

DISTINGUISHED LECTURE

Beauty, the social network¹

Dominic Mclver Lopes

UBC Philosophy, Vancouver, Canada

ABSTRACT

Aesthetic values give agents reasons to perform not only acts of contemplation, but also acts like editing, collecting, and conserving. Moreover, aesthetic agents rarely operate solo: they conduct their business as integral members of networks of other aesthetic agents. The consensus theory of aesthetic value, namely that an item's aesthetic value is its power to evoke a finally valuable experience in a suitable spectator, can explain neither the range of acts performed by aesthetic agents nor the social contexts in which they operate. This paper proposes a new theory of aesthetic value specifically to explain facts about the sociality of aesthetic agents.

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Introduction

The domain of aesthetics is a domain of culture. As trivial as it might sound at first, the claim is surprising, and worth thinking about, when taken literally, for culture depends on large-scale, cooperative human activity, yet we view aesthetic space as populated by individuals, or small groups of collaborators. Repatriating aesthetics within the sphere of culture foregrounds some observations that a theory of aesthetic value should explain and that traditional theories of aesthetic value fail to explain. On a new and better theory, *Homo aestheticus* is an offshoot of *Homo economicus*.

Three observations, an assumption, and a method

That aesthetic value has a social dimension is no big news. Differences in ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status plainly impact aesthetic evaluation

CONTACT Dominic Mclver Lopes  dom.lopes@ubc.ca

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(e.g. Bourdieu 1984). Your being a nineteenth-century German philosopher or a late twentieth-century Inuit carver imperfectly but systematically predicts your taste. However, there is more to culture than shared taste. To see this, consider three further observations about aesthetic culture.

Art works hold no monopoly on aesthetic value, which is equally at home in popular art, from the mainstream to the fringe, in domestic and industrial design, and in nature, of course. Faced with boundless riches, we specialize, going in for some aesthetic genres or kinds rather than others – post-rock, Mughal miniatures, *bizen yak*, proofs in geometry, rye-based cocktails, Peruvian textiles, Pokémon cards, and wetlands. Each aesthetic kind demands a specialized competence, a body of knowledge and skill, that must be learned. Competence in Mughal miniatures yields little competence with the music of Godspeed You! Black Emperor. A theory of aesthetic value should explain the diversity of aesthetic kinds, each demanding a specific aesthetic competence.

Aesthetic kinds come and go, maintained by individuals who perform a vast range of tasks. Acts of creation and appreciation hog the limelight, but the chorus includes editing, curating, collecting, conserving, exhibiting, teaching, and connecting audiences. Stipulate that an aesthetic act is an act that counterfactually depends on the content of an aesthetic evaluation. What the agent does with an item would be different were they to attribute to it a different aesthetic value. So stipulated, all the listed tasks can (but need not) be aesthetic acts. Yet each calls upon a distinctive competence. Competence in reading and appreciating heroic tetrameter is not, alas, sufficient for writing it. An adept collector of video games might nevertheless play ineptly. A theory of aesthetic value should explain specialized aesthetic acts and the competences they recruit.

A third observation goes meta on the first two. Aesthetic kinds and acts interact (Lopes 2015). The same act-type can be performed in different aesthetic kinds, and specialization by aesthetic kind means that competence in ϕ ing in some K does not amount to competence in ϕ ing in all K s, or even in another K . An expert literary editor is not an expert photographic editor. To see the difference aesthetic kinds make, hold the act-type constant. Conversely, to see the difference act-types make, hold K constant. One and the same aesthetic kind houses agents busy at different activities, and specialization by act-type means that competence at ϕ ing in K does not ensure competence in any other acts in K . An expert literary editor is not an expert book jacket designer.

Suppose a two-dimensional space (Table 1) with columns for high-level act-types (creating, performing, spectating, editing, and so on) and rows for aesthetic kinds (architecture, dance, fashion, theorems, birds, sunsets, and so on). Each cell in the table represents an aesthetic competence. The array of cells systematically represents how aesthetic competence is a function of both an aesthetic act-type and an aesthetic kind. A theory of aesthetic value should explain what is represented by the two-dimensional model of the interaction of aesthetic act-types and aesthetic kinds.

Table 1. Specialized aesthetic competence by aesthetic kind and act-type.

	Φ_1	Φ_2	...	Φ_i
K_1				
K_2				
...				
K_j				

Keeping an open mind about what additional observations might need explaining, these three suffice to contrast traditional theories of aesthetic value with a new theory. Before turning to that, two more bits of stage-setting, each inspired by the above observations.

First is an assumption about the kinds of reasons in which aesthetic values figure. Theoretical reasons are facts that raise the probability that p . The fact that the sun is setting on the mountains in the west is a theoretical reason because it raises the probability that it is evening. Practical reasons bear on the question of what an agent should do in the circumstances; they are facts that lend weight to the proposition that A should φ in C (Thomson 2008; see Wallace 2012, for some alternatives). The fact that it is evening in the wilderness is a practical reason because it lends weight to the proposition that Alice should build a fire. In an interesting twist, many since Kant have held aesthetic reasons to be a Janus-like amalgam of theoretical and practical reasons. Aesthetic reasons are reasons to judge, where a judgement is at once a verdict and an act. The fact that a song is poignant is reason to judge it beautiful. To judge it beautiful is to attribute goodness to it and also to appreciate or savour it. The poignancy raises the probability of its being beautiful and simultaneously favours an agent's acting in some ways and not others in the circumstances. The assumption is that a theory of aesthetic value should focus on how the song's being poignant gives an agent reasons to listen to it when she is old enough, to playlist it for a sombre occasion, not to dance to it.

Theories are answers to questions. A full theory of aesthetic value answers two questions. Some values are aesthetic (being poignant, being unified, being tawdry) and other values are not (being cruel, being curious, being a good umbrella). Therefore, one question is what makes some values aesthetic, rather than moral, intellectual, or utilitarian. A second question asks what makes it the case that aesthetic values figure in reasons for agents to act. Call this the 'normative question.' Normative questions arise in the heat of action, when an agent asks, what should I do? The answer lies in what they have reason to do. How, then, do aesthetic values answer any questions agents ask in the heat of action?

Until recently, the two questions have not been distinguished, and philosophers have sought theories that answer both at the same time, perhaps impeding progress. For now, rest assured that we often enough know an aesthetic value when we see it. A partial theory of aesthetic value remains to answer the normative question.

To complete the stage-setting, roll on a strategy for proceeding. A theory of aesthetic value answers the question why the fact that x is V gives an agent a

reason to perform an aesthetic act. In answering the normative question, the theory must explain the observations about aesthetic culture. The strategy is to seek a rational explanation. A social arrangement is rationally explained just when some of the reasons agents have to act anyway are reasons for them to act in ways that conform with and support the arrangement. When a social arrangement is rationally explained, the reasons agents have to act anyway are among the reasons that explain it.

In brief, the strategy is to locate a partial theory of aesthetic value that rationally explains, by appeal to the reasons agents have to act anyway, why aesthetic culture is specialized by an interaction of act-types and aesthetic kinds.

Aesthetic hedonism

Outsiders might be forgiven for expecting philosophical aesthetics to have a great deal to say about aesthetic value. In the late 1960s, with the publication of game-changing work by Danto (1964), Goodman ([1968] 1976), and Wollheim ([1968] 1980), attention largely switched from aesthetic value to artistic value and to studies of the mechanics of the arts – depiction, expression, metaphor, and fiction, in particular. Easing the change in direction was the dominance of a single theory of aesthetic value. ‘Dominance’ is perhaps too weak a word, for the theory has been so routinely taken for granted that nobody has ever felt a need either to give it a defence or even to post a lookout for competition. The dominant theory is often called ‘aesthetic empiricism’ or ‘aesthetic value empiricism,’ but ‘aesthetic hedonism’ is more perspicuous.

In its classical guise, general value hedonism holds that only pleasure has final value and only displeasure has final disvalue (e.g. Lewis 1946; for a non-classical view, see Crisp 2006). As little as it has going for it as a general theory of value, hedonism has retained its hold upon thinking about aesthetic value. According to aesthetic hedonism, an item’s aesthetic value is its power or disposition to yield finally valuable experiences, when the item is correctly understood by a suitable subject (Lewis 1946; Beardsley 1969; Beardsley 1970; Slote 1971; Dickie 1974, 40–41; Beardsley 1979, 1982; Mothersill 1984; Dickie 1988, 93; Eaton 1989; Goldman 1990; Levinson 1992; Walton 1993; Budd 1995, 4–7; Stecker 1997, 279–280; Miller 1998; Levinson 2002; Iseminger 2004; Goldman 2006; Stecker 2006; Nehamas 2007; Budd 2008; Levinson 2010; Strandberg 2011; Stang 2012; Matthen 2015; Levinson 2016; Matthen 2017).

Since ‘pleasure’ is the good, old-fashioned word for an experience that is finally good, or worth having for its own sake, the theory warrants the moniker of ‘aesthetic hedonism’ (the mnemonic being *ah...*). Nobody who has escaped the pull of Victorian morality need worry that some finally good experiences are not pleasures. Not all pleasures are sensual. Marcia Eaton gives the party hat to cognitive pleasures that ‘involve comparing, contrasting, fitting things into patterns, and figuring out meanings and connections’ (1989, 123). Jerrold

Levinson refuses to identify aesthetic pleasure with 'a physiological occurrence, passively borne' (1992, 295). As he explains, an experience can have final value, because one's cognitive faculties are notably exercised or enlarged; because one's eyes or ears are opened to certain spatial and temporal possibilities; because one is enabled to explore unusual realms of emotion; because one's consciousness is integrated to a degree out of the ordinary; because one is afforded a distinctive feeling of freedom or transcendence; because certain moral truths are made manifest to one in concrete dress; or because one is provided insight, in one way or another, into human nature. (1992, 301)

The power of aesthetic hedonism flows not from its touting the sensual appeal of art, but from its tapping the baked-in normativity of finally valuable experiences.

Comparing two paintings, Denis Diderot insisted, 'artists will prefer the first and they will be right. Personally, I prefer the second' (quoted in Fried 1980, 118). The wit lies in cancelling the assumption that being aesthetically good implies and guarantees pleasure. Bernard Williams once confessed, 'I simply don't like staying in good hotels' (1985, 125). Maybe Williams just did not get good hotels, but it is more likely that he was not one of those 'suitable subjects' in whom a good hotel induces finally valuable experiences. Aesthetic hedonism makes the experiences of some standard for others. Williams did not like good hotels but he nonetheless had aesthetic reason to patronize them, because suitable subjects like them. Diderot did not like the better painting, but that is no mark against aesthetic hedonism because the better painting is the one liked by suitable subjects, not the one liked by him.

In the hands of its more sophisticated proponents, aesthetic hedonism can make some sense of aesthetic sociality, specifically by how it characterizes the suitable subject of finally valuable experiences. A couple of characterizations have staying power.

Hume wrote in the *Treatise of Human Nature* that each one of us, has the most ardent desire of society, and is fitted for it by the most advantages. We can form no wish, which has not a reference to society. A perfect solitude is, perhaps, the greatest punishment we can suffer. Every pleasure languishes when enjoyed a-part from company, and every pain becomes more cruel and intolerable. ... Most kinds of beauty are derived from this origin. (1739, §2.2.5)

Reversing direction, Andy Egan proposes that shared aesthetic pleasures are important in 'building and maintaining interpersonal relationships, and in establishing and maintaining ties to communities and groups. Very many groups and subcultures are defined, at least in part, by the common aesthetic sensibilities of their members' (2010, 260). Pleasure induces sharing and a sense of community, and then is amplified in the sharing.

True or not, the Hume–Egan line is more pleasing to us nowadays than another line, which finds its canonical expression in Hume's essay 'On the Standard of Taste' (1777). The joint verdict of Hume's true judges sets a standard for others because it indicates maximal aesthetic enjoyment. Addison is aesthetically better than Bunyan because more apt to please those who get

the most pleasure. Hard core ideal observer theorists hold that true judges are universal judges who set the standard for everyone and every aesthetic kind (Levinson 2002). Many go soft core: different true judges set standards for different taste communities, where some and not all aesthetic kinds are endemic. A judge who sets a standard for Upper West Side students of serial music does not set a standard for Glaswegian pre-teens who are into manga (Goldman 1995; Ross 2012).

Both lines answer the normative question. Since anyone has reason to amplify and maximize their enjoyments, anyone has aesthetic reason to go in for what true judges like. If good hotels really are good, Williams had aesthetic reason to refashion himself so as to like them: he would have got more pleasure overall. Likewise, if anyone has reason to share their enjoyments, anyone has aesthetic reason to enjoy what their friends and neighbours enjoy. If good hotels really are good, Williams had aesthetic reason to refashion himself so as to share with others in liking them.

Indeed, each answer to the normative question promises a rational explanation of the social side of the domain of aesthetic value. A social arrangement is rationally explained just when some of the reasons agents have to act anyway are reasons for them to act in ways that conform with and support the arrangement. Having reason to maximize pleasure anyway turns out to be reason to conform with and support networks of deference to true judges. Having reason to share pleasures anyway turns out to be reason to conform with and support networks of friends and neighbours with whom pleasures are shared.

The trouble is that aesthetic hedonism does not rationally explain all our observations about aesthetic culture. What does get explained is the observation, familiar to readers of Bourdieu, that membership in social groups tracks aesthetic preferences.

Yet we also observed that aesthetic culture divides into aesthetic kinds. As a matter of fact, aesthetic kinds are not always tied to specific social groups (ska was big in Jamaica and also the UK). When they are, there is a special explanation in terms of access (e.g. children have reason to go in for children's music because of their development). Even supposing, against the evidence, that patterns of sharing do line up with the boundaries between aesthetic kinds, aesthetic hedonism does not rationally explain the alignment. My friends and I have reason to share in liking the same things, but that could be some ballets, some classic motorcycles, and some wetlands. Why do ballets, classic motorcycles, and wetlands shake out as different aesthetic kinds?

A second observation takes in the range of acts performed by aesthetic agents. To understand someone acting in the world and trying to modify it, ask what problem they have to solve. Aesthetic hedonism embodies an assumption about the problem with which aesthetic agents turn to 'suitable subjects' for a solution. The problem is to locate enjoyable experiences, to extract pleasures from things (Schier 1986; Gracyk 1990; Brooks 1993; Goldman 1995, 21–22;

Guyer 2005, 59; Melchionne 2010). Although aesthetic hedonists are sometimes wont to deny that aesthetic reasons are practical, in fact they identify aesthetic acts with acts of appreciation, contemplation, or absorbed attention. No wonder aesthetic hedonism rationally explains only those social arrangements that support appreciation, contemplation, or absorbed attention – not social arrangements where agents collect *netsuke*, edit photographs, or write Wikipedia entries about bicycles. Does the fact that the Rivendell Sam Hillborne lends itself to beausage give me no aesthetic reason to write about it, unless writing about it is a special way of extracting some pleasure from its beausage?

Considerations such as these do not cashier aesthetic hedonism, whose proponents may be moved to reply. Even so, there is ample reason to work out an alternative theory of aesthetic value. So far none exists, though aesthetic hedonism has had its critics (Knight 1967; Zangwill 1999; Sharpe 2000; Carroll 2002, 154–163; Shelley 2010; Wolf 2011; Lopes 2015). The key is to see that an alternative to aesthetic hedonism should explain all three observations about aesthetic activity.

Aesthetically doing well

Whereas aesthetic hedonism casts aesthetic agents as gripped by the problem of how to procure aesthetic gratification, the truth is that aesthetic agents tackle a range of different problems because they perform a range of act-types in a range of contexts. So why not start with an account of all-purpose normativity, as it applies to any agent with any problem to solve in any context? An agent who has a reason to act at all therein has a reason to act well, but one always acts well by achieving, so one always has reason to achieve (Sosa 2007; Greco 2010; Morton 2012).

A performance is good partly in so far as it succeeds in its aim. An archer performs well in hitting a bull's eye and a barista performs well in pulling a delicious shot of espresso, for a bull's eye counts as a success in archery and the barista succeeds in their aim when they make tasty coffee. That its success makes an act good is no big surprise, of course. The point of acting is to nudge the world in the direction of a better one.

Tradition represents beauty as serving a role in aesthetic activity that is analogous to the role of the good shot in archery and the coffee shop. Aesthetic agents succeed in so far as they savour beauty, and aesthetic activity is organized around that aim. However, we need not assume that aesthetic agents share a single aim, to bring about a good that organizes all aesthetic activity. Collecting and conserving *netsuke* have different success conditions, as do conserving *netsuke* and conserving Nintendo games.

An archer's shot, or a barista's, might succeed through dumb luck. With a bit of good luck, incompetents can succeed. Alas, the dissociation runs the other way, too. Success is not the inevitable result of competence. In the words of the

Teacher, the race is not to the swift nor yet favour to the skilled: chance happens to them all. Through bad luck competent archers, and baristas, sometimes fail.

Performances are better or worse in so far as they involve an exercise of competence. It is a merit in a performance that it is done competently, even if it fails in its aim. On the flip side, it counts against the goodness of a performance that it is done incompetently, whether or not it is successful. The two dimensions of value vary independently.

As was observed, aesthetic agents engage in differentially specialized actions. The observation can be refined: they have different aims and also different competences suited to their aims.

A performance is good when successful and also when done from competence. Is it better when both conditions are met? Only when they are met in a particular way. An archer lets fly with perfect skill. Unluckily for her, a seismic tremor jolts the target sideways just as the arrow leaves the bow. Luckily for her, a sudden gust of wind blows the arrow back on track in perfect compensation. She hits the bull's eye, but she has been Gettiered. Her performance is successful and competent, but she would have performed better were her shot successful out of her competence. Success is good and so is exercising competence but better still is achievement, success out of competence. So we may ask of any successful performance whether it is an achievement: Is it caused by an exercise of competence?

Aesthetic agents are like archers. Aiming for success, they bring their competence to bear, and their performances are achievements when they attain success as a result of the competence of their performances; aesthetic achievement in success caused by competent aesthetic action.

The achievement model tells us how to measure how good an agent can be simply qua agent. The best agents have what it takes to achieve success out of competence. The same goes for the best aesthetic agents. They have what it takes, when they act aesthetically, to wring success out of competence, hence to achieve. From this we can get an answer to the normative question. An aesthetic value figures in a practical reason, a reason to act. Just as an agent who has a reason to act therein has a reason to achieve, an agent who has a reason to act aesthetically therein has a reason to wring success from competent aesthetic action. A theory of aesthetic value might run with the thought that,

necessarily, V is an aesthetic value only if the fact that some x is V lends weight to the proposition that it would be an aesthetic achievement for some A to ϕ in some C .

Running with this thought leads only to an answer to the normative question. A full theory would go further and say what makes V a distinctively aesthetic value.

Needless to say, the above sketch of the theory leaves plenty of details to be filled in... on another occasion. The sketch is enough to assemble an explanation of our three observations about aesthetic culture.

Explaining aesthetic culture

Aesthetic agents are rarely solo operators; they often count on each other in order to achieve what they do. Specialization is a division of cognitive labour where each specialist allocates more resources to their specialization and relies on others to cover their self-induced incompetence. I take care of philosophical aesthetics, leaving modal metaphysics and philosophy of biology to others. You do the same in developing an AOS. Collectively, we cover more ground in more depth than could a population of generalists. Herein lie the makings of a rational explanation of the institutional structure of the discipline of philosophy. In the right conditions, your having reason anyway to achieve something in philosophy is reason for you act in conformity with and to support a division of philosophical labour. The situation is much the same for specialized aesthetic agents.

Sometimes no social arrangement is needed to bring about or maintain a specialized culture. Suppose that a musical duet must choose what musical style to perfect to recording quality. Table 2 represents payoffs for each for the competence each cultivates, in every combination of choices. In this scenario, both have a choice about which competence to hone, and both are better off honing the same competence. That is, they are both more likely to succeed if they work up the same skills. Moreover, there is only one combination of choices where each does as well as they can in raising their chances of success. Agents in this scenario, having reasons to achieve, thereby have reason to specialize. Their having reason to achieve rationally explains their channelling into a particular aesthetic kind.

Not much more is needed for a rational explanation of their specializing in different activities within the kind. Table 3 represents a scenario where the same two agents, having reasons to achieve, thereby have reason to specialize by act-type as well as aesthetic kind. Not only does each have reason to train for the blues but one has more reason to work on their blues guitar while the other has more reason to perfect the bass playing. Their having reason to achieve anyway is reason for them to specialize in the instruments they play.

A warning to aficionados of game theory; Tables 2 and 3 represent scenarios where agents face a choice about what to do and where the outcome for

Table 2. Cooperation in an aesthetic kind.

	Blues	Jazz
Blues	2, 2	0, 0
Jazz	0, 0	1, 1

Table 3. Cooperation in an aesthetic kind with different act-types.

		Guitar	
		Blues	Jazz
Bass	Blues	2, 2	0, 0
	Jazz	0, 0	1, 1

each is affected by the choice of the other. However, these tables, and the ones below, are special applications of game theory. They represent agents who must choose to develop a competence, and the payoffs are chances of achievement, or chances of getting success from the competences they choose to develop. None of the tables represents choices to consume aesthetic goods, with pay offs in terms of aesthetic satisfaction. The task is to see how an alternative to aesthetic hedonism rationally explains the structure of aesthetic culture. A piece of aesthetic culture is rationally explained just when some of the reasons agents have to act anyway are reasons for them to act in ways that conform with and support the piece of culture. Divisions of aesthetic labour are rationally explained when participating agents do better, raising their prospects for aesthetic achievement, by developing specialized competences in cooperation with each other.

Philosophers have a thing for agents who face coordination problems (Lewis 1969, 8–24; following Schelling 1960; see also Bicchieri 2006). In coordination problems, there is a set of combinations with more than one member, such that any combination not in the set makes at least one agent worse off (i.e. there is more than one strict Nash equilibrium). Table 4 represents agents who have better chances of achievement if they develop competence in the same aesthetic kind, but who have the same chances of achievement whether they both go for jazz or both go for the blues. As a result, the fact that each has reason to achieve gives neither a decisive reason to choose to develop one style over the other. Agents in this scenario, having reason to achieve anyway, thereby have reason to conform to and support a social arrangement of some kind – an exchange of promises, perhaps, or a convention.

Aesthetic culture need not find a rational explanation in the fact that aesthetic agents face coordination problems. Rarely do agents face more than one combination of choices that lead to equally good aesthetic achievements for all. Let talent be aptitude for developing a competence for achievement. Tables 3 and 4 represent the following difference: the agents in Table 3 are more talented at the blues, whereas the agents in Table 4 have equal talent in jazz and the blues. Chances are that aesthetic agents will differ in talent. Aesthetic talent is to some extent part of an agent's natural-born endowment, and it also reflects the non-aesthetic competences they have developed. Some are born with some talent for ballet, and some talent for ballet is a side-effect of training in gymnastics. By contrast, human beings are equally talented at driving on the right and driving on the left, and they are equally talented at speaking English and speaking Tagalog. Forgetting how special are cases like these, we tend to look

Table 4. An aesthetic coordination problem.

		Guitar	
		Blues	Jazz
Bass	Blues	1, 1	0, 0
	Jazz	0, 0	1, 1

for conventions to rationally explain cultural facts. In particular, sociologists in the so-called 'cultural production' tradition understand aesthetic practices as implicating conventions that 'make possible the easy and efficient coordination of activity among artists and support personnel' (Becker 2008, 30, also 1–9, 56, 369–70).

Great swaths of aesthetic culture organize around the kind of social arrangement that generates trends. If, as Hume and Egan emphasized, we sometimes thrive by fitting in, then we sometimes have reason to fit in. One way to fit in is by imitating others, generating a trend, so we sometimes have reason to follow trends by imitating others (Lewis 1969, 120; Coleman 1990, 230–237; Bicchieri 2006, 31–34). The trends that get the headlines are trends in consumer choice, and the breakthrough study of imitative trends looked at the fashion for mini-skirts in the early 1960s (see Bicchieri 2006, 31–33). However, there also exist trends in what competences to develop – just consider cookbook trends (Julia Child is back) and trending how-to content on YouTube.

Trends exploit a special two-way division of labour. A sizeable population of agents have reason to follow any of a number of possible trends. They are followers. Complementing them is a smaller population of trendsetters, who have reason to have followers. Table 5 represents a scenario where there is a trend spreading an aesthetic competence in craft brewing. A range of aesthetic competences make up the craft brewery – not only brewing and consuming, but also food pairing, marketing, serving, growing hops, reviewing, and so on. Trendsetters and followers can specialize in any of these tasks. For sake of simplicity, take the case of the brewmasters. Also pretend that there are only two kinds of beer, hoppy and malty. In Table 5, a brewer who is follower has the best shot at achievement if he perfects his skill at brewing malty ales, whereas the trendsetting brewer has the best shot at achievement if she perfects her ability to brew APAs and IPAs. At the same time, however, the success of each agent hangs in part on their brewing trendily. The follower utterly fails in using his competence if he brews out of step with the trend, and the trendsetter is more successful when she has followers. Like conventions, patterns of imitation are social arrangements that make for a rational explanation of the structure of aesthetic culture.

A final type of scenario opens the door to social sanctions on the development of aesthetic competence. Table 6 represents an aesthetic prisoner's dilemma. Architects and builders must acquire competences such that builders can do a good job building what architects design, and architects can specify

Table 5. Aesthetic imitation.

		Trendsetters	
		Hoppy	Malty
Followers	Hoppy	1, 2	0, 1
	Malty	0, 1	3, 1

Table 6. An aesthetic prisoner's dilemma.

		Architects	
		Mod-mod	Brutalist
Builders	Mod-mod	1, 1	0, 2
	Vernacular	2, 0	0, 0

what is within the capabilities of builders. Being attuned to their familiar surroundings, builders have the best chance of success from competence when using vernacular forms and materials (e.g. gabled roofs, cedar shingle siding). Being attuned to international high style, architects have the best chance of success from competence when using brutalist forms and materials (e.g. flat roofs and poured concrete). Disaster strikes them jointly if both learn what gives them the best chance of individual achievement. Architects will learn to specify brutalist designs in poured concrete while builders will hone their skills on shingle siding, and we will blame our leaky roofs on both their houses. They could compromise and both learn to practise modified modernism (Smiley 2001). In practising mod-mod, they would avoid disaster, but neither would optimize their chances of individual achievement. If both do what they have most reason to do, which is to optimize their individual achievement, disaster will strike.

Why squander the potential for joint gain that can be got when both learn mod-mod forms and materials? By compromising, each is able to avoid disaster and achieve substantially, albeit not maximally. In some scenarios, aesthetic agents have reason to conform to and support social arrangements that secure convergence on competences that yield joint gains and avoid disaster. For example, they have reason to represent mod-mod as obligatory, as divinely ordained, or as natural and inevitable, so that it becomes taboo to design or build anything else. They have reason to scorn anyone who does not go along and to reward those who do go along.

These scenarios are highly stylized sketches showing how the reasons aesthetic agents have to act anyway give can be reasons for them to conform with and support aesthetic cultures that divide and distribute their aesthetic competences. Removing one dimension of stylization, the temporal one, ramps up explanatory power. Tables 2–6 are static. In fact, agents build on past improvements in competence by taking advantage of cultural transmission. Across generations, we see increasing specialization, except when disruptions to cultural transmission mark a return to some dark age.

Over time, aesthetic competences tend to become ever more finely individuated. Take proficiency with a musical instrument. That someone is proficient with the violin no longer means that they can play any kind of violin music. One might be tempted to insist that a violinist is simply competent in violin, but has not learned every way of playing it. However, a way of playing the violin is just a finer skill. Competence in playing fiddle and in playing Karnatic violin are species of the generic competence in violin. The point is that specialists must

coordinate finely individuated competences. The Dixie Chicks do not call upon L. Subramaniam to fill in when Martie Maguire has the flu. They need someone competent in playing fiddle – indeed a particular style of fiddle. In learning a new style of playing, a violinist adapts to another aesthetic kind. They learn what ways of playing yield what aesthetic values in order to be able to interact with others.

The task was to elucidate reasons that agents have to act that rationally explain three observations about the structure of aesthetic culture. Agents have reason to act in conformity with and to support networks of specialization that boost their potential for individual and hence joint achievement. Aesthetic agents operate upon items of aesthetic interest, but they also operate upon each other. More specifically, they operate on items of aesthetic interest by operating on each other, and they operate upon each other by operating on items of aesthetic interest.

The network theory of aesthetic value

Aesthetic values figure in aesthetic reasons, which are reasons for agents to act, hence reasons for them to bend their competence upon success. So far the thought has been that V is an aesthetic value only if the fact that some x is V lends weight to the proposition that it would be an aesthetic achievement for some A to ϕ in some C . Running with this thought has led to a rational explanation of the structuring of aesthetic culture into aesthetic kinds where agents perform a range of act-types, such that kinds and act-types interact.

The network theory of aesthetic value unpacks C to make the theory's explanatory resources explicit

necessarily, V is an aesthetic value only if the fact that some x is V lends weight to the proposition that it would be an aesthetic achievement for some A to ϕ , where x is an item in K and A 's competence to ϕ is attuned to K .

So stated, the theory is partial, answering only the normative question. Additional conditions might say what makes V a distinctively aesthetic value.

The argument for the network theory of aesthetic value is abductive. That is, the theory does a better job than its competition at explaining accurate observations about aesthetic culture. Much more work needs doing, however. What are aesthetic kinds, exactly? What are the elements of aesthetic competence, and how does aesthetic competence attune to aesthetic kinds? Indeed, how do answers to these questions appeal to aesthetic values or reasons? Addressing these questions is good work, for another occasion (Lopes [forthcoming](#)). Before closing, a worry about the abductive argument.

Cooperation vs. competition

The structure of aesthetic culture is a product of interactions among individual aesthetic agents, whose agency it enables and extends. Surprisingly, both

claims are controversial in the social sciences, though they are beginning to win converts (Witkin and DeNora 1997; Acord and DeNora 2008; Layton 2011; and see Coleman 1990 and Fine and Fields 2008 for general theory).

Many anthropologists and sociologists seek to explain the structure of aesthetic culture as homologues of other cultural patterns – patterns in what is meaningful for a group (e.g. Bourdieu 1977; Washburn 1983). Whatever else these explanations have going for them, they are not rational explanations. That is, they do not appeal to aesthetic values as figuring in the reasons agents have to perform acts. That an item has features homologous to features of items in some other domain of culture cannot begin to answer the normative question. As James Coleman puts it, 'the absence of an explicit normative principle at the level of the individual ... has denied sociological theory the possibility of making normative statements' (1990, 41). The assumption here is that it is good to have a rational explanation of observations about aesthetic culture.

Bourdieu (1984) and his followers mount another, more direct, challenge to cooperation-based explanations of aesthetic culture. According to Bourdieu, agents in different aesthetic 'fields' compete with each other for cultural and economic capital within a community. For example, popular musicians and their fans compete for cultural and economic capital with 'high brow' musicians and audiences. Thus, Bourdieu proposes an agent-level explanation of the stratification of aesthetic culture in terms of competition rather than cooperation.

The challenge is only apparent, since competition need not crowd out cooperation (Becker 2008, 373–481). Agents who compete with each other in performing the same act-type may simultaneously cooperate with agents performing different act-types. As a matter of fact, cooperation between agents with different specializations can be more effective precisely because agents compete within a specialization. Curators who compete with each other must up their game, and that benefits artists whose work they present. In return, artists who seek to outdo each other are more likely to create work that shows well, boosting the prospects for curatorial achievement.

As he surveys the fields of the arts, Bourdieu sees only artists and spectators, where cooperative interaction is not very obvious (though it is there – see Fried 1980; Baxandall 1985). The cooperative underpinnings of aesthetic culture are going to be hard to discern as long as we think the only aesthetic acts are acts of appreciation, contemplation, or absorbed attention plus acts of making items that afford appreciation, contemplation, or absorbed attention. The same error explains much of the appeal of aesthetic hedonism.

Everybody knows that the stupendous aesthetic attainments of human beings around the world since the decoration of the caves at Chauvet could not have been the work of solo operators. Only some deeply entrenched ideas about aesthetic value could seduce philosophers into giving the fact so little weight in their theorizing.

Notes on contributor

Dominic McIver Lopes is Professor of Philosophy at the University of British Columbia, where he works principally in aesthetics. He is the author of many articles as well as five monographs, and he is currently completing a book, *Being for Beauty: Aesthetic Agency and Value*, and assembling a companion collection of his articles, *Aesthetics at the Edge: Where Philosophy Meets the Human Sciences*.

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