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Social Aesthetic Goods and Aesthetic Alienation

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The aesthetic domain is a social one. We coordinate our individual acts of creation, appreciation, and performance with those of others within the context of social aesthetic practices. More strongly, many of the richest goods in our aesthetic lives are constitutively social — their value lies in the fact that individuals engage in joint aesthetic agency: that they are doing something *together*, which they understand as a cooperative and collaborative project outstripping that which may be realized alone.

Consider the rich tradition of Sacred Harp singing. Sacred Harp, also known as shape-note or fasola music, is a practice of group singing that originated in eighteenth century New England, and gradually spread to the rural South and Midwest of the United States. The practice takes its name from a hymnal published in 1844 that contained choral songs arranged in four-part harmony. Many of the songs in *The Sacred Harp* include traditional English melodies set to pious verse in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Sacred Harp singing uses a system of shaped notes initially developed to teach vocal music in the 1800s — different shapes correspond to "fa," "so," and "la." The practice itself is a participatory one: Sacred Harp singers do not sing for an audience. Participants instead divide themselves into four vocal groups — treble, alto, tenor, and bass — arranged around a hollow square. They face each other. The singers are led by a song leader in the middle who beats out the rhythm. Song leading is egalitarian — singers take turns leading, selecting songs for the group to sing and then rotating back into the groups.

Participants in this tradition speak of the power of the harmonies created, but also of the sense of connection with the other participants in creating something together that exceeds the powers of any one individual. Each individual voice is one of the "thousand strings" coming together in the sacred harp. And it is this sense of *being a part of a collaborative aesthetic project* — of subsuming oneself in something larger — that constitutes a distinctive value of this practice. We aim to realize beauty, *together* — and this work enables a mode of connection with others in an *aesthetic community*, bound together by our shared aesthetic practices. At the same time, we share in the values realized

by way of the community's agency: shape-note singers are collectively responsible for realizing, facilitating, and sustaining the particular beauties of their forms of song.

Aesthetic communities have histories, and in many cases this history gives a sense of connection to both past and future community participants. Buell E. Cobb Jr. writes of the powerful sense of tradition attending Sacred Harp singing:

> Sacred Harp singers feel themselves as belonging to one great family or clan. This feeling is without doubt deepened by the consciousness that they stand alone in their undertaking — keeping the old songs resounding in a world which has either gone over to lighter, more 'entertaining,' and frivolous types of song or has given up all community singing (1978, p. 150).

We might therefore say that Sacred Harp singers participate in an *aesthetic tradition*: an aesthetic practice that is passed from generation to generation and committed to the realization of distinctive kinds of aesthetic values. The tradition itself has value as a kind of collective aesthetic achievement that sustains these values and practices.

I take it that we have a basic concern with participating in aesthetic communities and traditions. While the case of Sacred Harp singing foregrounds this concern, I shall argue that in fact concerns like it are pervasive: a great deal of our aesthetic lives revolves around collaboration and participation with other aesthetic agents, even in apparently individualistic practices of appreciation and artistic creation. I shall even go so far as to say that these social aesthetic goods are core constituents of an aesthetically good life; an aesthetic life lived without the possibility of participating in them would be diminished in much the same way as a life lived without friendship.

But what if such a diminished aesthetic life were all but guaranteed by the ideals of our theory of aesthetic value? In this paper, I argue that aesthetic value hedonism has this very effect. Aesthetic value hedonism claims that aesthetic value is constituted by pleasure. The ideal of aesthetic agency associated with this theory is one of cultivating our capacities and directing our activities to pursue the richest pleasures possible. I shall argue that this ideal is incompatible with a full commitment to social aesthetic goods: the hedonist is thereby *alienated* from the other participants within these social aesthetic practices.

This result sets up a dilemma: either the hedonist must bite the bullet and accept that the theory leads to a problematic form of *aesthetic alienation*; or we must reject the hedonist's ideal and instead allow that our ideals of aesthetic agency should accommodate the value of social aesthetic goods. I shall argue that we should take the dilemma's second horn.

1. Social Aesthetic Goods

We can begin by examining more closely the social nature of the aesthetic domain and the social aesthetic goods that it makes possible.

On first blush it might seem as though aesthetic appreciation and aesthetic creation are individualistic endeavors: beauty strikes *you*, individually, while the solitary genius accomplishes heroic acts of creativity on their own. This picture, which we can call *aesthetic individualism*, foregrounds individual experience and action in giving an account of the aesthetic domain (Riggle, 2022, p. 8). It is a picture central to a great deal of the recent history of Western aesthetics, especially insofar as this conception of the aesthetic domain takes its cues from the theory of Taste, understood as an immediate and individual response (Shelley, 2022).

The problem with aesthetic individualism is that it neglects the importance of other people in our aesthetic lives. Aesthetic agency rarely occurs in a vacuum — aesthetic acts such as curating an art show, relishing a perfect Reuben sandwich, crafting an instance of an internet meme, or attending a concert all occur against a background of coordinated aesthetic agency on the part of others. We rely on the actions of other aesthetic agents: artists who create works for us to appreciate, performers who play the notes in a performance, critics who serve as guides, and audiences who engage with our own creations. Our

aesthetic activity takes place within the context of shared aesthetic social practices. This context serves as the scaffolding for our individual activities by providing support, guidance, and standards for success (Kubala, 2021; Lopes, 2018).

The aesthetic individualist might try to account for the social nature of the aesthetic domain by arguing that participating in these kinds of aesthetic practices realizes important values for each individual participant. For example, an aesthetic value hedonist might argue that we participate in aesthetic practices because doing so is more conducive to our individual pleasures. By specializing among a practice's different roles, we divide the labor of generating aesthetically valuable objects and training individuals to take pleasure in engaging with them. One might argue, alternatively, as Dominic Lopes does, that participating in aesthetic practices gives us the best means to achieve as aesthetic agents. The core idea of Lopes's network theory is that individual achievements are more reliably produced when we can specialize and cooperate in some set of particular aesthetic practices (Lopes, 2018, pp. 112–114; Riggle, 2022, pp. 1–9).

I do not doubt that participating in aesthetic practices has value for individuals in these ways. But I am more interested in what I think the individualist approach misses: part of the attraction of social aesthetic practices is that they facilitate a class of what I shall call *social aesthetic goods*. It is my contention first of all that we value such goods in their own right; and second, that accessing such goods is an important constituent of an aesthetically good life. Taking these two claims on board, I argue that a large part of our motivation to participate in aesthetic practices can be understood in terms of our concern for these social goods that aesthetic practices facilitate.

To make the argument, I shall need to say a bit more about the nature of such goods.

I begin with the observation that aesthetic social practices offer us opportunities for exercising coordinated and collective aesthetic agency with others. There is a minimal sense in which coordination is required to participate in the practice at all: you and I must share the same norms and similar conceptions of aesthetic value. But many aesthetic practices also afford us more substantive opportunities for collaborative aesthetic agency: we go to see movies in a theater so that we can share our experiences of the film with the other audience members; we share jokes and memes with each other; we each bring our best dish to a potluck; or we play music together in a jam session.

This kind of coordination and collaboration is perhaps most obvious with group performance. Consider again the example of Sacred Harp singing, where we join together to create a complex musical performance — one that is the product of the collective, rather than of any one individual. We can also exercise similar kinds of collective agency, however, in the context of appreciation. Tom Cochrane has argued that in some contexts (e.g., a rock concert), audiences coordinate their activities of attention and appreciation to create an instance of joint attention — one binding them into a group, a plural subject listening and responding to the music as one (Cochrane, 2009). It is plausible, furthermore, that in such contexts the group genuinely shares not just its coordinated and collective attention, but also the musical experiences resulting from it (Polite, 2019).

What occurs in these instances is that we are no longer individual monads, bouncing off each other within an aesthetic practice governed by norms and rules. Rather, we have entered into a different kind of relationship with each other — namely, that of an *aesthetic community*. Communities in the ordinary sense are groups of individuals who share practices and values, who identify with the group and its practices, and who also recognize each other as members within the group (Mason, 2000, p. 21). A community becomes an *aesthetic* community when the group collaborates within an aesthetic social practice, and when the members of the group share a sense of recognition toward each other as sharing in the practice as community members.

Ted Cohen has written about the way in which a shared appreciation of jokes creates a sense of intimacy, which he understands to be the shared sense of those in a community. Jokes, Cohen argues, are notable in that their conditional nature highlights the shared practices

and values knitting a community together — in laughing at a joke, we are reminded of what we have in common (Cohen, 1999, p. 28). But as Cohen is quick to note, this sense of intimacy can be established through all sorts of shared aesthetic practices. By performing, appreciating, and experiencing together, we come to recognize ourselves and each other as a part of some community; it is our joint aesthetic agency that serves as a kind of glue to bind us together.[1]

Aesthetic communities have histories, and often when one joins such a community one also participates in an *aesthetic tradition*. Traditions consist of beliefs, customs, teachings, practices, and values transmitted over time, from generation to generation. An *aesthetic* tradition is constituted by the transmission of an aesthetic practice over time.[2] Consider again the initial example of Sacred Harp singing: most members of the singer community have a sense that they are constantly navigating and renegotiating a continuous tradition based around shared songbooks, conventions of group singing, and the values of fellowship and community. The tradition passes from old-timers to newcomers through oral tradition, mailing lists, groups on social media, and above all at conventions and in group singing across the hollow square. The tradition has seen debates both over how the songs are to be sung and *which* songs should be sung: some songs feature lyrical content that certain participants find offensive or racist, while others debate the songs' expressions of religion (Miller, 2008, pp. 172–208). But underlying these debates is the sense that the shared practices — insofar as they constitute an enduring tradition — have a deep value that should be preserved and cultivated. This preservation and cultivation constitutes a kind of *temporal* achievement: the successful collective endeavor of safeguarding old songs from the vicissitudes of culture, while also keeping the value of singing them fresh and relevant for new generations of singers.

Until this point I have been emphasizing the social dimensions of the aesthetic domain in arguing that many aesthetic social practices give us opportunities for coordinated and collective aesthetic agency. This, in turn, serves to establish both aesthetic communities and aesthetic traditions. Now I wish to say a bit more about the value of these communities and traditions, which I have called *social aesthetic goods*.

Others emphasizing the value of aesthetic communities have argued that this value lies in a kind of mutual recognition and appreciation for aesthetic individuality within the community. In aesthetic communities we are each able to express our own distinctive aesthetic sensibilities while at the same time appreciating and supporting the aesthetic sensibilities of others (Riggle, 2022, p. 11). This is no doubt one part of the appeal behind such communities and traditions.

But I think that this account misses an important aspect of the value in aesthetic communities and traditions. I suggest that we also fundamentally value a kind of *subsumption* of individuality within the aesthetic domain: we value being able to take on roles inside an aesthetic practice to diminish our divisions from others and allow us to share in aesthetic activities and experiences, while at the same time contributing to a larger aesthetic project — one realized collaboratively by a community or in a tradition — with independent aesthetic value.[3] The purest examples of this subsumption seem to exist in aesthetic practices that diminish the importance of individual authoring and

1. In fact, some aesthetic practices seem to be focused on building and sustaining such communities. For example, Thi Nguyen has argued that monuments are a means for a group of individuals to express its commitments to itself. The entire point of many monuments, argues Nguyen, is to give the slippery and intangible values shared by community members a concrete and physical expression — one that allows the community to better grasp and appreciate these shared values over time (Nguyen, 2019).

2. When does an aesthetic practice become a tradition? (Scheffler, 2010) holds that traditions involve a transmission of practices, as well as of values, beliefs, and customs, across multiple generations. I am happy to adopt something like this criterion as well. Thanks to an anonymous referee for requesting clarification on this point.

3. Although I put the point in terms of "subsumption," I do not mean to indicate that we lose completely or erase our individuality. Instead, our practical identity comes to be defined in terms of the collective — those aspects of ourselves significant to us are those shared in common with others, rather than those distinguishing us from them. Thanks to Keren Gorodeisky for encouraging me to clarify this point.

emphasize the communal. One practice I have already discussed at length is Sacred Harp singing, but there are many other cases: consider, for example, the task of creating an instance of an internet meme and sharing it online, often anonymously. In doing so we contribute to the large-scale collective authoring of the meme itself. On the reception side, consider the case of being swept up with an audience at a rock concert or a sporting event — one whose enthusiasm feeds the band and drives them to an even more awesome performance.

These kinds of subsumption are valuable because they offer us means to overcome our limitations as aesthetic agents — limitations both on our individual aesthetic capacities, and on the temporal dimensions of our aesthetic agency. We can do so by connecting our own aesthetic agency with those of others in the context of aesthetic communities and traditions. Doing this renders our lives aesthetically meaningful.

Let me say a bit more about this. Andrew Huddleston has interpreted Nietzsche as focused on the central value of culture. According to Huddleston, Nietzsche believes that most ordinary individuals should devote themselves to culture — something that, according to Huddleston, Nietzsche viewed as essential for imbuing their individual lives with meaning (Huddleston, 2019). Nietzsche's position is characteristically radical: he seems to have thought it was only by way of a kind of "slavery" to a culture that the lives of those incapable of greatness could have any meaning at all. As they are incapable of individual excellence, ordinary individuals should instead contribute to the realization of something larger than themselves, just as a lowly peasant might contribute to the construction of a cathedral by hauling stones.

I think that we can recover a more modest version of Nietzsche's thought — one consistent with Susan Wolf's discussion of meaningfulness. Wolf argues that a meaningful life is one where we are individually engaged in projects of positive value. Wolf also notes that positive value cannot simply mean personal value: one's project must be recognized as valuable by others, as well as by oneself. What matters, according to Wolf, is not *how much* value we realize, but rather our practical orientation toward the world. She claims that living such a life is a way to reject a sort of practical solipsism — one that places us at the center of everything — by recognizing our own limits and, in turn, devoting our lives to something larger than ourselves (Wolf, 2014b). Our engagement with communities by way of our aesthetic practices gives us a means to connect our lives with overarching aesthetic values that we could not pursue individually because of the limitations on our aesthetic capacities: we cannot all be trail-blazing aesthetic pioneers, forging radically new aesthetic practices. Even so, we are still capable of living meaningful aesthetic lives by joining our own agency to those of others in contributing to the efforts of an aesthetic community.

A similar point holds for aesthetic traditions: each of us faces temporal limitations on our agency. Given limited lifespans, there is only so much we can do. More strongly, there is no guarantee that anything of aesthetic value that we have realized individually will survive us. Very few people will individually create aesthetic achievements capable of withstanding the test of time. Samuel Scheffler has argued that traditions give us a means to transcend these temporal limitations: when we join a tradition, we become both heirs to and custodians of the tradition's central values. This position enhances the significance of our own activities: we can view them as connected to a valuable tradition, thereby increasing their significance. At the same time, we can be relatively sure that the tradition will persist. This assurance gives us the sense of being able to reach beyond the limits of our short lifetimes (Scheffler, 2010, pp. 303–306).

Are these goods genuinely *aesthetic* goods, especially given that communities and traditions can be realized in non-aesthetic contexts? Perhaps what motivates this concern is a kind of two-value picture: the sorts of goods I have discussed involve, on the one hand, properly *aesthetic* value, insofar as they realize aesthetic goods associated with things like appreciation and creativity; and on the other, they realize *social* values, insofar as they put us in touch with others. These, the view goes, are separate sources of value — and at least in principle, one

might even realize the social values at the expense of the aesthetic ones. For example, suppose we have all gathered together to play music even though none of us has any idea how. We might still have a great deal of fun doing so and thereby realize all the social goods I have been discussing, yet without realizing any aesthetic value whatsoever. The upshot of such a view is that the social dimensions of the goods I have distinguished are extra-aesthetic — and regardless of how important those values are, all things considered, they do not form an important part of our *aesthetic* lives.[4]

I think the problem with such a view is that the values realized by social aesthetic goods cannot so easily be pulled apart. Consider an analogy with friendship: we value our friendships because of how they realize several kinds of value: values of pleasure, intimacy, trust, reciprocity, and so on. We can understand and realize these values independently of friendship, but we care about the distinctive way they are collectively realized in friendship. This is why it makes sense to talk about the value of *friendship*, even if its value is derivative of other more basic values that friendship happens to realize, instantiate, or facilitate. Similarly, in discussing social aesthetic goods I aim to indicate a class of goods where what we might think of as "aesthetic" and "social" values interpenetrate, such that these goods offer a distinctive mode for realizing both. We do not care about, for example, the "community" part of Sacred Harp singing separately from the "singing" part. What we value is rather the way these are unified — the way they are jointly realized while interacting with and mutually reinforcing each other.

Why include these under the domain of "aesthetic" values, rather than in some independent category — the "social aesthetic" category? My answer to this question will also take up the question of the relationship between social aesthetic goods and an aesthetically good life. It will also rely on several rather bold claims whose full defense must await future work.

4. Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing this point.

To start with, let us return once more to the case of friendship in order to consider its place in an *ethically* good life. On one conception of an ethically good life — perhaps that most closely associated with modern moral theories, like utilitarianism or Kantian ethics — friendship plays no special role. It is simply yet another domain where one might, for example, maximize utility or act in accordance with the moral law. Feminist ethics criticizes this picture of the ethically good life on the grounds that it fails to do justice to the significance of close personal relationships, like friendship, which involve particularized care and concern (Norlock, 2019). The goal of this critique is to offer a revised conception of the ethically good life — one that prioritizes realizing an alternate set of goods. This move is supposed to be justified on the grounds that attention to such goods better fits the lived experiences and values of ethical agents.

I suggest a similar revision for our conception of the *aesthetically* good life. Close attention to our lived aesthetic practices demonstrates significant concern with and pursuit of what I have called social aesthetic goods. Although I cannot fully defend the point here, I suggest that these goods are some of the primary constituents for an aesthetically good life. I think that this observation comes from considering an individual living a life without access to these social aesthetic goods. That individual would be confined to the limits of their own aesthetic responses, and to their own aesthetic agency; they would be shut off from the sense of intimacy, trust, and ultimately subsumption to be found within aesthetic communities and traditions. This way of being would represent a significant diminution of their aesthetic life, such that it would be difficult to think of that life as an aesthetically good one at all. If our ideals of aesthetic agency somehow prevented us from accessing such goods, it would be a major cause for concern; it is to this possibility that I now turn.

2. Hedonism and Aesthetic Alienation

At this point I have argued that social aesthetic goods make a valuable contribution to our aesthetic lives. This conclusion has a great deal of

significance for our theories of aesthetic value: these theories, along with their corresponding ideals of aesthetic agency, must make room for such goods. A theory of aesthetic value that rules out the possibility of these goods risks a kind of *aesthetic alienation*. One predominant theory of aesthetic value — aesthetic value hedonism — leads to just this risk.

The central idea of aesthetic value hedonism is that aesthetic value is constituted by pleasure. Objects have aesthetic value just insofar as they have the capacity to produce pleasure in a suitable spectator. Hedonism tidily explains aesthetic normativity: the normativity of aesthetic value ultimately reduces to the normativity of pleasure. Our reasons to engage with aesthetically valuable objects are ultimately hedonic reasons. Aesthetic value hedonism of this sort — henceforth simply 'hedonism' — is the default theory of aesthetic value in contemporary aesthetics (Shelley, 2018; Van der Berg, 2020).

Most contemporary hedonists endorse some form of universalism, according to which an object's aesthetic value is determined by reference to its capacity to produce pleasure in an ideal observer.[5] How do we identify ideal observers? Mary Mothersill (1989) and Jerrold Levinson (2002) follow Hume in arguing that ideal observers may be distinguished by reference to masterworks that have passed the test of time. They claim that there is a set of masterworks whose appeal has been especially broad, both across time and across cultures. The best explanation for this appeal is that these works have a high degree of aesthetic value, where this value is understood as a capacity to produce pleasure in a suitable observer. The ideal observers are those who prefer to engage with the masterworks above all others, and who, in Levinson's words, are "able to comprehend and appreciate masterworks in a given medium to their fullest" (2002, p. 234). In practice, these ideal observers turn out to be those individuals possessing qualities much the same as those identified by Hume: delicacy, practice, comparison, freedom from bias, and good sense.[6] These are the qualities allowing observers to fully comprehend and appreciate the masterworks, while also allowing them to compare the works to the experiences of new aesthetic objects.

The notion of an ideal observer is not just a means of fixing aesthetic value; these observers also serve as an ideal of aesthetic agency. Recall that, for the hedonist, aesthetic normativity is basically the normativity of pleasure: what we ought to do, aesthetically, is maximize our pleasure. We have taken on board the assumption that ideal observers are those best situated to appreciate aesthetically valuable objects — which are understood as those with the capacity to produce pleasure. Those objects with *greater* aesthetic value, or the masterworks, are greater inasmuch as they yield richer, more substantive pleasures. This is exactly why the ideal observers prefer them over everything else. We therefore have hedonic reasons to try to become like the Humean ideal critic: doing so would maximize our pleasure, given the assumption that ideal critics are best situated to appreciate aesthetically valuable objects. We should develop capacities similar to those of ideal critics — a delicacy of imagination and sympathy, practice, comparison, and so on — and we should prefer to spend time engaging with the aesthetic objects preferred by ideal critics, simply because doing so would yield greater pleasures.

Although I have presented only a sketch here, the attractions of hedonism ought to be clear. We start with the common-sense idea that our interactions with beauty are pervaded by pleasure. In offering an analysis of aesthetic value in terms of pleasure, we then get a neat account of the normativity of aesthetic value. Aesthetic value matters to us because pleasure matters to us.

Most presentations of hedonism are also compatible with aesthetic individualism: what matters is the pleasure each of us takes, individually, as a result of our engagement with aesthetic value. Certainly, the hedonist might allow that some pleasures can be accessed only by

5. A notable exception is Matthen (2018); Matthen argues that modes of engagement vary across cultures, leading to cultural differences in pleasures and thereby also in assessments of aesthetic value.

6. For more on the question of identifying ideal observers, see Ross (2020, ch. 4).

participation within various social aesthetic practices, but these serve only as a means of realizing individual pleasure.[7]

With some further refinement we also end up with a clear ideal of aesthetic agency. Each of us has aesthetic reasons — which are, ultimately, hedonic reasons — to develop capacities of appreciation and to acquaint ourselves with a broad horizon of aesthetic masterworks. Ideal observers, or the Humean ideal critics, serve as models for us to emulate. They are also, in Levinson's words, "truffle pigs" sniffing out the richest pleasures for our delectation (2002, p. 234). It is this ideal of aesthetic agency which, I shall argue, leads to a problem of *aesthetic alienation*.

To articulate this challenge, I must first say a bit more about alienation, and about why it is problematic.

2.1 Aesthetic Alienation

Concerns about alienation are nothing new for moral theorists. Consider Bernard Williams's well-known discussion of partiality, and in particular his discussion of choosing to save one's drowning spouse instead of saving a stranger. Williams's claim is that evaluating our commitments and projects from the perspective of impartial morality would be "one thought too many" (B. Williams, 1981, p. 18). Although interpretations of Williams's remarks are manifold, the most common reading has it that Williams is noting a problem of agency for modern moral theories like Utilitarianism and Kantian ethics. These theories seem to demand that we adopt an impartial perspective as agents — one where we impartially contemplate duties, promotion of utility, and the like. Doing so would require us to stand outside our personal relationships and projects, leaving us incapable of fully committing to them. We would thereby be *alienated* from them — to satisfy the ideals of our moral theories would undermine our ability to pursue the very relationships and projects we find enormously valuable and meaningful.

The core of the worry about alienation is the following: our theories, were we to adopt them, would sunder us from something of value — some part of our ordinary lives that we take to be deeply meaningful or important. At root the concern is about *agency*. What kinds of individuals would we be, and what kinds of lives would we lead, were we to adopt the theory in question? The challenge for moral theories is to develop an account of moral agency that avoids the risk of separating us from those deeply meaningful or important things (Wolf, 2014a).

What would be the analog for theories of aesthetic value? I suggest that a theory of aesthetic value risks *aesthetic alienation* when exemplifying the ideals of aesthetic agency advocated by the theory would prevent us from accessing core constituents of the aesthetically good life. The challenge for the aesthetic theorist, then, would be to give an account of aesthetic agency that allows for access to these goods.

Let me introduce one further distinction between different varieties of alienation. Jack Samuel has distinguished between what he refers to as *psychological* and *social* alienation. Returning to Williams's example of the drowning spouse, Samuel argues that Williams appears "to be thinking of personal relations as relevant to understanding human agency insofar as they leave a mark on our individual character" (Samuel, 2021, p. 7). Samuel interprets Williams as making a point about the way moral theory alienates us from various parts of ourselves: it prevents us from attaining a unity between the ideals of our moral theory and some of our most deeply held motivations and desires. It therefore makes it impossible for us to manifest a kind of volitional integrity, which is a pre-condition of being a distinct individual. It is this disunity that constitutes *psychological* alienation.

Psychological alienation is distinct from *social* alienation. This, as Samuel understands it, is the concern that a commitment to moral theory prevents us from recognizing each other as genuine individuals within the context of our relationships. Individuals become, in Samuel's terms, "windowless moral monads," each focused on doing their

7. There are versions of hedonism that hold pleasure to be inherently social, and that would not count as instances of aesthetic individualism. I discuss these below in the paper's third section.

duty or maximizing happiness. Borrowing a theme from Iris Murdoch, Samuel argues that this commitment to moral theory renders us unable to recognize the individual reality of our friends and loved ones, and the normative authority they have over us:

> Others are not just objects in the external world that we can aid or thwart, harm or protect, but persons with claims on what we choose, and the capacity to recognize us reciprocally. Their authority over us is structurally like our own, if not always as strong…That I'm the ultimate practical authority over my actions — that any authority that others have is no more than I grant them…is a paradigmatically alienated conception of practical authority. (Samuel, 2021, p. 17)

We are not simply alienated from ourselves by way of a commitment to modern moral theory. We are alienated from each other, and from the normative significance we have over each other in the context of our interpersonal relationships.

The problem of social alienation — rather than psychological alienation — seems to be the more pressing one in the context of interpersonal relationships. Consider, for example, friendship. It may be one aspect of friendship's value that it leaves a mark on our character, making us more distinctive individuals as a result of our participation (Nehamas, 2010; Rorty, 1993). But this does not seem to be our primary concern in forming and maintaining friendships. We are instead more concerned with developing a specific kind of relationship with our friends — one demonstrating characteristic kinds of reciprocity, interdependence, communication, trust, and agency. We care about coming to know our friends well, sharing our lives with them, and being directed by their needs and interests just as we direct theirs. As I have already alluded to, I think that there is a distinctively social sort of value in this relationship — the value of *friendship*. And the worry is that, say, being a full-blown Kantian or utilitarian will make this value inaccessible to us. The problem is that we would no longer be able to relate to our friends, *as friends*, should we adopt the ideals of moral theory. A certain valuable mode of sociality will be rendered inaccessible to us.

The ideals of aesthetic value hedonism lead to a similar kind of social alienation in the aesthetic domain. Recall the earlier discussion of social aesthetic goods: the goods of aesthetic community and aesthetic tradition require that we act together as co-participants engaged in a collaborative endeavor. We subsume ourselves within communities and traditions by way of joint commitments bringing us closer together. What matters in these cases is that we are contributing to something larger than ourselves and realizing distinctive values that we could not realize individually. We value the sense of intimacy this pattern creates, and the extent to which it diminishes the distinctions between us as individuals by emphasizing what we share and what we are doing together.

A commitment to aesthetic value hedonism is incompatible with this kind of social good. The hedonist's participation in aesthetic social practices focuses on maximizing individual pleasure. From this perspective, co-participants in these practices serve only as a kind of scaffolding for each of us to individually derive the richest pleasures possible. The norm guiding the hedonist's aesthetic agency is a norm of pleasure maximization. This norm both constrains and undermines the hedonist's ability to take on the group's commitments, and to fully join the aesthetic community — just as a pure pleasure-seeker could never realize genuine friendship.

Consider the case of Sacred Harp singing once more. From the perspective of the hedonist, what matters is simply that each participant takes pleasure in what they happen to be doing together. Drawing on Samuel's discussion of social alienation, to regard participants in this pleasure-based way makes each person out to be a kind of windowless aesthetic monad, bouncing around within an aesthetic practice and cut off from one another except to the extent that each can affect the others' pleasure. But even if it is true that the Sacred Harp singers experience pleasure in singing together, the hedonist gets the story

wrong about *why* the singers come together in the first place. What matters is that the singers regard each other as members of a community, acting together and united by shared commitments and values. It is this kind of recognition and mutual regard that the hedonist is cut off from, and which is why the hedonist can't access the full value of social aesthetic goods.

2.2 Style and Psychological Alienation

So far, I have argued that hedonism faces a concern about social alienation from those members of the communities and traditions connected to our aesthetic social practices. I wish to clarify that this concern is distinct from a more familiar worry about hedonism undermining the development of individual style — a worry I think we can recognize as a concern about what Samuel calls *psychological* alienation.

Alexander Nehamas and Nick Riggle have both written compellingly about the value of individual style and its importance for an aesthetically good life. Nehamas argues that to be aesthetically significant is to stand out from the crowd in a way that draws attention and sparks appreciation (Nehamas, 2007, p. 133). One way we might become distinctive as individuals is by our aesthetic loves: if my aesthetic loves manifest a particular sensibility — if they hang together in a coherent manner — then they might manifest an individual style. This is something aesthetically valuable in its own right and, as Riggle has argued, the pursuit of individual style might serve as an alternative ideal for aesthetic agency (Riggle, 2015, p. 447).

Riggle argues that there is an incompatibility between a commitment to aesthetic value hedonism and development of an individual style. The hedonist's commitment to seek out the richest aesthetic pleasures crowds out the possibility that our aesthetic loves could be anything more than sources of pleasure. Correspondingly, there is no way they might serve to express our individuality, or any otherwise distinctive sensibility (Riggle, 2015, p. 446). This prevents us from realizing the aesthetic value of individual style.

I think that this is clearly recognizable as an instance of *psychological* aesthetic alienation: a commitment to hedonism would prevent us from a kind of aesthetic integration, where our aesthetic loves express a distinctive and unified aesthetic character. I don't deny that individual style can be aesthetically significant, or that there *is* a risk of aesthetic alienation for theories of aesthetic value, insofar as they prevent us from realizing such a style. But note that exclusive attention to *this* form of aesthetic alienation represents a further manifestation of aesthetic individualism: what matters, again, is the impact on *me*, and on *my* development of individual style. Focusing on the social nature of the aesthetic domain, and on the importance of social aesthetic goods, is a way to correct for such aesthetic individualism. Doing so helps to bring into focus the distinct worry about social aesthetic alienation that I have introduced above.

3. The Hedonist's Reply

How might the hedonist reply? Consider two main lines of response.

First, the hedonist might deny that a commitment to aesthetic value hedonism necessarily leads to aesthetic alienation. Second, the hedonist might instead choose to bite the bullet, accepting the possibility of alienation while arguing that a commitment to aesthetic value hedonism is nevertheless still warranted.

As I shall argue below, I think that the first response fails. The second is more interesting, insofar as it points to the possibility that alienation in some contexts might simply be the cost of a competing aesthetic good — that of aesthetic exploration. The lesson, though, isn't that we should continue to accept hedonism; instead, as I shall argue, we should maintain some place for aesthetic exploration in our theory of aesthetic value, while reworking the theory to accommodate the importance of social aesthetic goods.

I start with the first line of response — the hedonist might simply deny that there is any incompatibility between aesthetic value hedonism and access to social aesthetic goods. Paul Guyer has argued that one of Hume's major concerns is establishing a *community* of taste

(Guyer, 2005). On Guyer's interpretation, Humean ideal critics are not simply *personal* ideals that each of us ought to emulate individually. Instead, the judgments of these critics serve as a regulative standard for the formation of a community dedicated to pursuing the richest pleasures possible. We can therefore imagine a community of pleasure seekers — a hedonistic posse — devoted to seeking out and experiencing the richest aesthetic pleasures. Presumably an aesthetic value hedonist would be capable of joining such an aesthetic community, in part because the community's aims are perfectly compatible with hedonism's ideal. The members of the posse could organize activities to help each individual seek out richer pleasures. Furthermore, as Guyer emphasizes, the members of such a community would take additional pleasure in *sharing* their aesthetic pleasures with the other community members. Thus, membership would be valuable to its members on hedonistic grounds.[8]

This response has a number of problems. First, it is not at all clear that the hedonistic posse would even qualify as a genuine community without compromising the hedonist's core commitments. This is because genuine community requires a kind of social commitment that might ultimately be at odds with the solo pursuit of individual pleasure.[9] Even if we allow that the hedonistic posse *is* a genuine aesthetic community, it would represent a major diminution of both the scope and the potential value of aesthetic community and tradition. First, note that most aesthetic communities are not built around the maximization of pleasure. Their focus is instead on the way shared aesthetic practices facilitate connections with others. Sacred Harp singers gather not because the songs they sing offer the richest pleasures, but because their mode of interaction gives them a genuine sense of fellowship and unity — what I have described previously as a sense of subsumption in collective aesthetic agency. Second, this sense of connection is not conceived of as valuable simply as an *additional* pleasure; it is instead valued in its own right, as a kind of contribution to a collective aesthetic achievement. The point is that the aesthetic hedonist has access to only *one* sort of aesthetic community — one built around the maximization of pleasure, valued instrumentally for this purpose. The theory cannot account for the many valuable aesthetic communities and traditions that seem to realize distinctively social aesthetic values of the kind I have indicated.

Another version of the first line of response stresses that not all pleasures are individualistic. Thus, the hedonist might maintain that some pleasures are inherently social and can be realized only by way of full investment in aesthetic communities and traditions. On this view the ideals of hedonism would point us toward realizing these sorts of social pleasures by way of non-alienated investment in social aesthetic goods. This version of hedonism would also avoid the charge of aesthetic individualism; it isn't simply *my* pleasure that matters, but instead the pleasure *we* create together by way of joint agency.

Admittedly, I find this sort of hedonism far more palatable than the more individualistic version I have been discussing to this point. I think it is plausible that there *are* such social pleasures, and that they are realized in the context of our participation in social aesthetic goods. Even so, I think that an exclusive focus on the significance of pleasure — even constitutively social pleasures — fails to do justice to the distinctive values of social aesthetic goods. To restate the point just made, we value our participation in aesthetic communities and traditions not only as a means of realizing pleasures, but also as a means of engaging in shared and collaborative agency, which we value in its own right. To focus solely on pleasure, even social pleasure, would be to lose sight of these values. This means that such a version of hedonism would at worst still lead to a form of aesthetic alienation, and at best might require a kind of self-effacement.

The second line of response for the hedonist is to bite the bullet by accepting aesthetic alienation as an unfortunate but necessary

8. We can find a similar notion — that of a community of individuals constructed by appeal to shared pleasures — in Kant. However, it is not clear that Kant views the maximization of pleasure as the central value of such communities to the extent that Hume does (J. Williams, 2024).

9. Thanks to an anonymous referee for suggesting this response.

consequence of adopting hedonism. Why might we be motivated to accept such a consequence? Here the hedonist might introduce a worry: without appeal to the significance of pleasure, we might get stuck participating in aesthetic communities and traditions that are deeply unsatisfying. The appeal to pleasure gives us a reason to exit such practices and pursue richer and ultimately more pleasurable aesthetic opportunities. Consider the reluctant consumer of a traditional green Jell-O salad: that she feels alienated from her community and its aesthetic practices may simply be a sign that she is alive to the existence of richer, more rewarding aesthetic practices that she would ultimately do better to participate in.[10]

What motivates this argument is the importance of a specific kind of aesthetic good — one that Samantha Matherne has called the good of "aesthetic exploration." Aesthetic exploration involves engaging with aesthetically valuable objects and practices unfamiliar to us, given our personal and local horizons. An aesthetic life without such exploration, Matherne argues, would be close-minded, contracted, and shut in (Matherne, 2024). How can we avoid getting trapped in our local communities and traditions in order to encourage aesthetic exploration? The answer, according to the hedonist, is *pleasure*. It is the promise of richer pleasures that draws us out of our local niches, encouraging us to depart our existing aesthetic practices and explore new ones.[11]

10. We can find similar responses to alienation worries in the moral domain. Consider Peter Railton's argument that alienation from one's present society may be necessary for social critique and moral progress (1984, p. 148).

11. Why might these theories of aesthetic value tend to encourage us to abandon our existing aesthetic commitments? Allow me a bit of bold (and perhaps overgeneralized) historical speculation. Aesthetic value hedonism emerged in the eighteenth century, in tandem with radical changes in the social practices of aesthetic creation and appreciation — the development of the modern system of the fine arts (Shiner, 2001; Wolterstorff, 2015). Hedonism and other universalist theories of aesthetic value are indeed useful as a means of justifying abandonment of traditional aesthetic social practices in favor of adopting new practices of engagement. It is perhaps no surprise that these theories tend to undervalue the importance of community and tradition, given that they have largely been used to advocate for aesthetic practices completely devoid of them. There are perhaps important parallels to be drawn with the emergence of modern moral theories, like utilitarianism, in the context of its contemporary social developments. I leave this speculation aside here.

I think that we should grant that aesthetic exploration *is* indeed a good, and it is one our theories of aesthetic value must make room for. We value new aesthetic horizons and the sense of freedom and exploration that comes from discovering something new. I also think it is plausible that pleasure can play an important role in guiding us to new aesthetic practices. The problem comes in thinking, as the hedonist does, that pleasure is *all* that matters to us, aesthetically. Ultimately for the hedonist, our reasons for exploration are entirely individualistic and self-interested: we are looking for the richest pleasures possible. This consumeristic mindset closes us off to the potential that new aesthetic practices might offer us new forms of connection to others — new communities and new traditions that might themselves realize distinctive social aesthetic values. Consider, by way of analogy, the way we pursue new relationships with other persons: the pleasures of attraction may initially guide us to strike up a conversation and get to know someone new. But what we want in these contexts is a genuine connection with another person — and we value this form of sociality in its own right.

What is the upshot? That is, how should we revise our theories of aesthetic value so as not to undervalue the significance of community and tradition, while also allowing for the good of aesthetic exploration? Where the hedonist appears to go wrong is in assuming that all aesthetic reasons are ultimately sourced in the value of pleasure. This is what leads to the challenge of aesthetic alienation. One option, recently developed by Nick Riggle, would be to argue that we ought to discount individualistic values — like the value of pleasure — entirely, and instead hold that the aesthetic domain is *entirely* a domain of social values (Riggle, 2022). But I do not think that so radical a move is necessary.

Perhaps a more promising approach would be to opt for a pluralistic account of the source of aesthetic normativity. According to such an approach, which Robbie Kubala has called a "hybrid-source" account,

there are multiple distinct and potentially competing values that generate aesthetic reasons (Kubala, 2021, p. 15; McGonigal, 2018). Pleasure is one such value, but it is not the only one. Others might include the values of achievement or autonomy. And if my argument above is good, perhaps we ought also to include the social aesthetic goods of community and tradition.

This approach would help us both account for the value of aesthetic exploration *and* set important limits on that exploration. We should be open to the call of pleasure, especially insofar as it guides us in seeking new aesthetic practices. At the same time, though, we should recognize that excessive attention to such exploration might come at the cost of fully committing to the communities and traditions in which we already find ourselves. Consider the analogous case of pursuing new friendships: while it is good to make new friends, our genuine friendships require investment and commitment, and we can only take on so many at a time. In addition, our existing relationships and communities may impose responsibilities on us — responsibilities of attention or care — that limit our ability to pursue new relationships. Our ability to access the values of friendship are to some extent both circumscribed and path-dependent. To be sure, the commitments we make in participating in aesthetic communities and traditions are generally far less substantive than those we develop in pursuing a friendship. We are likely able to participate in a far greater number of aesthetic commitments, and there is great although not limitless room for aesthetic exploration. Indeed, we can respond to the call of pleasure and explore the wide world of aesthetic value. Insofar as we are open in these explorations to the value of genuine connection with new communities and traditions — and realistic about our own limits — aesthetic exploration needn't come at the price of aesthetic alienation.

By way of conclusion, let me sum up the main lines of argument. I have introduced a category of social aesthetic goods — specifically those of aesthetic communities and traditions. I have argued that these goods are an important constituent of the aesthetically good life. I have claimed that aesthetic value hedonism generates an ideal of aesthetic agency according to which each of us should seek out the richest individual aesthetic pleasures. The problem with this idea is that it leads to a form of aesthetic alienation, where we are alienated from participants in the communities and traditions connected to our aesthetic practices. The solution, I have suggested, is that we revise our theory of aesthetic value in the direction of pluralism. We must allow that pleasure is not the only source of aesthetic normativity.[12]

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