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Neil Sinhababu

To cite this article: Neil Sinhababu (2017) Desire and Aesthetic Pleasure, Australasian Philosophical Review, 1:1, 95-99, DOI: [10.1080/24740500.2017.1296396](https://doi.org/10.1080/24740500.2017.1296396)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/24740500.2017.1296396>



Published online: 26 Mar 2017.



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Desire and Aesthetic Pleasure

Neil Sinhababu

National University of Singapore

ABSTRACT

Mohan Matthen's 'The Pleasure of Art' considers a rich variety of psychological phenomena surrounding our experience of pleasure in aesthetic appreciation. I explain many of these phenomena in terms of desire. Often my explanations support and complement Matthen's account; but sometimes I account for the same phenomena in terms of different causal structures than he invokes, seeking a more unified psychological theory.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 15 November 2016; Revised 21 November 2016

KEYWORDS Pleasure; desire; motivation; attention; learning

1. Introduction

Desire is a complex cluster of dispositions. It causes pleasure when its objects are vividly sensed or imagined, directs attention toward them, contributes to reinforcement of behaviours that follow representations of them, and motivates actions that we believe will help to attain them. These aspects of desire explain many of the phenomena Matthen discusses. At the end, I'll show how desire accounts for an additional phenomenon—the experience of artistic creation.

As with objects of desire generally, vivid representations of desired features in works of art cause pleasure. Such features include melodic structures in music, and relationships between fictional characters in drama. The contents of these desires may defy precise characterization. Introspecting them is not easy, and the desired features may resist precise characterization in the vocabulary of existing languages. Good art critics find ways to provide illuminating descriptions of these features, and good artists create works that have them.

2. Pleasure

Desires cause pleasure when we sense or imagine them being satisfied, and displeasure when we sense or imagine them unsatisfied. The more vivid our sensing or imagining, and the stronger the desire, the greater the pleasure. This is why it's pleasant to sense or imagine delicious foods, victories for political movements we passionately support, and affectionate relations with those we love. The more we desire these things, the more pleasant it is to experience them vividly, or to daydream about them.

These effects of desire extend naturally to aesthetic experience. It is pleasant to hear our favourite songs, to witness the pyrotechnics of action movies, and to see sculptured human shapes that express human emotion. Sensation typically provides more vivid representations than imagination can; those who appreciate art therefore pay money to put themselves in a position for more vivid sensory representations. Even when some displeasure is intrinsic to the experience—as with tragic drama, or the harsh sounds of early-1980s American punk rock—connoisseurs of these art forms still respond with pleasure to the desired features.

The facilitating pleasures Mohan Matthen discusses are explained by desire's role in constituting the facilitating nexus. He describes how drinking water when thirsty is pleasant, but drinking additional water soon becomes unpleasant. I understand this in terms of a fleeting desire for water, which exists when we're thirsty but vanishes when satisfied. Instinctual desires like hunger, which help us maintain homeostatic conditions, are often fleeting. We have highly evolved regulation mechanisms that remove such desires when acting on them further would be counterproductive. Aesthetic desires are not usually of this kind, as with Matthen's example of reading a book. We might stop reading when we grow sleepy, or because the book doesn't provide the right representations to please us; but our desire for the book to instantiate particular aesthetic features remains—unlike the desire for water after thirst is quenched. Desires generally persist after we recognize their satisfaction; they just fail to motivate us, because there's nothing more to do. We are usually still pleased to think of what we've attained.

Matthen's demarcations between types of pleasure are usefully placed, and could be expanded. Some pleasures and pains are simple bodily sensations. R-pleasures are an example, and the same natural kind might include pleasures further removed from relief, like those of warmth and massage. Aesthetic pleasures arising from what Matthen calls the *f*-nexus typically lack bodily location, unlike these more sensory pleasures. The difference in the causal process generating them correlates with a difference in whether we experience them as located.

While Matthen and I see the phenomena similarly, we disagree about which mental states operate as causes. He writes that 'these pleasures are like urges or drives; they motivate prospectively' [8]. I differ in not giving pleasure itself any motivational role. Instead, I say that desire produces motivation when we believe that there is a means for satisfaction—and, as a separate matter, that it produces pleasure when its object is vividly represented. In this way I provide a uniform causal aetiology for aesthetic and non-aesthetic pleasures.

Consider my motivation to put on my clothes before going outside, which comes from a desire not to be naked in public. I usually don't feel any noticeable pleasure or displeasure as I dress myself, as I don't at the time have vivid representations of being naked in public. But if I vividly represent myself in that situation, perhaps in a dream, I feel considerable displeasure. Pleasure cannot be the cause of my motivation because it is absent while I dress. Treating desire as the cause of both pleasure and motivation, but under different activating conditions, explains the different times at which they arise. Vivid representations of satisfaction cause pleasure and vivid representations of dissatisfaction cause displeasure, while means–end beliefs cause motivation. Understanding aesthetic pleasure as arising from desires that also motivate action (albeit in different circumstances) preserves a unified desire-based account for all motivation.

3. Attention and Learning

Desire automatically directs attention to things one associates with its satisfaction. Students in boring classes may find their attention drifting toward food if they're hungry, toward fellow students if they find them sexually attractive, or toward ways to build a winning 'Magic: The Gathering' deck if they're geeks. This direction of attention is generated by desire even apart from any intention to attend. Students may intend to focus on the lecture, driven by a desire to get good grades. But if its content is not something they closely associate with the objects of their desires, they will find it difficult to follow. Intentions to concentrate on a boring lecture can fail when hunger, lust, or an interest in optimizing one's Magic deck automatically diverts attention.

Desire is not the only phenomenon that directs attention. Strong and sudden sensations like loud noises or flashing lights attract it as well. Less sudden sensory input, perhaps from the presence of some delicious food in the room, can combine with the attention-directing effects of desire to draw the students' attention away from a boring lecture. Because aesthetic appreciation involves sensory representations of the features we desire artworks to instantiate, it similarly attracts our attention.

Matthen writes that 'the aesthetic attitude is active, exploratory, and comparative—which is why it is attentive' [22]. Desire's ability to direct attention explains these features of aesthetic appreciation. *Attention* to features of artworks and the *pleasure* arising from those features are correlated, partly because desire causes both.

I have listened to Wild Flag's 'Future Crimes' perhaps a hundred times. After hearing a certain part of the melodic keyboard riff I automatically attend to the notes that I expect and desire to come next. If the music unexpectedly stops halfway through this segment, or the sound of a passing motorcycle overwhelms it, my pleasure turns to sudden displeasure. Instead of the pleasure of vividly representing a desired musical feature, I have the displeasure of its palpable absence from my experience. Attention to melody is driven by my desire for melody to be instantiated, and by its presence in my experience.

Matthen describes how pleasure contributes to learning, and observes that attentional patterns leading to appreciation of art can be learned. He describes learning to drink wine in a way that brings appreciation of its flavour, rather than just gulping it down as if to quench thirst. When we do this, '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' [10]. Pleasure reinforces patterns of behaviour that lead us to attend in new ways. This figures in the third part of his definition of aesthetic pleasure: it 'activates a learned pleasure nexus that motivates, facilitates, and optimizes the subject's contemplation of the object' [18].

Timothy Schroeder's account of reinforcement learning suggests an alternative way of understanding the causal structure underlying these phenomena [Schroeder 2004]. He argues that desire has the same neurological home as the reward system—the ventral tegmental area and the pars compacta of the substantia nigra, or VTA/SNpc. This brain region is activated by representations of things we desire. It lies neurologically upstream of the motor cortex, certain pleasure centres, and attention-controlling areas of the brain, so that desire affects motivation, pleasure, and attention. If a psychological disposition is activated shortly before input from the VTA/SNpc, that disposition becomes stronger. So if one experiences pleasure (itself an object of strong desires in humans), whatever psychological dispositions

were activated before the pleasant experience will now grow stronger. Examples include the disposition to sip wine with attention to its flavour, or the disposition to attend to the next notes of ‘Future Crimes’.

4. Motivation

Desire’s most-discussed aspect is its ability to motivate action. Believing that some action will bring about a desired end motivates one to perform the action. This aspect of desire is vital for understanding the actions of artists themselves; the features that please them in their own artworks are the ones they are specifically motivated to create.

Aesthetic pleasure isn’t experienced only by spectators. It is also experienced by artists when their works have the features that they desire to produce. Their desires direct their attention toward making sure the works have these features as they create them. In an earlier moment of artistic inspiration, they may have imagined their works instantiating the desired features and felt delight as they rushed to create. Producing artworks with the desired features is often difficult, so artists may look upon their works with displeasure if such features fail to materialize. This is how it feels to have vivid representations of the absence of what one desires. But if they do succeed in producing them, they take pleasure in observing the vivid representations of such features.

If the properties of desire bind motivation and aesthetic pleasure together so tightly, why don’t spectators more frequently intervene and attempt to change existing artworks? Does the role I accord desire suggest that dissatisfied spectators will bring their own paint to the gallery and try to modify a picture they dislike? No, and not just because security guards would stop them. The rules for constituting most art forms exclude audience participation. If one judged that Caravaggio’s *Judith Beheading Holofernes* needs more blood, bringing along red paint and a brush would make it cease to be a single-authored masterwork of the late 16th century. What one desires is that *a painting of that sort* have more blood. Adding the blood oneself would change the kind of painting it is, and fail to satisfy one’s desire. So all the bloodthirsty aficionado can do is move on, perhaps gazing with satisfaction at how blood trickles down the side of the bed in Gentileschi’s depiction of the same scene.

By including motivation in the f-nexus, Matthen could explain why the same features that artists are motivated to produce in their works are the ones that they attend to with pleasure, and why they feel dissatisfied if they fail to create them. Then his account of the f-nexus would begin to converge with my account of human desire as a cluster of motivational, hedonic, and attentional dispositions. Elsewhere I develop such an account, using this theory of desire in a range of psychological explanations outside aesthetics [Sinhababu forthcoming]. I take it to be a law of human psychology that motivation is always caused by a mental state that has these additional features. If I’m right, and if Matthen treats the f-nexus as partly constituted by a desire for artworks to instantiate particular features, he can boast of integrating aesthetic pleasure and artistic creation into a fully general theory of human motivation.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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