

WHY IDEAL CRITICS ARE NOT IDEAL: AESTHETIC CHARACTER, MOTIVATION AND VALUE

Matthew Kieran

On a contemporary Humean-influenced view, the responses of suitably idealized appreciators are presented as tracking, or even determining, facts about artistic value. Focusing on the intra-personal case, this paper argues that (i) facts about the refinement and reconfiguration of aesthetic character together with (ii) the manner in which autobiography and character are implicated in artistic appreciation make it *de facto* unlikely that we can reliably come to know how our ideal counterpart would respond to a given artwork. Attribution of superhuman abilities to our ideal counterpart partially addresses this worry, but undermines a central feature of the theoretical motivation for the idealizing model. Insofar as response-dependent accounts of artistic value are inextricably tied to an idealizing view of critics, we have reason to reject them.

I. INTRODUCTION

HERE IS a prevalent contemporary Humean-influenced picture of artistic value and appreciation:¹ the best art works are those that our ideal art

¹ This is not necessarily Hume's view. See Stephanie Ross, 'Humean Critics: Real or Ideal?', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 48, no. 1 (2008), pp. 20–28, for an argument that it is not. Humean exegesis will be set to one side here given that the target of the paper is the broad view according to which some suitably ideal appreciator (either in terms of capacities or conditions) is taken to track or fix artistic value. The claim is recognizably influenced by Hume (even if he did not hold it) and plays a prominent role in the literature. See, for example, Jerrold Levinson, 'Hume's Standard of Taste: The Real Problem', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 60, no. 3 (2002), pp. 227–238; James Shelley, 'Hume's Double Standard of Taste', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 52, no. 4 (1994), pp. 437–445; and Charles Taliaferro, 'The Ideal Aesthetic Observer Revisited', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 30 (1990), pp. 1–13. The view figures significantly in discussions about value more generally as can be seen from Michael Smith, 'Internal Reasons', in his *Ethics and the Apriori* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2004), pp. 17–42; David Lewis, 'Dispositional Theories of Value', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, suppl. vol. 63 (1989), pp. 113–137; Peter Railton, 'Facts and Values', *Philosophical Topics*, vol. 14 (1986), pp. 5–31; and Bernard Williams, 'Internal and External Reasons', in his *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1981).

appreciators rate most highly. The estimation of a work's value by our ideal art appreciator is a function of the greatness and depth of the pleasure afforded in their experience with and appreciation of it. What marks out ideal art appreciators from those possessed of a merely standard human nature is that, in addition, certain requisite aspects of their human nature are suitably honed and refined. Thus, for example, ideal art appreciators will have a delicacy of imagination and sympathy that we lack. They will also be in an ideal position by virtue of possessing the requisite knowledge, comparative experience, and freedom from the whims of prejudice or fashion upon which a full and proper appreciation of a work depends. The refinement of aspects of human nature is required since, whether we are talking about the taste of wine to the palette or the aesthetic and expressive features of art works, the cultivation of discriminatory capacities and increased fineness of our responses enables us to pick out properties that affect how we experience and appreciate a work.

One way of fixing which aspects of human nature should be factored in as suitably refined, rendering this a non-arbitrary matter, is given by the refinement of those qualities that are required to appreciate works which pass the test of time.² Works passing the test of time are those that have been appreciated and rated highly across different cultures and epochs. In looking at such works we find that the refinement of certain aspects of our nature, such as delicacy of imagination and sympathy, are required to appreciate just how and why those works yield the kind of pleasures they do. The test of time is a good guide to those works that would be rated highly by our ideal critics because they are appreciated across many differences in prejudices, fashions, and attitudes. Ideal conditions for the judgements of our ideal art appreciators are required since, without the relevant knowledge, ideal art appreciators would not be able to fix many artistically relevant properties; cultural prejudices or fashions might distort the apprehension of artistically relevant properties; and devoid of the relevant kind of comparative experience, the ideal art appreciator would be unable to make the kinds of comparisons required to appreciate and estimate a work's worth. Why should we be bothered about what ideal critics like? Ordinary appreciators should be motivated to try and appreciate what ideal art appreciators recommend, as opposed to works presently enjoyed that ideal art appreciators would rate less highly, since the appreciative gain (at least if successful) will be greater: 'a satisfaction ultimately more worth having than what one gets from what one enjoys as a nonideal perceiver'.³

² See particularly Jerrold Levinson, 'Hume's Standard of Taste: The Real Problem', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 60, no. 3 (2002), pp. 227–238, as well as Mary Mothersill, 'Hume and the Paradox of Taste', in G. Dickie, R. Sclafini and R. Roblin (eds), *Aesthetics: A Critical Anthology* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1989), pp. 269–286.

³ Levinson, 'Hume's Standard of Taste', p. 234.

One significant worry about this kind of account is that there may be nothing to guarantee that the judgements of ideal critics converge in the way required to establish an interpersonal standard of taste.⁴ However, the locus of my concern is the intrapersonal case. We might think that even if the interpersonal case were problematic at least the intrapersonal case should go through. All that is required is the assumption that for any subject there is an ideal art appreciator counterpart. There may be divergence amongst all ideal art appreciators but surely there is an ideal counterpart that can fix or pick out the comparative value of art works for me. Focusing on the intrapersonal case enables us to concentrate on whether the Humean-influenced picture gives us adequate reason to hold that the pronouncements of our ideal art appreciators are authoritative for us, and consider the purported link between what our ideal aesthetic appreciator recommends and what we are motivated to do. In what follows, I will suggest that adverting to the notion of an ideal critic means we cannot be in a position to know which works we really should be motivated to try and appreciate and why. The upshot is that appealing to ideal critics (and associated response-dependent conceptions of artistic value) looks deeply problematic.

II. THE AUTHORITY OF THE TEST OF TIME AND THE PROCESS OF REFINEMENT

On the Humean model our ideal art appreciator is more refined than we are with respect to those discriminatory capacities, such as perceptiveness, and responses, such as imaginative sympathy, which are identified as being bound up with the appreciation of those works that pass the test of time. The development of our aesthetic character is thus conceived of as the ever-increasing refinement of just those qualities. It is assumed that because the test of time is a non-arbitrary indicator of the relevant qualities required for artistic appreciation, it follows that the results of the test of time are a good indicator of the overall artistic value of works, at least with respect to those that pass the test, and their evaluative interrelations. Hence we know what qualities we should cultivate and, pretty much, what works we should be motivated to try and appreciate. The inference here is problematic.

Let us assume that the test of time fixes non-arbitrarily the qualities we ought to refine. Does it follow that we know what we should be motivated to appreciate? It seems as if this is so if we concentrate on the wine-tasting case Hume presents us with.⁵ Sancho's kinsmen perceive all the qualities in the

⁴ See Matthew Kieran, *Revealing Art* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 226–230.

⁵ Hume, 'Of the Standard of Taste', in his *Selected Essays*, ed. S. Copley and A. Edgar (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1993), p. 141.

wine that the villagers do except for two additional qualities, the hints of leather and iron, that lead them to have slightly different responses and thus qualify their praise. The process of refinement of the relevant qualities required proceeds along a continuum and so concomitantly does the nature of our evaluations. It is not that the villagers were radically mistaken in their perception, responses, and evaluations, they were just a bit too coarse-grained and thus incomplete. They come to know this is so since they see the leather-bound key at the bottom of the barrel once all the wine has been drunk. We know, pretty much, with respect to art works which qualities we should cultivate since we can identify works that have passed the test of time. The analogy is not exact of course. The villagers know for sure with respect to the wine. The test of time only provides a pretty good indicator for art works since they have been picked out by actual art appreciators who themselves could be more refined and even closer to their ideal art appreciators. Still it is held to be fairly reliable, if not infallible, because the process of refinement is assumed to improve evaluation in this way. The assumption is naïve.

Small refinements in the same discriminatory capacities and responses can radically affect our experience and appreciation of art works in ways we are all familiar with. I once thought of the work of Mondrian's late to middle period as good graphic design, nice but flat arrangements of line and colour, and was puzzled as to why people thought his work particularly valuable as art. Yet once I was able to see some of these pictures as representing abstracted projections of pictorial space the structure of my experience was transformed and my evaluation inverted radically from thinking them no good to rating them pretty highly. Similarly I once thought that *Seinfeld* just wasn't funny, despite the obvious fact that many people found it so, because I just couldn't see why we were supposed to be bothered about the central characters. They all seemed fairly repugnant and unsympathetic in various ways. But once I came to realise that they weren't supposed to be sympathetic, I suddenly got the point and found it highly amusing. These are cases where my artistic evaluation radically inverted from pretty poor to pretty good, because of the development in my capacity to see or grasp things that I hadn't been able to previously. Of course it works the other way too. Works I once rated highly suddenly plummeted since a small development in my sensibility or understanding radically reconfigured my experience and thus evaluations of them. Furthermore, the nature and prospect of such radical reconfiguration is ramified when we consider that the refinement of our imaginative sympathy can radically affect how we construe the cognitive-affective character of works. I take it that a lot of the contested debate about what constitutes the literary canon is just an obvious mark of this. When our capacity for imaginative sympathy is extended with respect to types of people, social or ethnic groups we may previously have found it hard to be sympathetic towards, this can radically affect our experience with

and evaluation of works that manifest attitudes towards them. It is, for example, easy to understand why Nabokov's *Lolita* caused the furore it did because, at least for many, it was difficult to imaginatively sympathize with the central character, Humbert Humbert. Yet at least for those capable of such sympathy it was clearly a great work of literature rather than one to be reviled. A refinement in imaginative sympathy can thus radically effect a difference in both experience and evaluation. The examples I have concentrated on concern changes with respect to one particular capacity or response. That is all that is required for the argument, though it is worth pointing out that the potential interaction of refinements amongst capacities and responses serves only to magnify the problem.

Consideration of the development of our aesthetic character shows that a small refinement of our capacities and responses often radically reconfigures our experience and evaluation. There is in principle, then, no reason to believe that the same would not hold true with respect to more ideal actual art appreciators who reliably pick out and appreciate those works that pass the test of time. The most nearly ideal actual art appreciators will be unable to pick out differences that could radically reconfigure the experience and appreciation of works. Hence there is no reason to suppose that the gap between the most nearly ideal actual art appreciators, since their qualities could no doubt be ever so slightly more refined than they actually are, and the non-actual ideal art appreciators, rules out the possibility of radical reconfiguration. Indeed there is every reason to suppose this is likely.

To use an analogy, it is as if the position of my present aesthetic character is akin to standing very close to a large impressionist work by Monet.⁶ I see huge swathes of paint and colour but the shapes and structure are fairly indistinct and do not seem to represent anything. My experience of the work may be nothing to write home about and I evaluate it poorly from that perspective. However, as I refine my discriminatory capacities and responses it is as if I am walking back from the painting to get some distance. The process of doing so brings the painting into greater focus and suddenly the whole work is restructured and I can see interrelations of line, colour, and texture as a representation of a water lily garden. This is akin to the position of the ideal appreciator who is in the perfect position to experience and respond to the work appropriately. But given that the development of our aesthetic character naturally involves such radical reconfigurations, it is a bad inductive assumption to think that the test of time is a good indicator of artistic value. Even if we have non-arbitrarily identified the right discriminatory capacities and responses to refine, we cannot know or even have much of an idea about what our true ideal

⁶ I owe the analogy to Andrew McGonigal.

artistic appreciator would recommend. The likelihood of a radical reconfiguration between the present best guess and the ideal situation is pretty damn high.⁷

If we cannot even have that good an idea of what our true ideal art appreciator would recommend to us as artistically valuable, then we do not have much of an idea about what it is we should be aiming to try and appreciate. Our epistemic position would then be a bad one. Hence the motivational link is threatened. After all, why should we be motivated to appreciate particular works if we lack good reason to believe that doing so is worthwhile? Still, putting matters this way may be unduly pessimistic. If the development of aesthetic character is tantamount to finessing then, radical reconfigurations notwithstanding, at least we may often have a good enough idea about what our ideal critic would recommend. The appreciable value of certain works may be robust in the face of possible reconfigurations and this may be the mark of truly good or great works.⁸ However, a deeper problem for the ideal model arises when we examine the assumption about aesthetic character.

III. AESTHETIC CHARACTER

At least in some cases the ways in which we develop is not one of perpetually refining the very same qualities of our aesthetic character. There are sometimes marked shifts or radical breaks in the kinds of capacities and responses cultivated as we learn to appreciate new works. This is hardly surprising given that different works often call on distinct concerns and cognitive-affective attitudes that stand in tension with one another. Postmodern literature depends on a capacity for ironic detachment that pulls away from the kind of earnestness required for the appreciation of Dostoevsky. The poetry of Ezra Pound or C. H. Sisson exacts a discrimination about the precise form of speech that is at odds with the mythopoetic allusiveness of Yeats. This goes some way to explaining why, particularly in the early stages of aesthetic development, people tend to gravitate towards clusters of works that draw on closely related capacities, attitudes, and sensibilities. It is only as their aesthetic personality begins to develop that there tends to be greater variation and unpredictability in the kinds of works appreciated. But even then it is a striking fact that many

⁷ There may be an interesting asymmetry here. Perhaps such radical reconfigurations apply more typically to objects that ideally we should appreciate but do not, and far less often (if at all) with respect to objects that ideally we should not appreciate but actually do. The argument given above requires only the former possibility but allows for the latter.

⁸ The point about reconfiguration has implications for the interpersonal case in threatening the adequacy of the test of time as a sufficient indicator of value or predictor of future success. As with the intrapersonal case, perhaps it is a work's robustness in the face of different possible reconfigurations that marks out truly good or great works.

people still go through phases. By that I mean they have a tendency to be concerned with, at one time or another, works which bear certain kinds of close relations to one another in these respects. Perhaps they are going through a James Ellroy phase, are drawn primarily to nineteenth-century realism, epic sagas, action movies, nihilistic fiction, and so on. Of course, such things are strongly modulated by shifts in mood and variegated by many other strands of circumstance. But it is not uncommon for people to say things like ‘Lately I have been getting into...’

There is reason to think this is partly to do with the fact that working away on some sub-set of discriminatory capacities and responses does not always sit well with the cultivation of others. Developing a finer discrimination and appreciation of certain artistic features, or clusters of them, may undermine that of others. Let us consider a couple of cases.

First, as my social and emotional discrimination has become more acute I have found that my imaginative sympathies are more easily engaged and run deeper. Thus my appreciation of Jane Austen is much greater than it once was—in particular with respect to the sympathy I can now feel for central characters whom, I remember from my teenage years, I once felt little real sympathy for. Concomitantly, however, I have found it increasingly difficult to engage with works that involve intense psychological violence. In ways I did not have to before, I find myself having to wait until I am in a very particular frame of mind before I can cope with works like Oshima’s *In the Realm of the Senses*, Hubert Selby Jr’s *Requiem for a Dream*, or Lars von Trier’s *Dancer in the Dark*. If such a development were to continue, then I would be psychologically unable to cope with works that I presently appreciate and desire to continue to appreciate. Nonetheless such a development would no doubt continue to enhance my appreciation of, say, Henry James. The result would be a radical break in my aesthetic character with respect to those works I would be able to appreciate.

Second, when I was much younger I did not really appreciate certain kinds of roughly hewn punk or garage rock music. It struck me as clumsy, brash, and crudely emotive. As a matter of accident various friends turned out to love it and so I was subjected to it over a fair amount of time. Increasingly I found that I could start to listen and respond to it in terms of basic visceral feelings that made the experiences hugely enjoyable. But it turned out that in so doing I no longer appreciated other kinds of music as I had done previously. Certain music went from being polished to slickly produced, understated to mannered or whimsical to empty. Here it is not even as if the refining of an aspect of aesthetic character precludes the appreciation of something else which depends on the refinement of another aspect of character. Rather the coarsening of one aspect required for appreciation of one kind of music seems to undermine the refinement involved in appreciating other works.

The above considerations point toward a thesis concerning the disunity of the aesthetic virtues. Namely that the cultivation of certain capacities and responses required for some kinds of appreciation preclude or undermine those required for appreciation of other kinds. Thus perhaps there may not even in principle be an aesthetic character such that all works can be fully appreciated. To be in the position to fully appreciate certain art works would necessarily preclude someone from being able to appreciate others. The capacity for imaginative sympathy required for the complete apprehension and appreciation of Henry James, say, would block the capacity to delight in the transgression and violence of *Dancer in the Dark*.

Thus far we have the following. Our experiences and appreciation of works can be affected by the development of our aesthetic character. This may be a function of comparative experience, background knowledge, and understanding of art works. It can also be a function of the different dispositions and responses cultivated by art works. There are often shifts and radical breaks in the development of our aesthetic character. One reason for this is that the development of some aspects of one's aesthetic character in appreciating certain kinds of works can be at the expense of other aspects of character in ways that can make it difficult if not impossible, at least over a certain stretch of time, to experience and appreciate other kinds of works.

The implications seem to be threefold. First, what my ideal art appreciator is like is radically underdetermined in ways that could be mutually exclusive. My present aesthetic character may be just as consistent with idealized romantic, classical, surreal, or transgressive art appreciator types. Yet the pronouncements of the classical art appreciator type may be inconsistent with those of the surreal art appreciator type. Second, even if my ideal type is not radically underdetermined, it throws doubt onto the notion of an ideal art appreciator capable of making all the relevant pairwise comparisons needed to estimate the proper worth of a work. For at least in many cases the Millian-type experience test the ideal art appreciator relies on would be ruled out. Any ideal art appreciator may not even in principle be in a position to make the comparisons that estimate or fix the value of works. Cultivating some sub-set of aesthetic virtues required to appreciate certain kinds of works might necessarily put an ideal counterpart of me in a position where other aesthetic virtues are not sufficiently developed for him to be able to appreciate others. We do not even need a disunity of the aesthetic virtues thesis to make the point. Rather we can advert to a weaker claim. The *development* of our aesthetic character is uneven and lacks unity for the reasons adduced. All that this presupposes is the recognition that character develops through our temporally extended agency. Time being what it is, we are forced to make choices about the kind of things with which we want to engage to the exclusion of other kinds of works. Being the kind of creatures we are, we tend to go through phases in

our development over time. Such phases often cultivate one aspect of our aesthetic character in a way that neglects or undermines the development of our aesthetic character in other respects. Third, the kind of works I have been appreciating, the aesthetic phase I am going through, or the things I say in critical discussion will be revealing about myself in certain ways. They will show something of the kind of discriminatory capacities I have honed, or lack, how my imaginative sympathy or identification works, and the type of sensitivities I have.⁹

IV. PERSONAL APPRECIATION

Although these considerations show something of how we are implicated in criticism, they do not get us to the heart of the matter. A lot of what we are commonly interested in is tightly bound up with our psychology and psychological types. The ways in which critical discussion of works is revealing is not just a matter of revealing aspects of our aesthetic character. It concerns cognitive-affective emotions, attitudes, and aspects of our selves in general. The nature of my response to *Closer*, *Othello*, or *About a Boy* may not just reveal something about my capacity for imaginative identification but something about my past emotional history. The trouble with the ideal model is the presumption that anything due to peculiarities of emotional and personal history should be factored out.

The problem with impersonal appreciation can be brought out in greater detail if we focus on different conceptions of the role of Iago in *Othello*. According to Coleridge, Iago is in a significant sense the hero of *Othello*. He is a malign figure of genius, a dark Manfred-like figure rising above the conventions of society (just as, for Coleridge, the outcast Edmond is a hero in *King Lear* due to his protest against society). A. C. Bradley similarly conceives of Iago as a malign genius but for a wholly different reason. Othello occupies the highest position in the nobility of the officer class, so only a genius could overcome him. Leavis, in marked contrast, considers Iago merely to be a plot mechanism rendering Othello the villain of the piece by exposing his feet of clay. The differences make sense as an expression of their character and ages if we realise that Coleridge was the archetypal spokesperson for Romanticism, that Bradley not only wrote *Shakespearean Tragedy* in 1904 but was of the officer class, and that Leavis was present at the Somme as a member of the Friends' Ambulance unit in World War I.

⁹ In certain respects this amplifies Hume's remarks about ineradicable variations in taste being due to blameless differences in humours and dispositions. The trouble is that even in the intrapersonal case aesthetic character might lack the kind of unity required to underwrite univocal idealized pronouncements.

Alternatively consider Orwell's extraordinary 1940 essay 'Inside the Whale' praising Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*.¹⁰ Orwell easily ignored Miller's quietistic attitudes before his experiences in the Spanish Civil War. Yet in 1940, five years after *Tropic of Cancer* was published, he is *personally* driven to reconsider them. Indeed, not just to the extent that they must be denied or refuted but as possibly the only literary attitude available. Why? World War II had just broken out as Orwell was writing the essay and he had seen the triumph of Franco's fascists in Spain. The great central cause of Orwell in the 1930s was lost and he had become deeply disillusioned with the political and literary left. What drives Orwell's appreciation of Miller, and by contrast his distrust of much of the literature of the 1930s, is his own personal experience.

Criticism of the highest order is shot through with art critical evaluations that are partly a function of personal experience and attitudes. The features that are focused on, the ways those features are understood, and evaluations of the work often depend on personal assumptions and attitudes. Thus the way we appreciate a work can be as revealing about ourselves as much as it is about the work. This has implications not just for criticism as such, because a kind of impersonal appreciation and evaluation is shown to be a myth, but for a standard picture of fixing artistic value. If appreciation cannot but be personal in this way, then the notion of an ideal appreciator divested of personal idiosyncrasies fixing the relative ordering merits of artworks is useless.¹¹ There cannot be such an entity, no matter how theoretically refined, that fixes artistic value (at least for creatures such as ourselves).

It might be objected that all that has been shown is that criticism is often personally driven. Of itself, this does not show that ideal art appreciation cannot be divested of individual history. Perhaps we cannot sufficiently distinguish or separate off personal significance from artistic value. But the notion of an ideal art appreciator is, after all, a theoretical notion. It is an abstraction away from our practice which enables us to articulate how the objective ordering of the merits of art works is fixed even though as a matter of fact we cannot aspire to being in such a position. Hence we do not know for sure just how good a work really is, though something like the test of time may nonetheless provide a good guide to artistic value.

The nature and practices of criticism are enough to throw doubt onto this picture. The notion of an ideal critic, stripped of personal history, contingencies,

¹⁰ George Orwell, 'Inside the Whale', in his *Essays* (London: Penguin, 2000), pp. 101–132.

¹¹ As Hume states, 'it is almost impossible not to feel a predilection for that which suits our particular turn and disposition. Such preferences are innocent and unavoidable, and can never reasonably be the object of dispute, because there is no standard, by which they can be decided.' See Hume, 'Of the Standard of Taste', in his *Selected Essays*, ed. S. Copley and A. Edgar (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1993), p. 150.

and thus responses, is false. Much criticism is personally inflected in ways that affect our experience and appreciation of works. Hence our estimation of a work's value often partly depends on personal factors. However, the support given by critical practice is only *prima facie*. What is needed is an account of why, at least in many cases, appreciation and evaluation cannot but be personal.

V. SELF-IMPLICATION

Integral to many art works is the engagement of our cognitive-affective responses, and some of these are inflected with personal history. The explanation for the personal inflection of cognitive-affective responses is an inevitable upshot of how we learn what a particular emotion is and how we develop an inner cognitive-affective life. The identification of emotions starts from being fixed by paradigm emotional scenarios. It matters little whether or not there are certain basic emotion types and associated bodily movements that are biologically fixed, but let us suppose for the sake of argument that there are. Let us assume that basic emotions are patterns of response intimately bound up with affect (provides motivation) that fulfils adaptive purposes (we feel good about things that tend to be good for our survival and are afraid of things that tend to be bad for survival). At this level they are non-cognitive, triggered by certain natural elicitors, and are to some extent cognitively impenetrable. This helps to explain how we can develop a basic emotional life with little by the way of conceptual resources, and why sometimes no matter what we think we cannot help but feel a certain way. However, even if there is a biologically fixed emotional base, there are several key things to note. First, we learn when it is appropriate to feel emotions and how to express them through paradigm scenarios. The mimicking of facial expressions by babies, for example, enables them to learn when it is appropriate to smile, laugh, or cry. Second, the basic emotions themselves are adapted, again primarily through paradigm scenarios, to the application or constitution of higher emotions. The natural elicitors of a basic emotion can expand so that the emotion applies to a much wider range of things than the evolutionary purpose for which it was adaptive. Thus disgust may expand from repulsion at objects perceived as physically grotesque to actions seen as moral affronts. Furthermore it is not just that basic emotions can come to incorporate a wider range of things; more complex, sophisticated emotions are built up from the raw materials of basic emotions. The raw materials of anger, indignation, resentment, shame, and embarrassment, for example, are very much alike, but part of what discriminates them concerns their conceptual content.

Our inner emotional lives become deeper and more variegated as we learn new paradigm scenarios for the application of emotions, our conceptualization grows ever richer, and we become more discriminating about modes of

expression. New paradigm scenarios influencing emotional responses can arise in several ways. I may perceive a new type of situation as relevantly similar to other situation types that standardly elicit a particular emotion. Watching someone gorge themselves on mountains of food may appear relevantly similar to other scenarios that elicit disgust in me. Here the emphasis is on ways I come to see a situation. Alternatively, though I may not apprehend any similarities, I may witness the forceful expression of a particular emotion by others in a manner that suggests the scenario is a paradigmatic case calling for a particular emotion. I may never have encountered swearing before, and on my first day at school discover these new words that I then use in front of my parents. Their reaction at my casual use of these new words may be ones of unqualified horror such that I then come to see swearing as paradigmatically offensive. No doubt where such factors combine, the fixing of a paradigm scenario will run much deeper. At the level of conceptualization the mere learning of new concepts and how to apply them can have much the same impact. If I do not have any idea about distinctions between jealousy and envy, if I cannot discriminate amongst things like feeling ill will towards a person in virtue of their superior position from feeling resentful toward them for fear of their being possessed by another, then though I may well feel ill will and resentful it is not clear that I am either jealous or envious. This is because many states are tied up with ways of understanding the world and depend on the conceptual resources available to us. The degree to which this is so varies, as evidenced by the range of similar responses that runs the gamut through from embarrassment to shame to guilt. But at least for some range of our emotional life being in certain states depends on a range of conceptually dependent cognitive-affective responses.

It follows that much of the nature, tone, and tenor of our emotional lives is a function of our history. This will be true at the general cultural level; the time in which I grew up will be imbued with concepts and paradigm-fixing scenarios different from the age a hundred years before me. It will be true at the level of more particular group identities. Growing up as an English Catholic will shape my paradigm-fixing scenarios and conceptualizations in ways distinct from someone brought up as an atheist. It will also be true at the level of experiences, paradigm-fixing scenarios, and conceptualizations particular to my own individual autobiography. If I have been through a relationship that was erotic, compulsive, and destructive, I may conceptualize or respond to romantic love as semipathological in nature. Moreover, temporal relations, narrative relations, and relations of identity, which are matters of personal history, make a difference. Whether I still identify myself as an English Catholic or not, whether I have just gone into or come out of a romantic relationship, or why I conceive of myself as having gone into a destructive relationship may all make a difference.

This puts theoretical pressure on the notion of an ideal observer in the following way. We are temporal agents whose emotional life is partly constituted by our autobiography. How we understand certain features of art works, and the ways we respond to them, is sometimes a function of our autobiography. This is not to claim that all personal construal and response is legitimate. We can be led astray in our engagement with works since our emotional history may distort rather than enhance our appreciation of them. But, at least in some cases, our apprehension and evaluation of works may be legitimately enhanced or diminished in virtue of the way in which it is personally inflected. This is because seeing certain possibilities as live ones may depend upon personal experience. Orwell only came to take Miller's novel seriously after his experience of the Spanish war. Furthermore, it is not *just* experience that is often required. It is also a matter of the relations in which we stand to those experiences. It is not just that Orwell experienced what he did. It is also a matter of how he came to conceive of the literary left as essentially delusional and why this led him to break with it. This in large part explains why he came to take Miller's novel as the only kind of serious literature that could be written at that time. Orwell saw his experience *as* showing up the fantastical nature of (at least a kind of) socialism. Thus in 1940 he could not conceive of a literary work as being both of the left and truly serious. Our being in a position to see certain things as live possibilities, brought about or enhanced by personal history, often precludes our seeing others as live possibilities (or diminishes the degree to which we can do so).

It might be thought that the possibility of an ideal counterpart of myself fixing the merits of a work remains a distinct possibility. The argument thus far shows only, the objection goes, that at any given time neither we nor our idealized counterparts can apprehend some features, properly interpret them, or evaluate works as a whole in ways that are independent of particular autobiographical history. This is because at any given time (i) the cultivation of certain capacities and dispositions required for the appreciation of some art works can stand in tension with, undermine, or even possibly preclude those required for the appreciation of others; and (ii) facts about my autobiographical history and general character development affect how I am disposed to apprehend, interpret, and evaluate features of works in ways that preclude or undermine apprehending, interpreting, and evaluating them in other ways. Thus at any one time there may be features of a work that both I and my idealized counterpart cannot apprehend or interpret and evaluate in a certain way. It does not follow from this, the objection goes, that an idealized counterpart to myself cannot fix the value of works. For just as the idealized counterpart of myself is unconstrained by limitations on my actual experience, he has all the relevant comparative experiences I lack, and so he too need not be constrained by time and by my autobiographical development.

How can this be if even for the ideal counterpart being in a position to appreciate some features precludes the possibility of appreciating others? Imagine the following. The ideal counterpart experiences those works which call on and cultivate certain capacities and dispositions (set A) that are in tension with others (set B). Once they have been cultivated to the appropriate degree, however that is to be determined, he fixes the value of those works. Now before moving on to experiencing those works that call on and cultivate the set of capacities and dispositions (set B) in tension with those just developed (set A), his memory is wiped. He still retains the dispositions already cultivated. However, he will be unable to remember, reflect on, or bring to mind the kinds of considerations that factored into his experience of works calling on set A. This enables him to return to how he was prior to engaging with works depending on set A—with the difference that he now possesses the dispositions and capacities required for a full appreciation of them. The same procedure occurs with works related to set B and so on. There is no undermining or preclusion effect since the dispositions resulting from experiencing works of set A need not be triggered in engaging with works of set B. This is ensured since the memory of his experiences has been wiped so that any resultant occurrent states that would be likely to block or undermine appreciation of works depending on set B will not arise. At the end, when all the capacities and dispositions required for the apprehension of all features, interpretations, and evaluations of works have been developed, my ideal counterpart is in a position to fix the value of all art works. He possesses all the right capacities and dispositions required for the appreciation of all art works and only those required for the appreciation of a particular one will be triggered in his evaluation of it. Thus it does not follow from self-implication that an idealized counterpart to myself cannot fix the value of works.

However, what the hypothetical scenario fails to consider is the crucial role played by temporal and logical exclusion. First, the assumption that the ideal counterpart can return to the state prior to cultivating set A whilst possessing the relevant dispositions looks problematic since the very cultivation of those dispositions may have made for an irreversible change in the dispositional state. One dispositional state might be said to preclude another in the sense that the acquisition of the first makes for an irreversible change in the second. Comparative appreciation of radically different works of art might involve just such preclusion. Second, aspects of my autobiography which render me sensitive to certain things may also exclude apprehending, interpreting, and evaluating certain features or works in particular ways. It may make a huge difference to my responses to a novel centrally concerned with parental relations whether or not I am a man or a woman, whether or not I am infertile, whether I was infertile and am now cured or was previously fertile and am now not. Responses to a novel with a young central character of great promise may vary

according to whether or not I am, to use Joyce's phrase, 'a man with a great future behind him' or a late developer and so on. If this is right, then the notion of an ideal critic as an idealized counterpart of myself fixing the relative merits of works is in trouble.

Idealization threatens to abstract too far away from my autobiography in ways that render my ideal counterpart blind to features, responses, and live possibilities that my actual emotional life has rendered me sensitive to. Alternatively, he may be too tightly anchored to my particular history in ways that render him blind to features, responses, and live possibilities that my emotional autobiography has rendered me insensitive to. In either case an ideal counterpart to me cannot fix the relative merits of works since he is not in a good position to do so (at least not for many works). Given the way both our aesthetic character and character more generally are implicated in fixing on salient features of works, interpreting and evaluating them, the notion of an idealized counterpart of myself fixing the value of works looks problematic. In order to come up with a ranking of the relative merits of works of art, the ideal evaluator might even be required to have (temporally and perhaps logically) incompatible sets of dispositional states and capacities. Either too many memories need to be wiped out (in which case the ideal evaluator may cease to be my counterpart), or too much psychological continuity is retained (in which case, the problem of preclusion is not yet ruled out).

The importance of memory in helping an agent to retain appreciation of works experienced at a different stage in life (even when their current situation dulls said appreciation) should not be underestimated. I am not denying that the repertoire of experiences built up in a reasonably rich life will widen the ability to appreciate the virtues of different works because the ability to appreciate may be triggered by events whose effects on my character in other ways are impermanent. As a youthful revolutionary one learns to appreciate revolutionary art and one may retain this appreciation as an ageing conservative even when one is in a state incompatible with being a revolutionary. The difficulty is that it is hard to come up with a (realistic) suggestion for how to simulate those forms of appreciation that speak to irreversibly life-changing experiences for their full or proper appreciation (such as the loss of a child, being orphaned, severe incurable illness) that also ensures the kind of impersonal evaluation that the ideal model aspires to. This is not to deny that we may be able to rely on imaginativeness, empathy, and sympathy to bridge the gap (though we may also overestimate the extent to which this is easily achieved). After all, it might be enough to have been socially ostracized and bullied in order to appreciate a work that involves imagining what being a Jew in Nazi Germany might have been like—the order of magnitude is different but they may be sufficiently related types of experiences. Yet even if this were sufficient, the problem remains for the ideal critic in terms of impartially

evaluating different works that depend for their appreciation on the temporary imaginative acquisition of incompatible dispositional sets. There is no fundamentally impartial dispositional set from which to evaluate different kinds of works that require the taking up of incompatible dispositional sets.

VI. THE FUNDAMENTAL PROBLEM

The fundamental problem concerns the notion of an idealized version of oneself. If by idealization what is simply meant is an enhancement of my frail powers, good memory, and no dulling of sensibility with familiarity, then it is not obviously enough to bridge the gap between irreconcilable required experiences. If we are more generous with what idealization allows, then the ability to go through the whole gamut of human life, being female as well as male, being orphaned as well as living in a secure family, or the vivid imaginative appreciation of the differences where they are analytically incompatible, seems to make it possible in principle to be universally appreciative, but uninteresting because the faculties required are too superhuman to be accessible to us.

One of the claims made for great art is that its message is able to transcend details and have a universal appeal (which should mean greater accessibility). Why should the particular details of autobiography be relevant for appreciation? After all, we tend to think, surely what matters is not that it was Annabel, Celeste, or Harry that was my first love, but that someone was; not that it was in Bristol or Leeds, but that it was a provincial city. Where this runs into trouble concerns whether or when particular details of time, place, and circumstance may be required.

This may well be overly pessimistic since acts of imagining may be able to set up temporary dispositions in us of the required kind. Even so what the above account suggests is that the ideal critic is not anybody's counterpart (that is, nobody who actually exists might have been an ideal evaluator). It might still be insisted that the ideal critic is coherently conceivable as a hypothetical ranker with superhuman mental powers and no ordinary autobiographical development (maybe he acquired his powers all at once). In appreciating apparently incommensurable works of arts, this superhuman ranker can temporarily take on different dispositional sets, then wipe his memory clean (at will, we may suppose) while retaining temporally (but not logically) incompatible sets of (higher-order) dispositional properties. The resulting comparative evaluation might be unknowable to us, since what it is like to be such a superhuman being might be entirely inaccessible to us. But then a central feature of (and theoretical motivation for) the ideal model is wiped out. We cannot be in a position to know which works we really should be motivated to try and appreciate and why. If this is right, then either we need not

and should not advert to ideal critics, but, rather, we should focus on real ones¹² (especially if the above is unduly pessimistic about the role of empathy and the imagination), or, alternatively, to the extent that response-dependent accounts of artistic value are tied to ideal critics, then we have reason to doubt them.^{13,14}

Matthew Kieran, School of Philosophy, University of Leeds, Leeds LS2 9JT, UK.
Email: phlmlk@ds.leeds.ac.uk

¹² Geoffrey Sayre-McCord, 'On Why Hume's "General Point of View" Isn't Ideal—And Shouldn't Be', *Social Philosophy and Policy*, vol. 11, no. 1 (1994), pp. 202–228, develops a substantive argument to the effect that Hume appealed to the general point of view rather than an idealized one (part of which involves the claim that an ideal observer would not only be inaccessible to us but we could not anticipate what her reactions would be).

¹³ See, for example, David Enoch, 'Why Idealize?', *Ethics*, vol. 115 (2005), pp. 759–787, for a critique of idealization and response dependence in ethics, and Thomas Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U.P., 1998) for an attempt to reject the Humean assumption that reasons to value depend upon facts about the agent's dispositions, desires or preferences.

¹⁴ I am grateful to reviewers, the editors of the *BJA*, colleagues at the University of Leeds and audiences at the annual American Society of Aesthetics conference, 2004, philosophy senior seminar, Columbia University, April 2005, Aesthetics Anarchy conference, University of Indiana, May 2005, and the University of Bolton for helpful comments and discussion. I also wish to thank in particular Jerrold Levinson, Eugenio Lombardo, Andrew McGonigal, Daniel Mendelsohn, Alex Neill, Peter Simons, and Nick Zangwill for critically sympathetic discussion and suggestions.