

# ON THE MORAL PSYCHOLOGY AND NORMATIVE FORCE OF AESTHETIC REASONS

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GUY DAMMANN AND ELISABETH SCHELLEKENS

This paper investigates the way in which we adduce reasons in support of our aesthetic judgements. We examine the seemingly question-begging nature of that process, such that any aesthetic quality we adduce as a reason can be found compelling qua reason for a particular judgement if and only if that judgement is already assented to. We then analyse this phenomenon in the parallel contexts of gustatory taste and friendship, where the differences are understood to lie primarily with differences in the normative force of reasons held in support of gustatory judgements, aesthetic judgements, and personal friendships. While some question-begging obtains in all cases, in the latter we can begin to see that friendship can be justified with reference to its contribution to the good of ourselves. This is explored further in connection with the way in which examining our reasons for being friends with people is actually productive and generative of that friendship. Our conclusion is that while the giving of reasons for aesthetic judgements is still subject to a certain question-begging, those judgements acquire a powerful normative force in cultural contexts where it can be seen that assenting to them constitutes the realization of our good as individuals.

I

Attempts to account for how we adduce reasons for our aesthetic judgements tend to present us with two broad philosophical alternatives. On the first, supporting our aesthetic judgements consists, roughly, in listing those features which, in some logical sense, may lead us to infer the presence of an aesthetic quality such as beauty or overall aesthetic value. This line of inquiry, as has frequently been pointed out, subsumes the aesthetic reason-giving process to fairly standard inductive reasoning, and, as such, may be said to overlook the fundamentally perceptual nature of the aesthetic. As Frank Sibley famously writes, 'aesthetic perception [...] is essential to aesthetic judgement; one could not therefore be brought to make an aesthetic judgement simply as the outcome of considering reasons, however good'.<sup>1</sup> On the second alternative, this perceptual character serves as the very starting point of our aesthetic epistemology: the only real justification available to aesthetic judgements is so-called 'perceptual proof'. The aim of adducing reasons then becomes, in Sibley's words, 'to open someone's

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<sup>1</sup> Frank Sibley, 'Aesthetic and Non-aesthetic', in *Approach to Aesthetics: Collected Papers on Philosophical Aesthetics*, ed. John Benson, Betty Redfern, and Jeremy Roxbee Cox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 40.

eyes to the aesthetic qualities of an object'.<sup>2</sup> What we lose here, however, is any obvious means of ascribing direct normative weight to aesthetic reasons: sometimes they do help us to see; sometimes they simply don't.

The ensuing aporia can be captured thus: either one goes against the dominant and long-standing tradition which holds that aesthetic judgements are fundamentally perceptual in the sense described above; or, by accepting that aesthetic judgements are perceptual and autonomous, one soon finds oneself in the uncomfortable position of maintaining that reasons only count as reasons if and only if one has already come to endorse the aesthetic judgement those reasons supposedly support.

Focusing on this impasse, our main concern in this paper is twofold. First, we ask what is it we do when we adduce aesthetic reasons. We shall take this to be a question, broadly, of what may be described as the moral psychology of aesthetic reasoning, or the morally informed psychology of aesthetic reason-giving. That is to say, we will primarily be concerned with an account of how the normative force of aesthetic reasons is manifest in experience, and, to a certain extent, with the source of this normativity; we will not therefore be overly concerned with the metaphysics of aesthetic qualities *qua* reasons *per se*.<sup>3</sup> Second, given the epistemic limitations which confront the notion of aesthetic reasons in any non-inferential account of aesthetic judgement-making, how might such aesthetic reasons be understood to acquire a significant normative dimension and force? The perplexity described above urges us to explore new lines of inquiry, ones in which the question-begging itself may be put to good use. We shall therefore begin our investigation by examining what we describe as the question-begging nature of aesthetic reason-giving. Having indicated the extent to which aesthetic reason-giving begs the question, we then move to compare the aesthetic cases with what we take to be the parallel cases of gustatory judgements and judgements about friendships. Here we show that while the question-begging structure obtains to a certain extent throughout, the reasons carry a different degree of normative force in each case. Finally, we suggest that aesthetic reasons, like reasons for love, can be deemed compelling in relation to whether or not we can see the judgements they support in relation to our own good.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>3</sup> In other words, we are not here concerned with which metaphysical theories best explain the norms surrounding particular aesthetic qualities and their positive or negative valence. That is not to say that we reject the relevance of metaphysics to this account; we merely consider it best left to one side for the purposes of the present discussion.

II

Let us begin by examining an example of how one may describe a specific artwork with the intention of getting someone else to perceive what we ourselves perceive aesthetically (that is, the intention of coming to an aesthetic agreement).

A deems Chopin's Prelude in E minor to be an aesthetic 'masterpiece', and proceeds to give reasons for this judgement in the hope of eliciting B's agreement. A starts by pointing to the way the melody seems to emerge organically from the descending harmonic progression, how it has a lingering quality which is tremendously beguiling and melancholic. A also cites the economy of the simple bipartite form, and the way the slight elisions in the second half (as a repeat of the first half) increase the music's intensity with the greatest economy. This intensity, A points out, is caught up in the expressivity of the final melodic outburst before everything comes to a close at the very end.

Assuming a degree of musical knowledge on B's part, what is it, in Sibley's phrase, that we can hope to 'get them to see', or in this case hear? Which features do we highlight in order to support our own aesthetic judgement? In the first instance, we can get B to hear the two parts of the piece, their similarities and differences. We can also show how the melody derives from the upper note in the original harmony being sustained across several bars until there is a perceived tension which seems to require resolution. What is more, we can point to the artistic technique in Chopin's handling of this tension, and to the way such simple materials still lead to a whole in which are perceived various events and a conclusion which, having regained the simplicity of the opening, seems to offer closure but also a lingering sense of something unsaid.

Clearly, this case can be said to stand as an example of good practice in art criticism in so far as it fulfils what many critics and commentators on criticism demand of critical discussions about works of art. As Noël Carroll writes, the critic 'is someone who is capable not only of evaluating artworks, but who is also expert in the sense that she is adept at backing those verdicts up with reasons'.<sup>4</sup> A's account anchors itself to observable features of the work; it displays no bias towards one form of music-making over another; and it resists incorporating any personal experience or memory which is not generally available to others of similar sensibility and cultural background. To use Carroll's words again, 'critics

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<sup>4</sup> Noël Carroll, *On Criticism* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 14. See further: 'Criticism comprises many activities, including: the description, classification, contextualization, elucidation, interpretation and analysis of the artworks in the docket. But in addition to these procedures, criticism also involves reasoned evaluation. Indeed, these other activities are not generally thought to be ends in themselves; they are characteristically undertaken precisely for the purpose of providing the grounds for the critic's evaluation of the artwork in question.'

are beholden to the canons of reason [...] genuine critics are committed to describing accurately and reasoning validly.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the critical analysis brings into the open various aesthetic qualities – harmony, tension, intensity, expressivity – whose positive valence is generally agreed upon not merely by the majority of musicians and their audiences in general, but quite possibly by our interlocutor in particular.

Nonetheless, despite highlighting generally accessible features of the work and making other efforts to ensure the explanatory force of the reasons adduced in favour of our aesthetic judgement, we cannot take it for granted that any of this solid reasoning will necessarily lead to the aesthetic agreement we seek with our interlocutor. What A perceives as the subtle increase of tension, leading to an expressive outburst, B may simply perceive as boring and uneventful. She may, on listening again, even be able to pick out all the features we have identified in our reasoning. She can perhaps even ‘see what we mean’. And yet she still finds it boring.<sup>6</sup> It is after all possible to perceive all the descriptive generally accessible features that A has pointed to in support of her aesthetic judgement and still fail to agree that Chopin’s Prelude in E minor is a masterpiece.

What, then, is happening here? Is B just mistaken? Is the lack of aesthetic agreement to be explained in terms of some failure on her behalf? It is of course tempting to think so. But if we judge someone to be mistaken about something, should we not be able to show them where they have gone wrong? This, it seems, is considerably more difficult than one might assume. After all, our interlocutor has followed every step of our reasoning. We also know her to share many of our other musical tastes and judgements.<sup>7</sup> She can perceive the observable features we have adduced in explaining our aesthetic judgement, and perhaps even why the combination of these features would lead to the likelihood of the piece’s being an aesthetic masterpiece. And yet she cannot share our aesthetic experience of the work *qua*, as we would have it, a masterpiece. Thus while our own judgement is well supported by compelling reasons, these reasons do not seem able to compel someone who does not already endorse our judgement. This, in turn, seems to suggest that our aesthetic judgement is, in some significant sense at least, not fully justified by the reasons we adduce, but, rather, that the authority

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>6</sup> By ‘boring’ we would like to suggest an absence of aesthetic interest or value. This seems preferable to an overtly negative aesthetic ascription in the sense that finding something ‘boring’ seems to allow for the possibility, as in this case, that the subject sees what there is to see in the work but still finds it lacking in the aesthetic merit others find in it.

<sup>7</sup> B is not therefore the aesthetic equivalent of an amoralist or someone who simply fails to see things as having an aesthetic dimension. For the purposes of the argument, we may assume B is as adept a critic as A.

may in fact flow in the reverse direction such that our reasons become compelling if and only if we already assent to the judgement they seem to support.<sup>8</sup>

The apparent question-begging can be cast in a clearer light if we consider a complementary case. Let us suppose that B draws A's attention to another short piece by Chopin, the Prelude in B minor. Let us say that B plays this piece to A and demonstrates, by relying on the same reasoning as used by us in support of our assessment of the Prelude in E minor, that the same aesthetic qualities identified by A can then in fact also be ascribed to the Prelude in B minor. This, argues B, not only offers compelling support for her judgement that the latter piece is a masterpiece, but also that A must assent to the judgement because it follows the same form as A's original reason-giving and draws on the same aesthetic qualities originally observed by A as being qualities of the Prelude in E minor. However, A is not compelled to make any such aesthetic judgement, despite the reasoning being indistinguishable and based on the same aesthetic qualities. A persists in finding the Prelude in B minor boring and finding the Prelude in E minor a masterpiece, while the reverse remains the case for B. In both cases, then, while both listeners are able to hear the piece's economy and expressive intensity, only one listener in each case is drawn to conclude that the piece is a masterpiece. What this scenario suggests is that quality *P*, which we may hold as representative of a generally aesthetically meritorious quality, only displays this merit when identified in an instance which we judge in particular to have aesthetic merit. That is to say, *P* does not seem to confer its aesthetic merit onto *x* so much as, on the contrary, draw its perceived aesthetic merit (at least partly) from our prior judgement that *x* is a masterpiece.<sup>9</sup>

Taking stock, then, much seems to depend on our overall assessment of *x*. If we find *x* aesthetically excellent, the features we indicate as partaking of this excellence appear to provide compelling reason for our judgement. However, if we do not find *x* aesthetically excellent, those same features, while we may admit them to be desirable qualities in general, do not in this instance partake of any

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<sup>8</sup> It is a situation somewhat akin to this which Sibley has in mind when he remarks that the idea of appealing to aesthetic qualities as reasons for a verdict is accompanied by a certain 'absurdity': 'When you already accept that the characteristic *P* is one with inherent aesthetic merit, in seeing or deciding that *x* has *P* you are *ipso facto* seeing or deciding that *x* has some merit, just as the butcher, finding his knife sharp, has, in doing so, found it, at least in that respect, good'. Frank Sibley, 'General Criteria and Reasons in Aesthetics', in *Approach to Aesthetics*, 118.

<sup>9</sup> If *P* is said to have merit in itself, this merit is surely accrued from a stockpile of individual instances of *P* partaking in the overall merit of various cases of *x*. If this were not the case, it would not be possible to find something harmonious or expressive and at the same time boring. It is, in other words, our evaluation of the whole which leads us to see the particular features in a certain light, not the reverse.

excellence. On the contrary, those features are part of why  $x$  is, for example, found not to be aesthetically excellent but boring. And this, we may simply note for the present, is perhaps reassuring, if only in the restricted sense that aesthetic judgements tend to relate to particular objects of appreciation rather than to general principles. Where  $P$  is found to confer aesthetic merit on  $x$ , to the extent of appearing to provide a reason capable of justifying our aesthetic judgement about  $x$ , it is the particular instance of  $P$  in  $x$ , not a general rule about  $P$ , which strikes us. That is to say, it is the specific expressive intensity ( $P$ ) in Chopin's Prelude in E minor ( $x$ ) which impresses us aesthetically, rather than expressive intensity per se. If it were not so, we would be unable to locate instances in which expressive intensity obtained but also bored us. Moreover, we would not be making a perceptual aesthetic judgement but a straightforwardly inferential judgement, inferring the quality of  $x$  from the observed presence of  $P$ .

The question that calls for our attention, then, is not whether the process of adducing aesthetic reasons is question-begging or not, for in the sense described here, it clearly is. Instead, our concern is with whether this circularity actively undermines the normativity of aesthetic reasons. There is a sense, of course, that one may observe a distinction between explaining and justifying reasons, and simply conclude that aesthetic reasons are best understood as psychological explanations which hold only for particular aesthetic agents. This would certainly relieve aesthetic reasons of the responsibility for supporting aesthetic judgements in any stronger justificatory sense. But as Arnold Isenberg, among others, has pointed out, the process by which we adduce aesthetic qualities as reasons bears little similarity to psychological explanations, and every similarity to an evidential model of reasoning.<sup>10</sup> If, for example, we point to the expressive intensity of a Chopin prelude as a reason for holding the piece to be an excellent one, we are not typically seeking to explain how we personally came to find it excellent but seeking rather to provide evidence which supports our judgement and, in virtue of this, will encourage others to share it. If, however, aesthetic reasoning always begs the question, then, what purpose can we understand it to serve?

### III

Our concern, in simple terms, is in some respects comparable to the proverb about the proof of the pudding being in the eating. The folk wisdom expressed here tells us that however many reasons we may find for thinking that a pudding ought to be a good one, it only counts as a good one if those who eat it find it to

<sup>10</sup> See Arnold Isenberg, 'Critical Communication', *Philosophical Review* 58 (1949): 332–33.

be a good pudding, which is to say that they enjoy eating it. Unless a pudding is eaten with enjoyment, it makes no sense to call it good.<sup>11</sup>

The reason, this tells us, that we find the pudding to be good is just that we find it to be good in the eating. It is from that ‘perceptual proof’ that we may subsequently adduce particular features – such as the combination of ingredients or the skill of execution – as reasons for the judgement. The question, then, of whether a particular cited feature *P* (for example, the chef’s placement of a basin of water at the bottom of the oven) justifies a particular assessment of pudding *x* is wholly reliant on our perception that *x* is good. And if we do not find *x* to be good, no amount of pointing to the basin of hot water, or any other *P*, will lead us to conclude that *x* is good.

Before we return to the aesthetic case, we should pause to consider a further feature of the pudding’s proof. Under what circumstances might the reasons adduced for our judgement justify that judgement to the extent that it might command assent from others? Without committing ourselves to any details about how a postulated reality would be constituted in this case, or indeed any position on the reality or non-reality of aesthetic properties, we can agree that it seems appropriate to say that the pudding *really* is excellent if and only if everyone who likes such puddings would experience the pudding as excellent. This is to say that the pudding ought to be enjoyed by each and every individual who is disposed to like such puddings generally. The normative force of the judgement is important here, because even though it makes sense to see these reasons as normative and grounded in descriptive features about the pudding (as to why it is excellent), the force of these norms does not carry beyond the community of individuals who are already inclined to like puddings of the kind of which our pudding ‘really’ is an excellent example.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, person A, who is disposed to like this kind of pudding, can see that she ought to find *x* excellent and can also ‘prove’ the judgement by eating *x*. By contrast, person B, who does not like this kind of pudding, can see that she ought

<sup>11</sup> We can discount the ambiguity usually implied by the word ‘proof’ in such contexts, where the term may either denote that a proposition has proved to be true (as in mathematical proofs), or equally that the proposition has merely been tested, or ‘proved’. The phrase ‘the exception proves the rule’ is commonly misunderstood in virtue of this ambiguity because the phrase means not that every rule has exceptions but that it is the apparent exceptions which put rules to the test. In the current case, however, the phrase suggests a conscious pun on precisely this ambiguity: given that the act of testing, or ‘proving’, the pudding consists in eating it, the proverb is doubly true.

<sup>12</sup> Our concern here is with the epistemology and normativity of perceptual judgements, and not with the metaphysics of the properties they denote or which are adduced as reasons in support of those judgements. We are keen not to commit ourselves to a position on this latter point, largely because the two authors tend to disagree about it.

to find  $x$  excellent if she were the kind of person who likes that kind of pudding. What she cannot do, however, is 'prove' that judgement by eating the pudding. This suggests that the normative force of the quality (reason)  $P$  is restricted to the specific community of those who are bound to enjoy  $x$ . Members of this community can adduce  $P$  in support of their evaluation of  $x$  as much as they like, but non-members will feel no compunction to share their evaluation.

#### IV

We are now in a position to shed further light on the aesthetic case by examining the emerging contrasts with our previous examples. For, in our Western culture at least, there seems to be nothing strange about the person who maintains that Chopin's Prelude in E minor is a masterpiece at the same time as maintaining that she personally doesn't like it. 'I can hear that it's an excellent piece of music,' this perfectly normal person may say, 'but it's not to my taste.' This report approximates to the case discussed earlier where a listener was able to follow an argument about Chopin's Prelude in E minor but still found it boring.

There is nothing unusual, then, about a person saying these things. It does not follow from this, however, that propositions of the kind ' $x$  is good' and 'I like / don't like  $x$ ' are of an entirely different order. This is because it makes little sense to refer to a piece of music as a masterpiece unless it stands in a position to be enjoyed or appreciated by a significant community of listeners. That is to say, at some stage, some significant community or individual must have 'proved' the evaluation by finding the masterpiece aesthetically rewarding. What we do find in the aesthetic case, yet largely lacking in the pudding case, is the way the language in which the disjunction of aesthetic judgement and aesthetic experience is couched typically betrays a deference towards the taste of the community for whom the judgement is normative. In a debate, for example, with one of Hume's 'ideal judges', or with a real person who approximated to Hume's description of the ideal judge, most of us would give significant weight to such a person's opinion. We would be wont, for example, to apologize for our failure to concur: 'I'm sure you're right', we might say, 'and you obviously know what you're talking about, but for the moment I just can't see it.' There is, then, in the aesthetic case, a willingness to defer to a separate plane of authority than our own individual aesthetic response. This deference has important implications for the normativity of aesthetic judgements.

Consider the following two statements:

I accept that  $x$  (pudding) is a masterpiece, and that I ought to like it if I were inclined to like that kind of pudding. However, I happen not to be inclined to like that kind of pudding and so I do not like  $x$ .



I accept that  $x$  (Chopin prelude) is a masterpiece, and that I ought to like it. But I happen not to like  $x$ .

What is lacking in the statement about the Chopin case is the extra condition of 'if I were inclined to like [Chopin's music]'. We could of course include this condition and make the statements equivalent. In that case, however, we would obscure a much more important difference, which is that, while the musical statement makes sense without the extra conditional, the pudding case would not. If we happen not to like that kind of pudding, no one is really in a position to tell us that we ought, nonetheless, to like it. And yet in the aesthetic case, we are entirely at home with the idea that we ought to like things, even when we happen not to.

The difference, then, seems to have to do with the normative force at work in each statement. In the pudding case, the force of the 'ought' has no psychological compunction: it is not felt by the speaker of the statement. In the musical case, however, the force of the 'ought' is felt by the speaker (despite her not liking the piece herself). This force is not, of course, sufficient to compel the speaker to like the music, but it is sufficient to draw attention to the thought that something more fundamental might be amiss in her happening not to like  $x$ . In short, whereas the gustatory case only has normative pull for the people disposed to like the kind pudding in question, the normative force of the aesthetic case extends beyond those limits and includes those who don't tend to like Chopin's music. In other words, the normativity of aesthetic reasons extends beyond the community of people for whom the reasons are actually experienced as such.

How should we explain this stronger degree of normativity in the aesthetic case? This is a question which, we suspect, can only be answered by taking into account the broader cultural context within which such judgements are made and debated.<sup>13</sup> We can say that within a particular culture it is normal to appreciate  $x$  and see it as a masterpiece, even to understand  $x$  as a 'flowering' of that particular culture (in the sense of representing the best a particular culture can produce).<sup>14</sup> To the extent, therefore, that I am part of that culture, the fact that I happen not to like  $x$  does not preclude my experiencing a kind of demand to put aside that judgement and make an effort to come to like  $x$ , since that is what

<sup>13</sup> Although our primary focus is, as previously stated, not metaphysical, we would here not want to rule out the possibility that a full explanation of the phenomenon under scrutiny is to be couched in metaphysical terms.

<sup>14</sup> 'Culture' here can be taken to mean anything from the grandiose 'Western culture' to a culture of a small community such as might frequent a particular concert hall or pub. Culture denotes in this sense not merely the community of persons, but the set of practices, beliefs and values held in common by that community.

the culture I belong to would have me do.<sup>15</sup> After all, we are used to saying, for example, 'You may happen not to like this piece of music now, but it may grow on you and in time you may come to love and appreciate it as I do.'<sup>16</sup> We are used to the thought, in other words, that cultural values and the norms which enshrine them can only be subscribed to through the education and effort of individual members of that culture.

Now, although we may admit that the aesthetic case seems to enjoy a stronger normative status, we still face the problem of question-begging. That is to say, the only reason that others may have come to find our judgement that *x* is an aesthetic masterpiece confirmed by their own experience is because they have somehow come to find that *x* is a masterpiece for themselves. As we made clear earlier, *P* only becomes compelling as an aesthetic reason after we gain assent to the judgement that *x* is a masterpiece. But given the possibility of our changing our mind about our aesthetic assessment of *x*, what is it that causes this change to take place when it does take place?

It is our contention that some of the more fine-grained details of this process become visible when we consider a further case – namely, the arguably parallel case of reasons adduced for liking and loving persons. Before we move on, however, it is worth noting two particular features displayed in the aesthetic case. The first is that such changes of taste apparently happen with greater frequency when we are young, or at least when we are more susceptible to the process of education. When we are older, just as we often become more settled in our moral and political principles, we seem to become more settled in our aesthetic tastes.<sup>17</sup>

Second, it seems to be the case that changes in our aesthetic taste often take place under the guidance, active or passive, of people whose judgement we trust. This may be because these people are more experienced, and thus know of and have experienced aspects of life we too would wish to know and experience. At a more basic level, this trust would appear to be predicated on a more general kind of desire that we exercise in doing things that make us more alike to the people we admire. We may, on this account, have a perfectly natural desire

<sup>15</sup> And even, as seems increasingly prevalent in our own culture, we experience the normative demands of culture with more or less complete indifference – and therefore not as an incentive to put aside our judgement and make an effort to come to like *x* – we can still attest to the existence and force of those cultural norms by resisting them and locating our own taste in opposition to a norm. Counter-cultures, after all, have their own cultural weight.

<sup>16</sup> Arguably, too, the frequent insistence on the possibility of separating the idea of something's being aesthetically excellent from the fact of our liking it seems predicated precisely on preserving this possibility.

<sup>17</sup> This should not be taken to imply that our tastes 'improve' with age, but neither should it be taken to imply that they mightn't do just that.

to appear more worldly, say, in which case we will be apt to try to adopt the tastes and practices of people who exhibit the kind of worldliness we covet. Alternatively, we may wish to be like someone we consider to be virtuous, in which case we will follow their example in general, even to the extent of following them in the example of making up our own mind about things and holding reasons for these views. In all cases, however, the draw is towards our becoming like other individual members of a larger or smaller community; and in all cases the process takes the form of our making an effort to behave, value, and believe in ways which correspond to the perceived behaviours, values, and beliefs of that community.

The importance of this second point, in our view, should not be underestimated. This is because, if demonstrated, the idea leaves room for the generally held underlying conviction that aesthetic judgements are, fundamentally, perceptual and non-inferential, while at the same time showing how those judgements can be revised and discarded in favour of judgements initially held not by us but only by others.<sup>18</sup> The perceptual character of the judgement is preserved because what is transferred is not simply the judgement itself – we do not simply say ‘Because A likes x then so do I’ – but rather the sensible framework within which a particular judgement of aesthetic taste comes to be felt to be a natural expression.

A simple example of this is the following. We urge our friend to watch a television serial on the grounds that it seems to shed light on the shortcomings of modern political life in an amusing and gripping manner. Our friend finds the serial without any merit, largely because she doesn’t like watching television serials. Her life, say, doesn’t involve the habit of sitting and watching television. However, our friend notices that our own lives seem fuller and richer than hers, and puts this down in part to our habit of watching television serials. She therefore makes an effort to get into the habit of watching television serials, a habit which, once established, leads to her sharing our original judgement about the particular serial on the grounds that she too finds that it sheds light on the shortcomings of modern political life in an amusing and gripping manner.

Our friend, then, has come to share our judgement about the serial as well as our reasons for holding that judgement. As with our own judgement, it is made on the basis of our friend having come to see for herself that the serial is to be enjoyed, and that it is enjoyable at least in part in virtue of the quality indicated. But there is nothing necessarily inferential about the process by which the judgement has come to be shared. Our friend might equally well

<sup>18</sup> See also Eileen John, ‘Beauty, Interest, and Autonomy’, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 70 (2012): 193–202.

have concluded the serial to be as lacking in interest as she first found it, even though she has gone on to find other serials as rewarding as we have found this one.

## V

Isenberg's classic article, 'Critical Communication', arrives at a position similar to ours about the question-begging of aesthetic reasons: 'There is not in all the world's criticism a single purely descriptive statement concerning which one is prepared to say beforehand, "If it is true, I shall like that work so much the better".'<sup>19</sup> Isenberg's primary purpose in the paper is to clarify the distinctions between reasons, norms, and verdicts in the philosophy of art criticism, and one of his main concerns is to highlight the crucial role of aesthetic norms in accounting for the perceived relevance of an aesthetic quality (cited as a reason) to a judgement or verdict. As in our analysis, Isenberg remains wedded to the disjunction between the descriptive and normative aspects of aesthetic reasoning, or criticism, and his interest in norms stems from the effort to show how the reasoning process takes place on the normative side of the divide; the role of the descriptive element primarily consists, for Isenberg, in indicating features of the object to which the judgements can be wedded.

One of the most fruitful discussions of the paper, however, pushes the analysis in a slightly different direction. This is Ted Cohen's article, 'On Consistency in One's Personal Aesthetics', where a comparison is explored between the reasons we hold for liking art objects and the reasons we hold for liking people. Cohen's basic problem is roughly the same as ours. Here, the aporia is expressed as an incongruity in our personal affections, according to which the quality we adduce as a reason for liking one particular friend may equally hold true as a quality we find in someone we happen not to like. Cohen expresses the incongruity as follows:

- (1) A likes  $x$ .
- (2) A believes he likes  $x$  because  $Rx$ .
- (3) A does not like  $y$ .
- (4) A believes  $Ry$ .<sup>20</sup>

Cohen's supposition here is that when we realize the incongruity, we will be prompted to revise  $R$  to form  $R^*$  so that it applies more particularly to person  $x$

<sup>19</sup> Isenberg, 'Critical Communication', 338.

<sup>20</sup> Ted Cohen, 'On Consistency in One's Personal Aesthetics', in *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection*, ed. Jerrold Levinson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 106–25.

and no longer as true of person *y*. In that case, however, and supposing *A* to have an infinitely wide circle of acquaintances, Cohen simply points out that a further person *z* can be found of whom *R\** also obtains but whom *A* does not like. In this way the incongruous structure is preserved however refined the qualities adduced as reasons for liking *x* become.

Though Cohen purposefully leaves the conclusion of his overall argument open, the lessons we can draw are several. The first is that if the quality of *x* which *A* adduces as reason *R\*\*\** is refined to the furthest degree, then it becomes a quality which can only be true of *x* and no other person; and in this case, its particularity precludes it from functioning as a reason in general. As Cohen puts it: 'It seems the essence of a reason, after all, to be *general*, to have at least an in-principle application to cases besides the one in hand.'<sup>21</sup>

The second conclusion is that the question-begging relation between reasons and verdicts does not in itself represent a dead end, but can instead be seen as a functional element of a process which is itself productive of friendship. Part of what we do when we like people, Cohen suggests, is to find things about them that we like. And when we find that the things we like about them are not in themselves sufficient to explain our liking of the person, we find further things to like about them which carry, *at least for the time being*, the weight of a reason. This process – while it remains epistemologically speaking, as Cohen admits, 'a hopeless pursuit' – is ultimately one of the deepening of a particular friendship.<sup>22</sup>

The third conclusion is that the process is centred on the individual case rather than on the pursuit of reasons in general, in the guise, say, of assembling a repertoire of generally liked qualities of persons. That is to say, the process of pointing to, and refining our account of, the likeable qualities of friends – or, in parallel, the practice of art criticism – finds its motivation in the fact of our liking that friend, and is ultimately directed towards maintaining that affection. Put another way, what we are doing in such cases is deepening our affective relationship with an individual person.

## VI

Cohen's analysis of this case is restricted to the search for consistency in the individual subject's affections. But what happens when we expand the framework to include the questions we raised about the normativity of reasons for aesthetic judgements? Given that the reasons adduced here inevitably lack the logical force to compel others to share our affections for particular individuals, does this kind

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. Perhaps not coincidentally, the friend Cohen cites to illustrate the case of *x* is the person he ended up marrying.

of case shed any light on how we do in fact get others to share our affections for particular individuals?

One possible path to pursue in this connection is the following. When we introduce our friends to each other, we often cite qualities in each which we think will recommend them to each other. We say, for example, 'John! Come and meet Jane. Jane, like you, is a fine pianist and also a great lover of New Wave cinema.' From previous discussion, of course, we know that these features are not in themselves sufficient to produce a friendship between Jane and John. However, there is one other contributory feature of the introduction which might tip the balance, and that is the fact that John and Jane are both friends of ours. The underlying principle of introductions seems to be the idea that 'any friend of yours is a friend of mine'. We all know from experience that this precept is a highly fallible one, but it does have something which the other features of the introduction lack – namely, a normative force which guarantees, in genuine friendships, not that John and Jane will become friends but that their acquaintance originates from a state in which each is well disposed to like the other.

One way to understand this normative force is as follows. My friendship with Jane is a fact about me. It is a part of who I am that I happen to like Jane, just as it is part of the practice of my liking Jane that I find out things about her that I like. John is also my friend: it is part of who he is that he happens to like me. It therefore follows that it is part of the practice of John's friendship with me that he finds out things about me that he likes. One of the things about me – a part of who I am – is that I like Jane. Thus in being introduced to Jane as my friend, John, as my friend, is called upon to share in my liking Jane.

We all know from (often painful) experience that in some cases, John and Jane will not become friends, while in others they will. And just as there are no reasons sufficient to justify our liking our friends, there are no rules for deciding whether John and Jane will become friends or not. But we do know that if the friendship burgeons, it probably will, jealous romantic entanglements notwithstanding, deepen our friendship with each of them. And if the two take a strong dislike to each other, it is likely to create obstacles to our friendships with one or the other or both. Furthermore, these obstacles have implications not merely for our friendships as facts in themselves, but also for us. For insofar as my liking both John and Jane constitutes a (greater or lesser) part of 'who I am', then I am bound to undergo a disturbing change when the part of me bound up with liking Jane and John becomes problematic.

In this sense, the norm which obtains when introducing friends to one another, which leads to a general disposition on the part of the one to like the other, is not

grounded in the abstract and entirely fallible rule of thumb which affirms that 'any friend of yours is a friend of mine'. On the contrary, the norm is grounded in the simple facts of our friendships. John's desire to at least try to like Jane, then, is motivated by his prior liking of me, a fact which serves not merely as a recommendation but actually motivates the effort.<sup>23</sup> It motivates the effort because for John to succeed in sharing my liking of Jane is for John to succeed in pursuing his liking of me by finding things about me which he likes; and because, conversely, to fail in sharing my liking of Jane is to fail in pursuing his liking of me by finding things about which he likes.

One of the features highlighted by Cohen's analysis of the form friendship can take is that the practice of being friendly, if you will, with someone, or the practice of finding things about our friends which we like, is a process which is itself generative of that friendship. And one of the reasons for this is not merely that we acquire commitments to a greater number of reasons for continuing to like our friend, but that each of these commitments contributes to the individuality of that friend. As Cohen makes clear, the direction of the reasoning process is towards particulars which reinforce that individuality.<sup>24</sup> And what does it mean to accord individuality to our friends? Well, part of what it means is that we see our friend not as someone who happens to satisfy our desires in some way, but rather as someone with their own distinct and discrete interests and desires which we respect in virtue of the fact that they are part of who he or she is. We may not necessarily share our friend's desires, but to the extent that satisfying them in some way or another appears to us to be good for our friend, we will also perceive these things as good. We will think something good, that is, for his or her sake.

## VII

Our expansion of Cohen's parallel between the reasons we hold for our aesthetic judgements and those we hold for our personal friendships leads to a situation in which we can begin to understand the way these reasons can be understood as compelling not merely for ourselves but also for others. That is to say, we are

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<sup>23</sup> The norm's force, or power, to motivate to a greater or lesser degree our friends to like one another, relates to how close our own friendship is to each of them. The closer friend I am to John, for example, the more strongly he will feel the demand to share my liking for Jane.

<sup>24</sup> A similar movement is observable in Isenberg's argument, where he discusses the idea that the element of 'communication' in art criticism is best understood in terms of communication as community-forming, where what is communicated is ways of seeing and feeling in relation to particular objects. The sharing of value judgements is thus the basis of a 'community of feeling which expresses itself in identical value judgments'. See Isenberg, 'Critical Communication', 336.

now in a position to show how the reasons we adduce for our own judgements can come to possess enough normativity to recommend them to others. That process is not, as we have shown, a straightforwardly inferential one. It does not, that is to say, consist of others inferring their own judgements from the reasons we give for our judgements. What it does consist of, however, is that others may come to make the same judgements that we make – about friends or artworks – on the grounds that they come to see themselves as bound to us and, by extension, our tastes.

In order to understand how the normative force of such reasoning can extend beyond our circle of close friends, we must now consider one final case, that of love. What are reasons for love? A significant problem for any philosopher who attempts to answer this question is that love has the appearance of something which constitutes its own reason. Just as the philosopher pursues the path of understanding because she, as part of her job description, is in love with wisdom, so too does anyone who reflects on why he or she loves the things and people he or she loves always rubs up against the realization that it is in these loves that his or her own nature is realized. For this reason the idea of love is much more comfortably situated as a motivating reason for thinking and doing things than as something which we conclude to be the case by our thinking and doing those things. The logic of love thus follows the same question-begging which dogged our analyses of reasons for aesthetic judgements. We have reason to love someone, at root, if and only if we happen already to love them. But regarding love, it is perhaps at least easier to see how this circularity might be penetrated by the realization that our own good is intricately bound up with our keeping company with the object of our love.

It is helpful to recall in this connection the conception of love advanced by Iris Murdoch in *The Sovereignty of Good*, and elsewhere, where she argues at length that an important aspect of love consists in coming to see others as they really are. ‘When M is just and loving,’ writes Murdoch, ‘she sees D as she really is.’<sup>25</sup> With regard to difficult moral judgements, she argues that the right course of action only becomes visible when the individuals in question are viewed in a loving spirit: ‘The love which brings the right answer is an exercise of justice and realism and really *looking*.’<sup>26</sup> It is only through love, Murdoch says, that we come to see people as they really are because it is in the spirit of loving that we are apt to confer upon other people individuality and autonomy, and thus allow them to

<sup>25</sup> Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge, 1970), 35. For a discussion of this aspect of Murdoch’s philosophy, see J. David Velleman, ‘Love as a Moral Emotion’, *Ethics* 109 (1999): 338–74.

<sup>26</sup> Murdoch, *Sovereignty of Good*, 89.



take space in the world as beings with desires, beliefs, and a reality quite other than our own.<sup>27</sup>

An obvious advantage of Murdoch's construction is that it satisfies our general intuitions about the idea of love having both moral and aesthetic extensions. Love consists both in holding the beloved in a certain kind of moral respect – in granting the beloved its own sake on whose behalf we feel it is good to act – and in a certain way of seeing which brings particular qualities and features of the beloved into visibility, so to speak. The reason for love, according to this picture, relates to the need for people and objects to be manifest in the world as they really are, a need which can only be realized through being loved.

As in our analysis of friendship, love takes the form of a commitment to maintain the beloved as the object of our loving gaze. Its reasons, therefore, are bound up with the realization that we would no longer be ourselves if we ceased to exist in the company of the beloved. If we compromise the status of the beloved through, for a moral example, subjecting her or him to our selfish desires, or equally through, for an aesthetic example, failing to see her or him 'as she really is', then we are failing in our commitment to love and, as a result, we are damaging our own good. In brief, in failing to think and act *for the sake* of someone or something we love, we are failing to think and act *for our own sake*.

Viewed in this light, the problem of finding reasons for love begins to circumvent the limitations associated with circularity, and gains an enlarged character. We are not required to provide reasons for love per se but rather to explain in what sense our company with the object of our love is good for us. If we really love something, or somebody, we will, as Cohen suggests, continue to find things about them to love (that is, reasons to love them). The problem then becomes one of explaining why the world in which we exist – the world, that is, in which our love is directed towards the people and objects whose company we choose to keep – is a good world and one which merits our inviting others to partake of it. For it is only in relation to the image we entertain of the good world that it makes sense to think there is good reason for us to persist in loving the things and people we do love. And to the extent that the good world we denote, or invoke, in such explanations is one in which others can come to participate, then the explanations we give recommending that they do make the effort to participate should, in principle at least, be sufficiently compelling to recommend that they do just that.

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<sup>27</sup> As Murdoch puts it elsewhere, 'Love is the extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real.' See Iris Murdoch, 'The Sublime and the Good', *Chicago Review* 13, no. 3 (1959): 51.

Such explanations are difficult, perhaps inevitably so, but they are not question-begging. They do not beg the question, because the reasons given ultimately relate to an explanation of why our interlocutor's good is, like ours, bound up in appreciating, or loving, what we love. And given that a common good which we perceive as being manifest in something we love remains invisible to us, *pace* Murdoch, unless we see it with love, then the explanation acquires the character not merely of a recommendation to see something as we see it, but as an invitation to love it as we do.

## VIII

In this connection, the moral case – which was, after all, Murdoch's primary focus – is perhaps easier to determine than the aesthetic one. It seems easier to determine because it seems easier to bring a rational argument to bear on why particular moral norms and values might, generally speaking, be good norms and values. It is important to remember, however, that Murdoch's conception of morality implies that these norms and values are circumscribed by a culture (of love) whose practices consist partly in finding the good of others as a reason for loving them. That remains the case even if we follow Murdoch in entertaining the idea of such a culture as being a universal culture in the guise of humanity in general. In the aesthetic case, then, even though most would shy away from invoking a universal culture of aesthetic taste,<sup>28</sup> the structure remains intact. For in so far as we can identify our own good with the task of coming to love the images of aesthetic excellence which obtain for our particular culture (a culture which can be as narrowly or broadly conceived as you like), then the reasons for pursuing those loves are justified by the goodness that our particular culture is found to possess.

We are now in a position to return, by way of conclusion, to our earlier argument about Chopin's Prelude in E minor. As we have seen, our reasons for loving this particular piece took the form of a developing critical relationship with and a sensuous awareness of the work's aesthetic qualities. These reasons, we remember, seemed sufficient to one individual, A, but not to her interlocutor, B, who persisted in finding the piece boring. But let us say that A succeeds in demonstrating to B that the particular qualities of the Prelude are representative of the flowering of a culture to which both of them belong. That is, let us say that A succeeds in getting B to see that both of them participate in this culture and find their own good, as individual members, to be bound up precisely with the practice of participating in it (which is the practice of being sensible of its

<sup>28</sup> Most, perhaps, but not all; the obvious exception is of course Immanuel Kant.

images of aesthetic excellence). To the extent that A succeeds in this respect, then A really is showing B that she ought to love the piece as she does to the extent of motivating her assent. A's reason for loving this piece of music, just as B's reason for coming to love this piece of music, the argument shows, consists quite simply in the discovery that a better part of both their natures is bound up with finding it to be lovely. It is part of A's and B's being who they are, as members of a common culture, that they find themselves drawn to love something which exemplifies the excellence of that culture.

Assuming that such could be shown, we conclude that this could indeed stand as an example of aesthetic reasons acquiring sufficient normative force to demand, if not compel, someone else to share our admiration of the Prelude. One should resist the temptation, however, to ascribe a straightforwardly inferential character to the way in which aesthetic reasons gain assent. For what is shown here is how and why, within the context of our moral psychology, aesthetic reasons acquire the normative force that they do acquire. The truth, if any, of the norms and judgements which gain endorsement as part of this process is of course something which lies beyond the scope of the present paper. What remains important is how the process of making and succeeding in this process of getting someone else 'to see' what we see is itself partly constitutive of the value or beauty of a work of art, since the process necessarily involves, *pace* Cohen, the discovery of things to love about the work. In this sense, the pursuit of love – or *mutatis mutandis*, the practice of good criticism – is itself that which allows us to persist in the 'hopeless task', as Cohen has it, of seeing people and works of art as they really are.

Guy Dammann

Department of Musicology, Uppsala University,  
Engelska parken, Thunbergsv. 3H, Box 633, 751 26 Uppsala, Sweden  
guy.dammann@musik.uu.se

Elisabeth Schellekens

Department of Philosophy, Uppsala University,  
Engelska parken, Thunbergsv. 3H, Box 627, 751 26 Uppsala, Sweden  
elisabeth.schellekens@filosofi.uu.se

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