine in this new way is not deliberate and reasoned; once acquired, it is executed without thought. Once we know how, we can pay attention to the special pleasure-giving qualities of wine. In this respect, learned nexuses are like that of thirsty drinking: they are coordinated activities carried out without conscious coordination of the component actions.

Innate nexuses are put in place by evolution for extrinsic benefits; pleasure motivates continuation of thirsty drinking, but evolution was concerned with rehydration when it made thirsty drinking pleasurable. The open gullet, the thrown-back head: these are ways of getting water; they are not there to maximize pleasure (though they might do this too). The same is often true of the nexuses imparted by training. A Lipizzaner horse is taught certain exercises, and acquires certain fixed routines that it executes on command. A violinist learns a new way of bowing or plucking. These nexuses are not in place for pleasure. They may *give* pleasure when they are smoothly and effortlessly executed; but they are not shaped by or done for the pleasure they give. Performers do not stick to their routines because they lead to pleasure directly, but because they yield success with other goals.

Nexuses learned by pleasure—henceforth, I’ll call them *pleasure-nexuses*—are ways of maximizing pleasure. You learn to take wine in the new way because it is more pleasurable than other ways; you learned it because pleasure was a reward for doing it this way; the new procedure was reinforced by the pleasure. Similarly, you learn to read and appreciate books that you previously found difficult because they have become, by learning, pleasant to read. You experimented with difficult books in this genre, and gradually pleasure became the reward for reading them. Teaching and coaching may play a role, but instruction is for enabling you to find ways of maximizing your enjoyment, not to serve other goals. Certain ways of reading books and looking at paintings are ‘correct’, but only because they maximize the pleasure you get from reading them or looking at them.[[5]](#footnote-5)

An interesting question arises: Are there ways of reading these books that are universally pleasure-enhancing (bracketing the vagaries of individual histories)? I delve into a cultural history of post-Independence India and find that Rushdie’s novel *Midnight’s Children* is suddenly more enjoyable. What if this doesn’t work for you? Can we discuss our difference? Can I convince you that I am right? My suggestion (in Section 8) will be that communication and culture provide part of the pleasure we derive from artworks. Your views and my disagreement with them are part of the pleasure we both get from the book. Additionally, perception of *value* may increase my pleasure: it adds to the pleasure I derive from Murakami’s *1Q84* that its protagonist is (like all Murakami heroes) an innocent, made in Parsifal’s mould. All of this helps us converge on a shared pleasure nexus.

We shall see that a learned pleasure nexus is crucial to the appreciation of art. As I have tried to make clear, I am not talking about superficial pleasure. The pleasure you get from a difficult book, or a painting that deals with painful material, cannot be reduced to the immediate pleasure of looking at pretty things. It is not merely fun. You have acquired a disposition to enjoy these difficult and costly activities, and you have learned to undertake them in ways that maximize the reward.

### The Specificity of Facilitation

Facilitating pleasure is pleasure in an activity. It motivates this activity and is associated with a nexus, innate or learned, that facilitates it.

This has two immediate consequences:

1. First, facilitating pleasure directed toward one activity need not be associated with any other activity. You are in the mood for good food; savouring it gives you pleasure. Eating may be associated with other activities (such as social interaction); but the pleasure of eating does not as such motivate these other activities.
2. Second, the f-nexus associated with a pleasure is also specific. It facilitates the activity that arouses this pleasure and no other. Savouring food is associated with enjoying the smell, masticating to soften the food and to release its flavour, swallowing rather than gulping. This is a different facilitation nexus than the one for concurrent social interaction; so eating an excellent dinner with good friends is not a single pleasure, but demands several skills. Needless to say, the f-nexus activated by the pleasure of engaging with art is quite different from either of these.

Though f-pleasure is directed toward an *activity*, it may also involve an *object*. In particular, facilitating the activity may entail evaluating an object as desirable specifically for that activity. For example, in thirsty drinking you may prize the purity and coolness of the water. This does not mean that you value the water *as such*. You wouldn’t necessarily prefer cool water for bathing, and its pure taste is irrelevant for looking at it in a reflecting pool. The important point here is that the f-nexus does not evaluate objects *as such*; objects are evaluated for their contribution to a specific activity.

### Three Additional Remarks About F-Pleasure

4.1 The Separateness of F-Pleasure

Some philosophers (mentioned by Owen [1971]) speak of ‘pleasures’ as countables; thirsty drinking, they say, is *a* pleasure while reading a good book is *another* pleasure. According to them, reading and thirsty drinking belong literally to the class of pleasures; they are not merely accompanied by pleasure. Others (e.g., Aydede and Fulkerson [forthcoming]) make pleasure a characteristic of a sensation. According to them, pleasure is a feature of the sensation that arises from reading or thirsty drinking. Both approaches bring pleasure too close to the activity that gives pleasure. On my view, pleasure is rather a mental state that results from awareness of an activity. It is distinct both from the activity itself (contrary to the countables view) and also from awareness of the activity (contrary to Aydede and Fulkerson).

The pleasure of thirsty drinking dissipates as you become sated. Similarly, the pleasure of absorbed reading evaporates when you become sleepy. These reversals suggest that f-pleasure is *distinct* from both activity and awareness. You continue to be aware of drinking water or of reading your book. However, the pleasure it gave you a few minutes earlier dissipates; the facilitating nexus ceases to be active and the activity becomes difficult. This has nothing to do with the perceived properties of the objects, or of what you are doing with them. It is just that they are evaluated differently. The activity is one thing; the pleasure is another. The felt evaluation is distinct and separate from the perceptual one.

Another reason for separating pleasure and awareness, particularly important to the aesthetic attitude I shall discuss below, is that one often does not know what is giving pleasure. You listen to a song, and you love it. But what exactly makes it so pleasurable? You don’t really know. If pleasure prompted by a feature of the song were a characteristic of (or worse, just the same as) the *perception* of that feature, this would be puzzling. If pleasure came already attached to awareness, how could you be unaware of pleasure’s locus? You could not. It is only because pleasure is separate from perception that you can sometimes lack critical awareness of where it comes from. Pleasure must be *bound* to its object by a distinct mental act. There are three mental states here: awareness of an act, pleasure—and the act, the ‘third man’, that binds the first two together, creating pleasure *in the act*. I return to this connection in Section 10, below.

This common-sense conclusion is supported by neuroscience. Perception comes from brain processes distinct from those that create pleasure. Functional modularity is at work here. Separate qualities are most often first separately processed in the brain, then bound together by yet another separate process. For example, colour emerges from one process, shape from a second process, and these are bound together by attention, a third process. As Treisman and Gelade [1980] put it: ‘the visual scene is analyzed at an early stage by specialized populations of receptors that respond selectively to such properties as orientation, color, spatial frequency, or movement, and map these properties in different areas of the brain’—their path-breaking feature-integration theory is that attention puts them all together. Phenomenologically, it might seem that perceiving the extent of colour and perceiving shape are one and the same act; but this is a mistake. The two have to be bound together by an active integrative process [Livingstone 2014: ch. 8]. The same goes for pleasure and perception. It might seem as if listening to Taylor Swift cannot be separated from the pleasure of listening to her; in fact, these are separate things that need to be integrated.

4.2 Pleasure, Activity, Sensation

My characterization of f-pleasure echoes elements of accounts by Murat Aydede [2014: forthcoming] and Matthew Fulkerson [Aydede and Fulkerson: forthcoming]. Aydede writes that pleasure influences behaviour and information processing [2014: 130]. Aydede and Fulkerson [forthcoming] say it is ‘essentially linked to a suite of behavioural and dispositional reactions’, and associate it with motivationally salient biasing effects, reward, and ‘input to more centralized concept-wielding cognitive systems’. They do not think it accidental that when a painting gives me pleasure, I become absorbed in it, try to discover its less immediately evident characteristics, talk about it to my friends, and so on. This is very close to the facilitation account that I have been proposing, and very different from a bare felt-evaluation account such as that of Cutter and Tye [2011], which makes pleasure merely a passive reaction.

There is, however, a significant difference between my view and Aydede and Fulkerson’s. They insist that pleasure is taken in *sensation*, not in activity. They think that in thirsty drinking we enjoy the *sensation* of drinking, not (in the first instance) drinking itself. ‘Only sensory experiences are (non-derivatively) pleasant or unpleasant,’ writes Aydede ([forthcoming]; see also Heathwood [2007]). Aydede and Fulkerson seem by this move to distance themselves from the variety of facilitated activities, and therefore to lose some of the explanatory utility of their ‘psychofunctional’ account. Since all that counts for them is sensation, they have little room to accommodate the heterogeneity of activities in which we take pleasure, and the consequent variety of the associated nexuses; so the specificity of facilitation is not an organic feature of their approach.

Of course, sensations can sometimes be pleasurable. Who among us does not sometimes yearn for the indolent pleasures of Kubla Khan? But pleasure associated with a sensation is, like the sensation itself, essentially passive. F-pleasure, including aesthetic pleasure, is always pleasure taken in an activity; this kind of pleasure enables productive agency. When I read a book or listen attentively to music, or do other things that involve intellectual activity, enjoyment leads me to continue and optimize the pleasure I encounter. Moreover, I enjoy different artworks by doing different things. Enjoying Philip Glass requires one cognitive approach, and enjoying Brahms another. (There will be more to say on this diversity later.) The relevant difference is not in the qualia of my experience, whatever these might be. We trace it rather to the *cognitive* and *perceptual* activities involved.

4.3 Pleasure and Consciousness

Can there be unconscious pleasure? Could an observer, even equipped with suitable brain-scanners, determine that I had pleasure while in deep dreamless sleep? Suppose my face wore a blissful expression. Suppose also that the scanner revealed activity in my pleasure centres. Wouldn’t this show that I was enjoying something, though unconscious? I wouldn’t be aware of enjoying it; but why not allow that I am nevertheless in a pleasurable state?

Without raising objections here to such a move, I simply note that it is less plausible for f-pleasure. Think of thirsty drinking. Even if you are not giving it focused attention, conscious pleasure keeps you going. This is even more so in the case of *cognitive* f-pleasure, which includes intellectual elements essentially. Why do you get absorbed in that book you are reading? Why do you linger in front of this painting? Such situations do not resemble our sleep example. I disagree with Aydede and Fulkerson when they claim it is the *sensation* of reading that makes you scrutinize the plot. But equally it makes no sense to push consciousness off the stage. Unconscious pleasure of the sort I have in sleep could not adequately account for the considered way you extract enjoyment from your book.

### Defining F-Pleasure

To summarize, f-pleasure is

1. a consciously felt positive evaluation that
2. arises directly from a subject’s awareness of performing a difficult and costly activity, and
3. activates a nexus of mental and bodily preparations that motivates, facilitates, and optimizes this activity.

The situation is illustrated in Figure 1.



Figure 1. The f-pleasure structure. The solid arrows are cause–effect links. (The nexus is an enabling cause.) The dashed arrow indicates orientation to the object of pleasure.

## Part II: Aesthetic Pleasure

I now take up aesthetic pleasure. *In general*, f-pleasure promotes and optimizes a difficult and costly *activity*; in aesthetic engagement, the activity in question is object-directed mental engagement. Aesthetic pleasure arises from a difficult and costly mental engagement with an object and activates a learned nexus that seeks to maximize the pleasure of this mental engagement. I shall show how this looping structure accounts for central characteristics of how we engage with art. (This is a good moment to remind the reader that I do not equate aesthetic pleasure with mere superficial fun. This will become increasingly apparent as we proceed.)

Art calls up in us a personally rewarding attitude of attentive appraisal. Why? Some philosophers appeal here to the nature of art-objects. Art is beautiful, they say; and that is why we engage with it as we do. I see this as a mistake. First, it quite wrongly assumes that art *must* aim to produce beauty. Second, and worse from my perspective, it tries to explain pleasure in terms of the independently existing aesthetic merit of its object. This ultra-Platonic stance subordinates subjective evaluation to objective value; as philosophical psychology goes, it runs in the wrong direction. Saying that you like something because it is good *rationalizes* your mental attitude. But it offers nothing informative about the mental process by which you came to your evaluation. (Carroll [2000] canvasses a less beauty-bound but equally Platonic version of this proposal.)

My explanatory project runs in the opposite direction. I hope to show that the distinctive character of aesthetic engagement explains our interest in the character of its objects, not the other way around.[[6]](#footnote-6) We judge objects to have aesthetic merit when they are a good fit for our aesthetic psychology. This is, in the Kantian sense, a *critical* stance. According to this way of thinking, aesthetic evaluation is a certain kind of mental activity. I attempt here to shed light on how that works.

### The Disinterestedness of Aesthetic Pleasure

Aesthetic pleasure comes from contemplating something intellectually and, in the case of visual and performing arts, perceptually as well—focusing on the object and its properties. To get aesthetic pleasure from a painting is to enjoy looking at it and thinking about it. A novel gives pleasure by engaging the mind: we enjoy its narrative in the context of its themes, its moral stance, its form, the style and articulateness of its presentation. This much is uncontroversial. The question is why and how contemplating an object brings pleasure.

Hardly less controversial is this: enjoyment derived from contemplation is not always aesthetic. A duke takes pleasure in contemplating the monetary value of his vast estate. He looks at each field and dale, keenly appreciating how it contributes to the estate’s total value. This is not aesthetic pleasure; it is not grounded simply in a positive evaluation of how it looks (and does not lead to the kind of exploration outlined in Section 8, below). Kant said, in my view rightly, that pleasure must be ‘disinterested’ if it is to count as aesthetic; pleasure is not aesthetic if it is engendered in use of the object of contemplation for other purposes.

The problem for the theorist is that while everybody agrees about cases like our duke example, a positive account of disinterestedness has been elusive. Part of the problem is that Kant construes aesthetic pleasure as an *object*-directed and not an *activity*-directed attitude; and this makes ‘interest’ less specific (as we saw in Section 3, above). Hannah Ginsborg [2009] tells us that Kantian disinterested pleasure is a non-perceptual ‘feeling’ that ‘does not depend on the subject’s having a desire *for the object*’—which is different, moreover, from finding it ‘agreeable’ or morally good. It is hard, however, to characterize such ‘desire for the object’ informatively. If you want to visit MOMA to see the Yoko Ono exhibit, does this count as a desire *for her creations*? In ordinary language we would deny it; but this is because our conception of ‘desire-for’ is implicitly based on something more specific than just a positive attitude toward the object. Perhaps it connotes wanting to *own* the object. Since desire for an object can be linked to many different activities and attitudes, it is theoretically informative only in the context of a special psychological attitude or relative to some activity.

Kant’s characterization is salted with negatives; many follow his *via negativa*. Jerrold Levinson [1992], for example, says that pleasure is aesthetic only if it is ‘not rooted in or dependent on the way an art work answers to one’s individual desires, needs, or worldly projects’. This way of explaining disinterested pleasure is unspecific and hence too permissive; for as Levinson himself notes, aesthetic pleasure *does* depend on an individual’s desire—namely, her desire to engage with the object of her aesthetic appreciation. Levinson points to something very important; but it needs positive, not just contrastive, characterization.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Other negative definitions of disinterestedness focus on the exclusion of other motivations.[[8]](#footnote-8) To take up examples that have been raised in the literature, consider a student who carefully analyses a Beethoven sonata because she is studying for an exam, or a parent who takes a keen interest in a performance of *Hamlet* because his daughter is playing Ophelia.[[9]](#footnote-9) In both cases, the subject’s engagement is motivated by an outside interest. But as described, these interests do not exclude aesthetic pleasure. The student might be moved by the simplicity and power of the sonata, the father by the psychological nuance of Shakespeare’s treatment. Aesthetic motivations and aesthetic pleasure can co-exist with other kinds of motivation and pleasure; they cannot therefore be identified simply through the absence of the other kinds.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Aesthetic pleasure is supposed to explain a certain kind of interest in human artefacts. We want to know what this means, and how it is psychologically possible. Since aesthetic interest does not exclude other interest, only a positive characterization will help us here.

### Facilitating Contemplation

Facilitating pleasure arises from awareness of a difficult and costly activity; once aroused, it drives a nexus that facilitates the activity. My proposal, encapsulated in the three propositions below, is that *aesthetic pleasure* is f-pleasure taken in, and specific to, contemplation of an object.

1. Aesthetic pleasure is f-pleasure taken in the activity of contemplating an object (that is, mentally engaging with it).[[11]](#footnote-11) The activity of contemplation, not the object taken in isolation, is what aesthetic pleasure evaluates and promotes.
2. Contemplation is difficult and costly; and it takes time away from other activities. Aesthetic pleasure motivates and facilitates contemplation of an object, and it is associated with a nexus that promotes this contemplation.
3. Aesthetic pleasure is the means by which the aesthetic nexus is learned and activated. As a pleasure-nexus (Section 2, above), it aims to optimize the pleasure taken in contemplating the object.



Figure 2. The aesthetic pleasure structure. The awareness and activity of Figure 1 are merged here. The nexus optimizes contemplation for pleasure.

These propositions yield a satisfying positive account of disinterestedness.

* F-pleasure is specific to an activity; in the case of aesthetic pleasure, the activity is contemplation, or mental engagement. Aesthetic pleasure is disinterested in the sense that it specifically motivates and facilitates the activity of engaging with something mentally—and perceptually, in many cases. The focus on contemplation is not achieved by excluding other interests by fiat, but by the specificity of the associated nexus.
* F-pleasure motivates and facilitates an activity; it evaluates objects only relative to that activity. In the case of aesthetic pleasure, the activity is mentally engaging with an object. The *object* is evaluated *only* as something that is pleasurable to contemplate. This is a primary criterion of disinterestedness.
* Since my account of disinterested pleasure is positive in this way, there is no tension in allowing the intrusion of other motivations. Imagine a fifteenth-century Catholic who contemplates a Giotto altarpiece because doing so focuses her mind on Jesus. She might still find the contemplation pleasing for itself, in the above sense. Her enjoyment is aesthetic, even though it originates from an extrinsic reason for contemplating the altarpiece.
* There are short-term and long-term functions of aesthetic pleasure. In the short term it motivates and facilitates contemplating an object; in the long term it shapes a pleasure-nexus that optimizes contemplation.

I mean to be quite permissive about what counts as ‘contemplation’. Any kind of mental engagement with an object counts—any kind of looking at it, listening to it, thinking about it. For me, aesthetic engagement is marked off not by the special character of contemplation, but by the self-reinforcing pleasure loop. To illustrate this, consider looking at somebody’s face out of sexual interest. First of all, there is nothing that distinguishes this, *qua* looking, from aesthetic looking.[[12]](#footnote-12) Now think of the psychological force of the sexual pleasure that arises. It might well encourage one to keep looking at the face; but this is different from the aesthetic loop in two ways. First, the activation of the nexus is not directly the result of looking at that face; another mental state was involved as a contributing or intermediate cause: sexual desire. Second, and more importantly, the facilitating nexus is different; it is the sexual one, which among other things prepares the mind and body for sex. Sexual looking is not self-reinforcing then, in the way that aesthetic pleasure is. The pleasure generated by sexual looking does not reinforce mere looking. Again, I don’t want to rule out that aesthetic pleasure may exist side-by-side with sexual interest. My point is rather that aesthetic interest is marked by a distinctive psychological structure. (Similar points might be made concerning the devout person who takes an aesthetic interest in the Giotto.)

So we arrive at a definition. Aesthetic pleasure is:

1. a consciously felt positive evaluation that
2. . . . arises directly from a subject’s difficult and costly activity of contemplating an object, and
3. . . . activates a learned pleasure nexus that motivates, facilitates, and optimizes the subject’s contemplation of the object.[[13]](#footnote-13)

To repeat: it is the self-reinforcing effect of contemplation that marks mental engagement off as a distinctive mental state—not the intrinsic character of the mental engagement itself.

## Part III: Learning to Enjoy

### The Learning Conditions

I come now to the third proposition of my proposal: aesthetic pleasure activates an associated pleasure-learned nexus. Recall how a nexus is learned by pleasure. An activity gives pleasure; different ways of conducting the activity give different amounts of pleasure. The incremental reward reinforces the more pleasurable modes of conduct.

Let’s apply this to aesthetic enjoyment. Suppose that you encounter a painting, and the following conditions are met:

1. The painting initially engages your curiosity or interest, so it is pleasurable to look at it.
2. You can change and adjust the way you look at it, by deploying background knowledge, by attending to its different aspects, by thinking and talking about it, and so on.
3. These different ways of looking at the painting are rewarding to different degrees.

Under these conditions, you can learn to engage with the object in ways that increase pleasure.

Two rather banal examples[[14]](#footnote-14) illustrate how the process works. Imagine that you encounter Magritte’s *The Treachery of Images*. Condition (i) is satisfied easily, often even adventitiously. Trivially, you might be visiting the Los Angeles County Museum of Art wanting to lay eyes on what you have heard is a famous painting. Initial interest is necessary to get things going; but since this is capricious as well as promiscuous, it tells us nothing about the nature of the aesthetic attitude.

Now suppose someone tells you that Magritte was fascinated by the relationship between name and object, and you come to realize that his inscription ‘Ceci n’est pas une pipe’ plays on the ambiguity between seeing a picture of a pipe and seeing the actual pipe depicted by it. Or suppose you work out this interplay of caption and image on your own without being aware of the historical or biographical background. Either way, you now adjust how you look at the picture; you might find, for example, that the picture is of a type commonly advertised in the back pages of cheap magazines, and that the handwriting is ‘like a script from the convent’, as Foucault puts it. This way of looking at the picture offers you greater intellectual pleasure than when you started—and of course a lot more than the advertising image would; for this reason it becomes entrenched as a way not only of looking at this painting, but also of interrogating other pictures. This new enjoyment would strengthen the looping structure of Figure 2.

I shall outline another example more briefly. It has been overworked in recent philosophical aesthetics, so the ramifications of my approach should be easy to discern. Imagine being in New York in 1917 and coming across Duchamp’s *Fountain*. You could, of course, contemptuously turn your back on it, and then condition (i) would not be satisfied (for reasons just as adventitious as in the Magritte example). But suppose for a moment that it piqued your curiosity. Then conditions (ii) and (iii) could easily take hold. Your attitudes toward the display of ‘art’ would change, leading to an increase in enjoyment of this and many other works. The possibility of this kind of development cannot be traced to the object as such (and the same goes for Magritte’s drawing). The difference lies in the possibility of rewarding engagement that Duchamp creates. Again, there is no ‘beauty’ here in the sense of perceptual characteristics that delight the eye. The significance lies in the possibility of engaging in new ways with the urinal (and indeed with marble sculptures).

There is a significant structural parallel between learning of this sort and Darwinian natural selection [Hull, Langman, and Glenn 2001]. An aesthetic object can be approached in different ways. Some of these ways give you more pleasure than others, and these more pleasurable ways reinforce the manner of your engagement with the object, which becomes entrenched as a result; so by a kind of operant conditioning, certain variants of mental engagement are preferentially reinforced. In natural selection, by comparison, there is heritable variation of types; the variation makes a difference to the retention of these types, so certain variants are preferentially retained; consequently, the most retained types become entrenched in the population.

Learning fits into the structure of aesthetic engagement as laid out above in Section 7 and Figure 2. In the short term, the reward (pleasure) we get from mentally engaging with a human artefact encourages us to keep engaging with it. In the longer term, we learn by engaging with these objects in different ways to enhance and maximize the pleasure we get both from individual creations—and from these and other creative styles and movements. Art enhances what we get from art. The same is true of ‘anti-art’.

Culture plays a crucial role in creating a variety of approaches to engaging with an object. The artist uses shared cultural assumptions, to create the possibility of approaching her creation in diverse ways. She challenges the audience to find new meaning in her creations, and offers cultural signposts and pointers to suggest directions we might take. Magritte and Duchamp did this by blocking old ways of looking and revealing new ones; Magritte’s inscription opens the possibility of looking not at the pipe but at its *image*. Of course, the artist’s meaning can be found without any pleasure being evoked. You may take a class on twentieth-century European art that educates you to look in different ways. But though you learn didactically what Magritte was up to, you may fail to respond with enjoyment. So long as pleasure is absent, your attitude is not aesthetic.[[15]](#footnote-15) The artist’s aim is for you to find this pleasure, which in effect eases the cognitive load of mental engagement, and motivates taking it on.

My idea that there are different ways of approaching a work of art, some of which give more pleasure than others, will remind some readers of Kendall Walton’s ‘Categories of Art’ [Walton 1970]. He holds that the aesthetic properties of an artwork depend on the category in which it is placed. As well, he insists that ‘the relevant historical facts . . . help to *determine* what aesthetic properties a work has’; and though I have made no mention of ‘aesthetic properties’, his claim has obvious echoes in my treatment. A possible difference is that Walton believes in an objectively correct way to approach an artwork. Aesthetic normativity is not my topic here, but my approach to the question of objectivity is through the particular kind of pleasure that I call *aesthetic*. For me, the ‘correct’ way of engaging with art is the way that is maximally productive of this kind of pleasure *provided that this does not contradict fact*. (Some find it extremely pleasurable to imagine that *Pride and Prejudice* is about zombies; I can’t believe that this is a stable position.) There are individual differences, of course. Two observers might find maximally pleasurable two quite divergent ways of engaging with an artwork. We imagine that discussion could alter this state of affairs, but still these observers might remain in different places. Supposing that neither is wrong about the facts, neither is wrong about the pleasure; so neither is wrong about the evaluation. It is not clear to me that Walton would disagree. I have in mind a specific cognitively complex form of pleasure, not just any old titillation. Perhaps this still leaves me short of the kind of objectivism that Walton demands; but I am closer to him than most hedonists can come.

### Expertise

Aesthetic learning creates permanent changes in the consumer’s cognitive attitudes. Eleanor Gibson [1963] researched such changes in the realm of perception. (See also Goldstone [1998], and Goldstone and Byrge [2015].) Gibson noted that repeated exposure to a type of stimulus increases speed and accuracy of discrimination over time, and called it ‘perceptual learning’. Philosophers often cite this kind of phenomenon, though they do not always notice the rise in discrimination and accuracy. Ned Block, for instance, appeals to ‘the difference in what it is like to hear sounds in French before and after you have learned the language’ [Block 1995: 234]. I would point out that the difference is not just in ‘what it is like’; there is also a difference in perceptual performance relative to discriminating the phonemes uttered by speakers of French. This is not primarily *factual* learning, but *performance* learning or learning how.

Perceptual learning is another aspect of how we learn to consume art [Matthen 2015]. Trained musicians are better at identifying musical progression and form than non-musicians; and though their superior performance extends to music from an unfamiliar musical culture, they are not as adept as those who are steeped in that culture. Again, eye-tracking studies reveal differences between experienced consumers of art and untrained but equally well-educated laypersons. The experts scanned pictures very widely; but laypersons focused on representational elements—such as parts showing people or architectural features—as if they were gazing at the scene that is depicted. ‘Artistically trained participants view familiar objects to a lesser extent than the laymen, with an increased preference for viewing more or less abstract, structural features instead’ [Vogt and Magnusson 2007]. In short, the aesthetically experienced consumers took more from the picture by not focusing simply on content.

Expertise in consumers is a precondition of art as a social institution. As Michael Baxandall has argued, art in fifteenth-century Italy developed in parallel with the skills of discernment and taste of clients: ‘As the conspicuous consumption of gold and ultramarine became less important . . . its place was filled by references to an equally conspicuous index of consumption of something else—skill’ [Baxandall 1972: 15]. It is worth reflecting on how the expertise of aesthetic engagement figures in this. The very rich people that commissioned and purchased art would not have tolerated fake gold in their jewellery; yet they could discern and were enchanted by the ability of artists to dissimulate. Baxandall quotes Alberti: ‘I would not want you to use any gold, because to represent the glitter of gold with plain colours brings the craftsman more admiration and praise’ [ibid.: 16]. Such a development relied not merely on imposed ideology—‘neo-Ciceronian humanism’, ‘Christian asceticism’, and the like—but on the developed capacity to enjoy the artist’s ability to dissimulate.

### Attentive Object Appraisal

Stephen Davies writes:

The audience’s experience of an artwork . . . cannot be pursued mindlessly or passively. The audience interacts with the work—looks for patterns, design, relationships; looks for connections and contrasts among formal, semantic, and whatever other elements there might be; looks at the work under one aspect, then under another, and so on . . . The pleasure afforded by art goes . . . with the very business of engaging with the work in order that it be appreciated. [Davies 1991: 60]

Obviously, Davies did not intend this to be a boldly original or iconoclastic proposal. These attributes of audience involvement are widely recognized. What I want to show is that this kind of aesthetic norm is the product of the learning conditions for aesthetic nexuses. I build this connection in what follows.

10.1 Attention

The aesthetic attitude is attentive. Some think that *all* pleasure is attentive. Seeing why this is mistaken will help us focus on the aesthetic attitude. Gilbert Ryle wrote:

The notion of attending or giving one’s mind to is a polymorphous notion. The . . . notion of enjoying is one variety in this genus, or one member of this clan, i.e., that the reason why I cannot, in logic, enjoy what I am oblivious of is the same as the reason why I cannot, in logic, spray my currant-bushes without gardening. [Ryle 1954: 142]

Ryle equates awareness and attention, and so assumes that pleasure is attentive. This is too simple. Some pleasures reduce attention and make it more diffuse; others draw attention and make it more focused. To show why and when aesthetic pleasure is attentive requires us to discriminate among situations.

Think of states of reverie. Gazing at moving water, you may enter a state of detachment—which can be very pleasant, but which cognitively distances you from the water. When you first start gazing at the water, you may be attending to it, or you may not. However this may be, the resulting reverie state is the antithesis of attention. Perhaps attention is the selective amplification of an information channel, to facilitate mental or bodily action on some object [Wu 2014]. Or perhaps it is the allocation of cognitive resources to a task [Mole 2011]. Either way, reverie is the opposite; it turns the volume down on incoming information, and withdraws cognitive resources. This shows that enjoyment does not in itself imply attention. And since f-pleasure works to facilitate the activity that engenders it, it is not to be expected that it would always encourage attention. This is why pleasurable reverie reduces attention rather than increasing it.

Now think of mentally engaging with an object in different ways, in search of how to contemplate it more enjoyably. This demands cognitive resources; and if background cultural knowledge and other interpretative resources are to be deployed, then all the more so. This is the primary aesthetic attitude—an active search for pleasure and enjoyment in contemplation. As I have described it, the aesthetic attitude is active, exploratory, and comparative[[16]](#footnote-16)—which is why it is attentive.

There is an interesting connection between pleasure and attention that amplifies why they are intertwined in aesthetic contexts. As mentioned earlier, pleasure is phenomenologically and neurologically separate from contemplation. This raises a problem. Leonard Katz explains it well:

In experiments the nonconscious mechanisms that bind pleasure to objects can be fooled about the pleasure’s source . . . For example, experimental subjects may be caused to like a beverage better by initial exposure to it after a photograph of a smiling face . . . It seems that affect, may, like color and many other features, be processed separately in the brain from representations of any objects to which the feature in question (e.g., color or pleasantness) really belong or is later assigned. Such assignment presumably requires active binding to object representations. [Katz 2014]

You may know you are reading a deep and absorbing book. You may also know that you are in a state of enjoyment. How do you determine which of your many mental states is giving you pleasure? Katz’s point is that the process of binding pleasure to activity is distinct from the one that stimulates pleasure centres. Binding is ‘active’; it is, as I put it earlier, the third man.

My conjecture is that one way the brain can bind *pleasure* to *activity* is by correlating changes in the level of each. When you passively enjoy something, you are not aware of changes in the activity that correlate with your own exploration of the object. Your pleasure will be defocused; it will not be bound to anything particular. This brings us back to conditions (ii) and (iii), and the imperative in aesthetic contexts to explore different ways of engaging with something to determine how pleasure alters along with changes in cognitive approach. This exploratory attitude helps bind pleasure to its source by attention—another component of the aesthetic attitude.

Bence Nanay [2014] argues that ‘attention is one of the crucial but almost completely ignored concepts in aesthetics’. He writes:

How do we know what properties of an artwork we should be paying attention to and what properties we should ignore or actively abstract away from? . . . Here is one strategy: we should ignore all those properties that the artist did not intend us to attend to . . . Here is another strategy: we should ask what would give us the highest degree of aesthetic experience/pleasure—maybe independently of what the artist intended. [ibid.]

I favour the second strategy. I would simply add: we find out what pleases us most by experimenting with different ways of mentally engaging with the artwork.

10.2 Appraisal

Gazing at a Mark Rothko painting, or listening to a Philip Glass *perpetuum mobile*, I might fall into a dreamy state that keeps me looking or listening. Reading a novel by Stieg Larsson, I might get so caught up in the narrative that I pay no heed to the qualities of the novel itself—the writing, the development of the characters, the clever interplay of personal and political themes. (Ah, the treachery of narrative.) In these cases I simply receive pleasure, but make no attempt either to trace its aetiology or to maximize it by reading the book in more effective ways. I concede that, in order to appreciate works such as those I have just mentioned, I may need to experience uncritically their power to affect me. Nevertheless, aesthetic appreciation cannot be just a passive effect. It must be exploratory; it must rest, at least in part, on the awareness that certain features of the object are responsible for the pleasure.

Object appraisal is mandated by how pleasure figures in learning. Earlier I said that pleasure is, among its other characteristics, an essential part of a learning system, a reward that reinforces certain behaviours. When a certain way of doing something gives you more pleasure than other ways, it is reinforced. Now, aesthetic pleasure arises from mentally engaging with objects—which involves being receptive to certain of their characteristics. Assuming that some ways of being receptive give more pleasure than others, aesthetic pleasure will be instrumental in learning these more effective ways. This is the basis for the requirement of object appraisal.

Wine tasting provides an instructive parallel. Suppose it is nothing beyond an attempt to experience pleasure by perceiving flavours; then skilled wine tasting would be the ability to find wines that give the most flavour-pleasure, and to consume them in ways that maximize this pleasure. This is a skill that pleasure can teach, but only if that pleasure is accompanied by close attention to the relevant perceived characteristics of the wine. There is an important difference between this sort of perusal and that of reading an exciting thriller. Here pleasure is being used to learn ‘right’ ways of perceiving; but with the thriller, pleasure is essentially passive.

The appreciation of art exemplifies the learned pleasure nexus. When novices engage with art they are in learning mode. They learn, by experimentation or by instruction, that some ways afford greater pleasure. The search for the most effective ways to enjoy art entails both receptivity to the relevant characteristics of art and optimized ways of engaging with it. This is the activity I call object appraisal. It is an active, deliberate form of engagement. It can also be broad ranging. Dickie [1964] writes: ‘Some poems simply are or contain social criticism, and a complete reading must not fail to notice this fact.’ I agree, but stipulate that in order to be aesthetic in motivation, the reading of the social criticism cannot *simply* proceed as if it were no different from reading a piece in *New Left Review*. Noticing the social criticism must, if it is aesthetic, both serve to heighten one’s motivation to read the piece and facilitate one’s reading. J.O. Urmson [1957] writes that ‘satisfaction may be both aesthetic and moral’. This seems right: any moral assessment of a work of art should include an aesthetic appraisal and vice versa. Nonetheless, the grounds of each assessment rest on different considerations.

To summarize: Certain objects give you pleasure when you mentally or perceptually engage with them. This pleasure motivates you to optimize the engagement and maximize the pleasure. The aesthetic attitude consists in appraising the object with this aim.

### How Art is Different

Conditions (ii) and (iii) have two notable consequences for how we understand the aesthetic realm.

First, if I am right, then one would expect that when somebody makes an object for aesthetic appreciation, she would seek to ensure that it is capable of being engaged with in a variety of ways that differ in the pleasure or enjoyment they afford. Shared cultural assumptions help to introduce and increase such variation. Creators exploit these assumptions, often by violating them in gross or subtle ways, to endow their works with possibilities of enjoyment that are not apparent at the surface. Now, natural objects do not carry—certainly not to the same heightened degree—cultural significance that requires new ways of engagement. As Glenn Parsons and Allen Carlson [2004] effectively argue, some of their other properties may invite contemplation that is culturally and scientifically informed and hence transformable. I don’t argue, then, that natural objects cannot be aesthetically appreciated; but I do say they are appreciated to the degree that they possess a dimension of pleasure-giving variability that prompts an effort to engage with them in new ways. And contrary to Parsons and Carlson, I would conjecture that this variability is generally less salient in nature than it is in the realm of artefacts, where creators deliberately inject it.

Second, what unifies art as such is that human beings create it in order to engage the distinctive mental structure of aesthetic engagement outlined in Section 8. Theories of art often seek commonalities in the *objects* that human beings create for this purpose. (Some claim, for instance, that they have certain formal properties.) There is no a priori reason why this kind of theory should fail; there are possible worlds where all objects created for aesthetic enjoyment are intrinsically similar. Given differences across cultures and across times, however, these accounts have not succeeded. This has led to a certain theoretical pessimism: for instance, Julius Moravcsik [1993] concludes that we should drop the idea that there is something common to art as such, and simply enumerate features that *some* artworks possess: ‘We can scan the global horizon, noting how widespread each feature is, and what generalizations account for their occurrences and co-occurrences’ [ibid.: 432]. Without wishing to deny the possible utility of such a global bird’s-eye view, I would suggest that aesthetic objects do have something in common: they appeal to the aesthetic attitude. I have tried to show how this attitude is psychologically distinctive.

### Nearly Aesthetic Pleasures

The specificity of aesthetic pleasure, which follows from its facilitating role, is an important element of disinterestedness. There are, however, many cases of pleasure in which it seems that this clause is violated, but which are felt to be aesthetic because of similarities with the aesthetic case. I’ll call these cases ‘nearly aesthetic’ to suggest that they fall short, though with intriguing felt similarities that could, for some, motivate their legitimate inclusion.

The first case, already touched upon, is the pleasure of sexual looking. Here one would like to say that the looking is anything but disinterested; and I argued earlier that it should be excluded because it is associated with the sensory pleasure of sex and its accompanying f-nexus. However, the term ‘beauty’ is associated with sexual attractiveness in most cultures and languages, particularly the sexual attractiveness of women. (Indeed, this might be the primary meaning of the term in many cultures, and have spread from there to the aesthetic quality.) I would conjecture that this has to do with the self-reinforcing feedback loop from looking to looking. This mimics aesthetic looking, except for its association with a nexus that facilitates other kinds of action. It is entirely possible, however, to detach oneself from the sexual nexus. Levinson [2011] goes too far I think, when he writes: ‘I would deny that human physical beauty can be detached from sexual attractiveness.’

A second case is that of flavour. Traditionally, philosophers have been sceptical of the notion that enjoyment of food could be aesthetic; but this is because they did not clearly enough distinguish the *sensory* pleasure of savouring food and the *relief* pleasure of satisfying hunger. There is a modulatory relation between these pleasures. When one is extremely hungry, eating gives the pleasure of relief from hunger. One can’t savour food in this condition. When one is not literally starving, the pleasure of savouring comes back. Finally, when one is sated, flavour pleasure recedes. Now, the pleasure of savouring food facilitates eating and tasting. Aesthetic pleasure in food would, by the analysis offered earlier, be pleasure that encourages and facilitates savouring without encouraging eating (except incidentally because eating is associated with savouring). The main reason to deny that flavour appreciation is purely disinterested is the one canvassed earlier: it is conditional upon not being sated, and could therefore be regarded as superadded to pleasure associated with bodily needs. But as Carolyn Korsmeyer [1999] demonstrates, this hardly exhausts the complex pleasures of eating. There is a good bit more to be said about eating.

For a third case, think of aesthetic pleasure in mathematical proofs. The primary purpose of contemplating these is to gain knowledge. Right away, that makes the activity *interested*; the loop in Figure 2 does not close. Nevertheless, some report an apprehension of beauty when contemplating great proofs, and many also report a differentiation: some proofs are deemed beautiful, others ugly. Could it be that mathematicians find certain constructions worth contemplating for no other reason than the pleasure that such contemplation affords? This was the view of Bertrand Russell; he wanted the Cambridge mathematics syllabus to be less applied and less English, and more pure and more German. Russell invokes something like Kant’s sublime (a feeling of superiority over nature):

The true spirit of delight, the exaltation, the sense of being more than Man, which is the touchstone of the highest excellence, is to be found in mathematics as surely as in poetry. [Russell 1919: 60]

### Conclusion

I have argued in this paper for two main theses.

The first is that mental engagement with art is a difficult activity that is facilitated by a pleasure-learned nexus, where the pleasure is a mental state that motivates and facilitates this mental engagement, or contemplation.

My second thesis is that art is something made to be contemplated in a way that engages a pleasure-learned nexus. Culture is an essential condition for such creation; it provides the artist with means to diversify ways of engagement with her creation, and people learn to find the most pleasurable of these ways.

As I have emphasized more than once, I do not propound substantive aesthetic norms here—nor even try to show why we should value art. My project has to do with the mind. I hope to have demonstrated something about how humans enjoy art, and why that enjoyment is of a distinctive kind.[[17]](#footnote-17)

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1. My project and methods are quite different from those of experimental aesthetics. (For a recent review of the latter see Palmer, Schloss, and Sammartino [2013].) The experimental work is *extensional*; it seeks to discover what non-aesthetic qualities—combinations of colour, spatial patterns, tonal progressions, etc.—we find aesthetically pleasing. My question is *intensional*: What is aesthetic pleasure? This question, which arises out of traditional concerns in philosophical aesthetics, is neutral regarding actual human preferences; and it is equally well posed across people and peoples who diverge in what they find aesthetically pleasing. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Edward Bullough [1912] wrote: ‘The axiom of “hedonistic aesthetics” is that beauty is pleasure. Unfortunately for hedonism the formula is not reversible. Hence the necessity of some limiting criterion . . .’ I agree. A pleasure-focused account of aesthetic engagement such as mine must distinguish the kind of pleasure that is involved. This is my main aim in this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In a celebrated paper, Robert Zajonc [1968] hypothesized that ‘mere repeated exposure of the individual to a stimulus is a sufficient condition for the enhancement of his attitude toward it’. He found that subjects liked a nonsense word or photograph with repeated exposure to it. This is one mechanism by which tastes are acquired. (I am grateful to Bence Nanay for pointing out the relevance of this phenomenon.) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The theory of operant conditioning is important here: see Section 8, below. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. I don’t want to reduce aesthetic norms to psychological attitudes; I do, however, want to emphasize the connection between critical normativity and psychological enjoyment. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Stephen Davies [2014] captures quite well the contrast between the two explanatory moments. Responding to my discussion of his ideas about the evolution of art [Matthen 2014], he writes: ‘whereas Matthen holds that our aesthetic pleasure is a response to our act of contemplation, I think it is a response to the beauty of its perceptual object’ [Davies 2014: 495]. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Levinson [2009]: ‘Pleasure in an object is aesthetic when it derives from apprehension of and reflection on the object’s individual character and content, both for itself and, at least in central cases, in relation to the structural base on which such character and content rest.’ I take ‘for itself’ to be essentially contrastive (it’s not clear how it applies to the ‘nearly aesthetic’ pleasures of Section 12, below) and hence implicitly negative. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See criticisms by George Dickie [1964]. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Edward Bullough [1912] has an unintentionally comic example: a man who is interested in *Othello* because he suspects his wife of infidelity. (Bullough’s tone of high seriousness does not suggest a foray into farce.) He allows that this man could still be aesthetically interested in the play. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Jerome Stolnitz [1960] denies co-existence in a peculiarly romantic way. Dickie [1974] quotes him as denying that one can be aesthetically critical: because in the aesthetic attitude, ‘the spectator “surrenders” himself to the work of art’. Dickie’s diagnosis is plausible: Stolnitz must think that ‘the critic has an ulterior purpose—to analyse and evaluate the object he perceives’. But this interest is fully compatible with the aesthetic attitude. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Richard Lind [1980] posits a nested structure: a ‘non-practical perceptual interest, and a practical meta-interest in undergoing the very process of perceptual interest’. This has the right kind of nesting, but it is a bit different from what I propose. My starting point is mental engagement with an object, which is not restricted to perception. Gary Iseminger [1981] proposes that aesthetic merit is the goodness of experiencing something. This too is nicely nested, though (a) ‘experience’ is conceived more passively than I would like, and (b) it founds aesthetic pleasure on Platonic merit (that is, on the goodness of experience). Neither Lind nor Iseminger says anything about facilitation; like many others, including Levinson [1992, 2013], they treat of pleasure as a purely passive response to an experience. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. A number of critics, notably George Dickie [1964], have argued that the aesthetic attitude is *not* distinctive, largely on the grounds that aesthetic engagement is very much like mental engagement that is differently motivated. While Dickie is right that aesthetic *contemplation* is no different from contemplation for other purposes, aesthetic engagement is marked by a distinctive self-reinforcing kind of pleasure and facilitation. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. In correspondence, Bence Nanay remarks that catharsis might count as an aesthetic r-pleasure. Perhaps he is right, and our definition might capture aesthetic f-pleasure alone, not every aesthetic response. Regardless of this, aesthetic f-pleasure defines aesthetic engagement. Catharsis would not be aesthetic if it didn’t arise out of aesthetic engagement. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Please, dear reader, treat my naïve ‘art-criticism’ as merely an illustrative cartoon. For a much more interesting treatment of Magritte, see Foucault [1983], which more richly epitomizes the kind of criticism I have in mind. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Hans Maes provides this quote from Joseph Heller’s *Catch 22* to illustrate the point: ‘He knew everything about literature, except how to enjoy it.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Compare Levinson [1992: 297]: ‘The pleasure of experiencing an art work is . . . typically a pleasure in doing something—listening, viewing, attending, organizing, projecting, conjecturing, imagining, speculating, hypothesizing, etc.—rather than just allowing things to happen to one on a sensory plane.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
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