**Overview of “Aesthetic Value and the Practice of Aesthetic Valuing”**

**Nick Riggle**

**1. What is aesthetic value?**

 🡪 The Demarcation Question: What makes aesthetic value *aesthetic*?

🡪 **The Value Question**: What makes aesthetic value *good*?

Two answers:

 Hedonism: The pleasure (or valuable experiences) one gets from one’s engagement.

Network Theory: Aesthetic values are reasons for action that enable individual successes.

Notice: the typical paradigms of aesthetic engagement center *the individual encounter with aesthetic value*: listening to a musical work, reading a novel, painting a picture…pulling an espresso shot…

My Main Claim: Thinking about aesthetic value in terms of the goods an individual can get from it is a mistake. We can only understand what makes aesthetic value good by understanding its role in *the collective practice of aesthetic valuing*. Aesthetic value is what is worthy of aesthetic valuing, where aesthetic valuing is a special social practice.

Two Notes: (1) I am interested in ‘aesthetic life’ broadly construed; (2) There are many specific aesthetic practices\*.

**2. How to Characterize a Practice**

Practices are not mere behavioral patterns. They are patterns of intentional action. These patterns come from the way rules, values, and conventions organize action:

**Rule-governed practices**: Practices organized by constitutive rules. These practices organize action by subjecting it to the rules or stringent norms of the practice. [baseball, tea ceremonies]

**Value-governed practices**: Practices organized by a value or values. [being on time, lawnmowing, sex]

**Conventional practices:** Practices organized by entrenched routines or popular dispositions. [walking on the right-hand side, shaking hands upon meeting]

Characteristic Actions: Action-types that are typical or paradigmatic of the practice. [carefully slicing fresh fish in Japanese cooking but not using napkins]

Participatory or Individual Practices: A practice is participatory if and only if (and to the extent that) acting in the practice enjoins the activity of others. A practice is individual otherwise. [promising vs. lawnmowing]

Method: A practice can be characterized by specifying its governing rules, values, or conventions and specifying (some of) the characteristic actions practitioners perform to follow the rules or conventions or to realize the values.

**3. Characterizing the Practice of Aesthetic Valuing**

Raz’s Skepticism: “The more general the values the less appealing appears the thesis of their social dependence. … We doubt whether there are practices sustaining [general values such as beauty], for their very generality challenges our common expectations of what practices are like. … We do not think of people’s behaviour toward issues involving beauty as a practice, for there is no specific action-type, performance or approval of which can constitute the practice of beauty, so to speak.

Our appreciation of beauty can be manifested by almost any conceivable action under some circumstance or other.” (*The Practice of Value* (2003): pp. 37-38)

Three problems with Raz’s skepticism:

1. **Wrong Focus**: Why focus on ‘specific action-types’ rather than on general ones, i.e. ones that feature in many different aesthetic practices\*?
2. **Non-sequitur**: It is true that aesthetic valuing can be manifested by many different actions, but it does not follow that no actions are characteristic of the practice.
3. **Individualism**: Is Raz being too individualistic here? Perhaps if we look at *collective* action, we will find what we are looking for.

Claim: The practice of aesthetic valuing can be characterized by the collective actions of *imitation*, *sharing,* and *self-expression*.

**Imitation.** Often when we aesthetically act we are using someone or something as a model for our own actions. We usually are not merely copying or mimicking; we are using someone as a good model for our own aesthetic actions. And even when we are not simply using another as a model, we might imitate them in the sense of being inspired by them to aesthetically act a certain way, mirroring their actions with our own twist.

**Sharing.** Many of our aesthetic actions are acts of sharing. Sharing is so intimately tied to so many aesthetic experiences that it can seem to be their functional output. The hand draws the beauty the eye sees and then offers it up.

**Self-Expression.** Often when we aesthetically act we are using aesthetic media to make ourselves visible as individuals—to ourselves and others. We ‘put ourselves out there’ through our aesthetic actions, creations, and reactions (and thereby offer ourselves and our products as imitable).

Clarification 1: These action-types do not *exclusively* characterize the practice of aesthetic valuing.

* Other actions can be characterized by imitation, sharing, and self-expression, e.g. the practice of philosophy. Philosophy is distinguished by its governing values, e.g. understanding, truth, rationality.

Clarification 2: These action-types do not *exhaustively* characterize the practice of aesthetic valuing.

* Perhaps other action-types figure in the characterization, e.g. “judgment”.
* But for my argument to work these action-types must be central to the practice.

Clarification 3: I’m unsure whether these action-types *necessarily* characterize the practice.

* Perhaps some groups do not share, or imitate, or self-express.
* But if they don’t then they must meet the ‘ends’ of the practice in another way.

**4. The Practice of Aesthetic Valuing as a Value-Governed Practice**

Three action-types hardly characterize a practice. So what unifies these action-types?

Notice that sharing, imitation, and self-expression are complementary*,* they fit together into sequences of paradigmatic aesthetic action:

* Recreating a dish you love from a local restaurant and sharing it with friends.
* Imitating someone’s outfit and texting a picture of it to a friend.
* Dancing (with others).

Why do these action-types work together or complement each other? The simplest answer would be that they work together because they all promote some higher value or values. But what value(s)? We get so many goods out of the practice: pleasure, achievement, cognitive goods, intimacy, fun…

The Question: What *distinctive goods* do we get out of the practice of aesthetic valuing?

My answer: *aesthetic community* and its ingredients, *individuality* and *aesthetic freedom*. By sharing, imitating, and self-expressing we create the conditions for and realize aesthetic community.

*Discretionary Valuing:* The ability to choose what and how to value. A person’s individuality is the set of their characteristics that result from their exercise of discretionary valuing capacities.

*Volitional Openness*: the ability to discount or temper our normal modes of action and reaction and to act from an open perspective that is engaged with and immediately responsive to one’s environment.

*Aesthetic Community*: two or more people form an aesthetic community when their capacities for discretionary valuing and volitional openness are *mutually supportive* of their sharing, self-expressing, imitating, and the like.

In sum, **the** **practice of aesthetic valuing** is a collective, value-governed, practice wherein we characteristically express ourselves, imitate the practices and products of other aesthetic agents, and share our aesthetic perspectives and products with them in ways that encourage them to imitate, express, and share in turn. The practice is good primarily because it exercises our capacities for discretionary valuing and volitional openness and, ultimately, promotes aesthetic communities of individuals.

**5. Aesthetic Value as a Practice-Dependent Good**

Now we can pose a new question about aesthetic value: What is aesthetic value *such that it figures in the practice of aesthetic valuing*?

Test case: Aesthetic Hedonism

*Aesthetic Hedonism*: the aesthetic value of an object is the value of the experience the object affords, when experienced properly by the right people under the right conditions.

Can the aesthetic hedonist explain what makes aesthetic value as such *sharable*, *imitable*, or *worthy of self-expression*?

No. Pleasure motivates and makes appropriate continued engagement with its source. Something more is needed to explain why some sources of pleasure are sharable, imitable, and usable as media of self-expression.

A new thought: Aesthetic value is a practice-dependent good.

Practices generate practice-dependent goods.

 🡪 Baseball generates baseball bats, which are good relative to the practice.

Constitutive Goods: Things that are necessary for meeting the ends of the practice. Bats are *constitutive goods* in the practice of baseball; sauce pots are *constitutive goods* in French cooking.

Realization Value: Some bats and pots are not merely constitutively good. Some are also *especially good* at realizing the (valuable) ends of a practice. A pot is necessary in French cooking, but a saucier is outstanding. Any old ball is necessary for playing soccer, but an Adidas ball is excellent.

Now we can ask: What has *realization value* in the practice of aesthetic valuing?

🡪 Anything that is such that engaging with it would realize aesthetic community or the goods that go into it—individuality and volitional openness. Call this aesthetic value. Aesthetic value is what is *worthy of the practice of aesthetic valuing*.

🡪 What are the kinds of things the creation of or engagement with which would articulate individuality, stoke volitional openness, or animate aesthetic community?

* A great Pop song or Beethoven’s 9th. An excellent suit or a stunning sculpture. A piece of street art or a disruptive avant-garde work.
* Not a meh salad, a monotonous song, a sad room, or an awkward poem.

**Aesthetic Communitarianism**: Aesthetic value is realization value in the practice of aesthetic valuing. Or, aesthetic value is what is worthy of the practice of aesthetic valuing.

**6. Wrapping up – Back to the value question: So what makes aesthetic value good?**

With the practice of aesthetic valuing in view, we can see that the value question is ambiguous between *top-down* good-making and *bottom-up* good-making.

Top-down: What makes aesthetic value good in general is that engagement with it realizes the practice-governing good of aesthetic community and its ingredients, individuality and aesthetic freedom.

Bottom-up: What makes any instance of aesthetic value good is whatever feature(s) it has that make(s) it worthy of the practice of aesthetic valuing—when we are engaged in the practice, we might say it is scary, tasty, pleasing, inventive, liberating, sleek, wild, subtle, transformative, weird, wild, visually arresting, sonically absorbing…

Diagnosis: The flaw in theories of aesthetic value thus far is that they try to read the metaphysics of aesthetic value off of individual-level evaluative considerations.