

Northern Michigan University

NMU Commons

Journal Articles

FacWorks

2014

The Relationship between Aesthetic Value and Cognitive Value

Antony Aumann

Northern Michigan University, aaumann@nmu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://commons.nmu.edu/facwork_journalarticles



Part of the [Aesthetics Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Aumann, Antony, "The Relationship between Aesthetic Value and Cognitive Value" (2014). *Journal Articles*. 87.

https://commons.nmu.edu/facwork_journalarticles/87

This Journal Article is brought to you for free and open access by the FacWorks at NMU Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal Articles by an authorized administrator of NMU Commons. For more information, please contact kmcdonou@nmu.edu, bsarjean@nmu.edu.

The Relationship between Aesthetic Value and Cognitive Value

It is sometimes held that “the aesthetic” and “the cognitive” are separate categories.¹

Enterprises concerning the former and ones concerning the latter have different aims. They require distinct modes of attention and reward divergent kinds of appreciation.

This position has its detractors.² The typical line of objection is to argue that cognitive values can bear upon aesthetic ones. Works of art and literature can disclose important truths about the world; they can teach us in non-trivial ways. Moreover, their doing so often contributes to their aesthetic merits.

I, too, reject the independence or autonomy of aesthetic and cognitive categories. However, I seek to develop a radically different defense of this position, one that inverts the traditional strategy. I aim to show that a work’s aesthetic merits can bear upon its cognitive ones.³

To build my case, I will focus on a very specific set of works, namely philosophical texts. The relationship between aesthetic value and cognitive value that I hope to establish is most readily apparent here. I believe that what I will say can be generalized to other kinds of texts, including works of literature, as well as to other kinds of artifacts, including paintings and sculptures. However, I will not defend the generalization in this paper.

1. Definitions

Some definitions are in order. First, I will take “aesthetic value” to refer to that which makes an object worthy or unworthy of being perceived, contemplated, or otherwise appreciated for its own sake.⁴ Accordingly, I will not consider it to encompass merely those aspects of an

object productive of sensory pleasure or its opposite, such as beauty, gracefulness, elegance, and their contraries. I will treat it as circumscribing a broader range of features including what Noël Carroll calls expressive properties (somber, melancholic, gay, bold, stately, pompous), Gestalt properties (unified, balanced, tightly knit, chaotic), taste properties (gaudy, vulgar, kitschy, garish), and reaction properties (sublime, beautiful, comic, suspenseful).⁵

I will exclude from the purview of my investigation aesthetic value properties that are cognitive in nature, such as being profound, insightful, true, or misleading. Incorporating them into the discussion would render my thesis trivial. Aesthetic values would obviously bear on cognitive values because some of them would *be* cognitive values.⁶

Second, when I turn to cognitive values themselves, I will focus on a proper subset of them, namely those we might call philosophical values. Doing otherwise would once again diminish the interest of my thesis. The general category of cognitive value includes such things as instructional, educational, or pedagogical value. There is nothing novel about trumpeting the importance of aesthetic considerations in these arenas. Horace made the point millennia ago.⁷ Texts that move us or that display eloquence and wit more often hit home. We more frequently remember them, incorporate their conclusions into our web of beliefs, and integrate their ideas into our deliberations. To take but one example, the beauty of Descartes's writing repeatedly draws us back to his *Meditations*. Time and again it leads us to consider claims made in this work that we otherwise might have forgotten long ago.

What, then, is philosophical value such that attention to it possesses greater interest? We can begin by noting that philosophical texts aim *inter alia* at truth.⁸ Accordingly, part of their value qua philosophical texts—i.e. part of their philosophical value—consists in

whether they achieve this goal. Another sizable portion concerns how well they support the truths they proclaim. Indeed, the strength of a text's arguments is likely the most decisive measure of its philosophical merit. Of course, other considerations deserve mention as well, such as the internal consistency of the text and its contribution to topics of perennial interest to the philosophical community. Although not exhaustive, this list is sufficiently informative for our purposes.⁹

The foregoing account of philosophical value might appear to undercut my position. We might wonder how it could matter to our *philosophical* assessment of a work whether it exhibited great literary eloquence, profoundly moved us on an emotional level, or contained that high level of implicit meaning known as "semantic density." Indeed, of what *philosophical* importance could it be whether the prose of a text was lifeless, serene, dynamic, vulgar, or vivid? Such considerations look irrelevant to the strength of a work's arguments, its internal consistency, or the truth of its conclusions. Claiming otherwise seems to involve a category mistake.

Nevertheless, I will defend the counterintuitive line. I will argue that the aesthetic value of a text can bear upon the philosophical value of a text. That is not to say that it always does so, or that it is ever the sole determining factor, only that it sometimes does so and to some degree.

2. Clarifications

In principle, aesthetic value could bear upon cognitive value in two ways. First, some aesthetic values might *metaphysically constitute* cognitive values. Possession of them could be commendatory or pejorative in a cognitive sense. Berys Gaut cites profundity and

insightfulness as potential examples.¹⁰ Second, the presence of some aesthetic values might help *epistemically ground* judgments about cognitive value. The fact that a work has them could figure into the reasons for giving a positive or negative assessment of the work's cognitive merit.

I shall proceed along the latter front. I will argue that aesthetic values can bear upon cognitive values by epistemically grounding claims about their presence or absence in a particular work.

Aesthetic values supervene on aesthetic properties.¹¹ Such supervenience takes two forms.¹² First, some aesthetic properties are themselves evaluative. They are bearers of aesthetic value or that in which aesthetic value resides. To say an object has one of these properties is in part to say the object is to some degree aesthetically good or bad.¹³ For example, to describe a work as sublime, moving, or bold is normally to appraise it positively. To call it dreary, derivative, or boring is typically to assess it negatively.¹⁴

Second, some aesthetic properties are not evaluative but are nonetheless *relevant* to aesthetic value. They figure into our explanations of why an object warrants a particular aesthetic value judgment.¹⁵ For instance, to describe the pace of a novel as fast is not usually to evaluate it. Yet, we might point to the fact that a novel is fast-paced to account for why we call it gripping, which would be an evaluative comment.

I will focus on aesthetic properties that are themselves evaluative. I do not merely wish to show that a work's aesthetic *properties* bear upon its philosophical value but that its aesthetic *value* does so.¹⁶

3. False Starts

The following observation provides a tempting point of departure. When assessing philosophical texts, we often raise considerations that fall into a category that overlaps with aesthetics, namely stylistics. We praise or disparage works because they possess or lack properties such as clarity, succinctness, awkwardness, and eloquence. We include “well-written,” or its opposite, in referee reports and in comments on student papers. The existence of such vocabulary in our critical practices suggests stylistic considerations (and so perhaps aesthetic ones) may affect philosophical value. After all, some scholars cite the appearance of cognitive vocabulary in art criticism as evidence that cognitive values influence aesthetic ones.¹⁷ Why should not something of the reverse hold as well?

We must tread carefully here. The fact that an evaluative judgment concerns a philosophical work does not thereby make it a judgment about the philosophical value of that work. The reasons for the judgment matter.¹⁸ For example, if I extol William Irwin’s *The Simpsons and Philosophy* because it made a large sum of money, or if I laud Plato’s *Republic* because it helped shape the western world, my evaluations are not philosophical in nature. In neither case am I concerned with the truth of the work’s content, the strength of its arguments, its internal consistency, etc. The same point might hold for assessments based on stylistic considerations. Although frequently made of philosophical works, they might reveal nothing about these works’ philosophical value. At least, we would need additional reasons before ruling out this possibility. Thus, we cannot conclude from the mere existence of stylistic vocabulary in criticisms of philosophical writing that stylistic value (and so perhaps aesthetic value) bears upon philosophical value.

A second observation might afford better initial footing. We might defend the idea that aesthetic value can influence philosophical value by noting that we esteem some philosophical texts as highly as we do precisely because of their aesthetic merits. For instance, Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* and Quine's "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" probably would not occupy such lofty places in the canon were it not for their incomparable wit. Augustine's *Confessions* likely would attract fewer readers were it less moving. Finally, Austin's "Truth" might have received less attention had it not contained so many quotable passages.¹⁹

Conceding the accuracy of these conjectures, what follows? Not much. They indicate the philosophical community cares about more than just philosophical matters. They also suggest some texts have aesthetic *and* philosophical value. However, neither point in itself entails that aesthetic value affects philosophical value.

4. Implications of Aesthetic Properties

How, then, to proceed? Perhaps the best way is with the notion that a text's aesthetic properties can implicitly express statements and claims. This idea is not new, having been suggested by Martha Nussbaum,²⁰ Peter Kivy,²¹ and others.²² However, it lacks a robust defense. I will provide one here.

First, note that works of literature typically prompt us to adopt the point of view of the (presumed) narrator. When reading Camus's *The Stranger*, we find ourselves looking at the world through the eyes of Mersault. The pages of Dickens's *Copperfield* draw us into the title character's perspective on life. Finally, the power of Nabokov's *Lolita* lies in its ability to make us empathize with Humbert Humbert.

Something different happens when reading philosophical texts. We do not automatically enter into the (presumed) author's world. We do not extend him or her the same leeway regarding the facts. Instead, we interrogate each word and sentence. We demand justifications for every assertion.

The difference in our reactions is partly due to genre expectations. But style, structure, and tone also play a role. Take Spinoza's *Ethics*. It proceeds in an abstract, impersonal, and dispassionate manner. These features keep us at arm's length from Spinoza, the man. They force us to concentrate on the ideas he puts forth. Moreover, the text's geometric feel encourages us to submit it to the same cold, logical analysis we would a mathematical proof.²³ Alternatively, consider the dialogues of Plato, Berkeley, and Hume. The characters in them challenge and question each other's views. We find ourselves caught up in the process. Transformed into judges of an imaginary debate, we scrutinize the merits of each new argument we encounter.

These examples show how the *formal* properties of a philosophical text can influence our approach to its content. A work's *aesthetic* properties can perform a similar function.²⁴ Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals* illustrates the point. The *Genealogy* is a moving, provocative, and even disturbing book. Conspicuous in this regard is the passage describing the journey of Mr. Rash and Curious into the workshop where Judeo-Christian ideals are made.²⁵ The scene comes across as something out of a horror movie. The workshop is dark and foreboding. Soft muttering and whispering emanate from hidden nooks and crannies. Noxious air overcomes Mr. Rash and Curious; he struggles to contain his stomach. His unease and disgust are contagious; they wash over us. The feelings we thereby acquire shape how we perceive the workshop's secrets.²⁶ They glue our attention to the unnerving aspects

of Mr. Rash and Curious’s discoveries. Thus, when he reports that Judeo-Christian values are the product of lies and deception, his message strikes a chord:

—“They are miserable, no doubt of it, all these mutterers and nook counterfeiterers, although they crouch warmly together—but they tell me their misery is a sign of being chosen by God; one beats the dogs one likes the best; perhaps this misery is also a preparation, a testing, a schooling, perhaps it is even more—something that will one day be made good and recompensed with interested, with huge payments of gold, no! of happiness. This they call ‘bliss.’”

—Go on!

—“Now they give me to understand that they are not merely better than the mighty, the lords of the earth whose spittle they have to lick (*not* from fear, not at all from fear! but because God has commanded them to obey the authorities)—that they are not merely better but are also ‘better off,’ or at least will be better off someday. But enough! enough! I can’t take any more. Bad air! Bad air! This workshop where *ideals are manufactured*—it seems to me it stinks of so many lies.”²⁷

The fact that a text’s aesthetic properties can influence us in this way underwrites their ability to imply claims. The reasoning here falls roughly within the domain of pragmatics. When engaging with others, we assume they will act cooperatively.²⁸ In part this means we expect them to encourage or direct us only in appropriate ways. We presume they will urge us to do only what they believe suits the circumstances. Thus, when an interlocutor prompts us to pursue a specific course of action, we take it that he or she believes the course of

action is appropriate.²⁹ In other words, the conventional implication of a person's directive is that he or she believes what he or she pushes us to do is somehow fitting.

5. Analogies

That directives give rise to implications is most obvious when the directives take explicit verbal form. Everyday conversation bears this out. Suppose that while working on a construction site, I shout to my coworker, "Pass me your hammer." The implications of my command include that I want my coworker's hammer and think it appropriate for her to hand it to me. Or suppose that while sitting in a pub with an empty beer mug in my hand, I call to the bartender, "Bring me another." My order implies that I desire an additional beer and find it fitting for the bartender to pour me one.

However, there is no need to limit the discussion to the spoken or written word. Consider that non-verbal gestures can also function as directives.³⁰ Pointing to my coworker's hammer while we work next to each other on a noisy construction site conveys roughly the same message as shouting at her to hand it over. Suggestively shaking an empty beer mug in the bartender's sight line is more or less equivalent to verbally requesting one more. These directive gestures generate the same implications as their spoken counterparts. Pointing to the hammer in my coworker's hand implies that I want it and believe she should pass it to me. Suggestively shaking an empty mug at the bartender implies not only that I want another beer but that I find it fitting for the bartender to provide it for me.

I believe that the aesthetic properties of some texts are analogous to such non-verbal gestures. They too function as directives: They prompt readers to approach the semantic content of the text in a particular way. And they get readers to view the text's subject matter

with a certain attitude or to see it from a certain perspective. Consequently, they too engender implications.

Returning to the *Genealogy* brings out the point. Nietzsche drives us to engage this text in a heightened emotional state by writing in a shrill and strident manner. It follows that Nietzsche wants our emotions to be aroused when we read the *Genealogy* and that he believes such arousal is integral to accomplishing the books' goals. Indeed, were Nietzsche not of this mindset, we would have trouble understanding why he wrote in the manner he did.

6. Implicatures, Presuppositions, and Entailments

Implications of the kind I have been discussing arise partly because of a pragmatic consideration. We must believe the implications in order to make sense of what the speaker or author is saying or doing. We must assume their truth in order to interpret the person issuing the directive as engaged in cooperative and rational behavior.

In this section, I will develop a more formal account of such implications, one that will enable us to calculate precisely what implications will be generated by a given sentence, speech act, gesture, or aesthetic property. To do so, I will compare them with three related phenomena: (1) Gricean implicatures, (2) presuppositions, and (3) entailments.

6.1. Implicatures

Conversational implicatures refer to the act of meaning one thing by saying or writing another. For example, in the right context, one implicates a request to open the window by uttering, "It is hot in here." By asserting, "Jones ate *some* of the cookies," a person implicates the additional proposition that Jones did not eat *all* the cookies. Finally, by touting Smith's

penmanship in a letter of recommendation for employment as a philosophy professor, one implicates that Smith is under-qualified.

Grice maintains that conversational implicatures arise in part because we must suppose their truth to understand the speaker or author as behaving cooperatively.³¹ Thus they bear some similarity to the phenomenon I have in mind. However, Grice also describes implicatures as having the peculiar feature of being *cancellable*.³² It is possible to revoke or overturn them without rendering the original statement incoherent. For instance, as noted, “John ate some of the cookies” implicates that John did not eat all of them. But no confusion arises if this implicature is repudiated. It would be perfectly acceptable to say, “John ate some of the cookies; in fact, he ate all of them.”

Implications of the sort I have been describing lack this property. Their cancellation leads to absurdity. It would be incongruous for someone to instruct a coworker, “Pass me your hammer,” and follow this up by adding, “But it would be inappropriate for you to do so.” The same point holds in situations where the directive takes the form of a gesture rather than an utterance. Suggestively waving a now empty beer mug in front of the bartender while saying “I don’t want any more” would make little sense.

Of course, it is possible to tell someone to pass the hammer while believing he or she should not do so. It is also possible to order another beer despite not wanting one. But such speech acts are defective. It is not in keeping with the expectation of cooperative behavior to direct people to do something without believing they should do it or without wanting the outcome to obtain.

6.2. Presuppositions

Presuppositions might seem a better fit than implicatures. Roughly speaking, presuppositions are propositions a speaker or author seems to take for granted in uttering or writing a sentence.³³ They are “taken for granted” in the sense that they are not part of the content of the original statement but their truth is a precondition of the statement’s felicity. In other words, if the speaker or author did not assume the truth of these propositions, what he or she said or wrote would somehow be inappropriate. To use two shopworn examples, saying “The present king of France is bald” presupposes the proposition, “There is a present king of France.” And asking “Have you stopped beating your wife?” presupposes you have a wife and have been beating her.

One defining trait of presuppositions is their ability to project from embeddings.³⁴ Unlike conversational implicatures, they typically arise even when the statement triggering them is nested within an operator such as negation. For instance, “It is not the case that the present king of France is bald” also presupposes France currently has a king. So too do the following sentences: “If the present king of France is bald, I’ll eat my hat”; “The president thinks the present king of France is bald”; and, “Did you know that the present king of France is bald?”

The ability to project from embeddings distinguishes presuppositions from the phenomenon to which I have been attending. If I tell you to pass me the hammer, I do take for granted that I want the hammer and that I find it fitting for you to give it to me. My directive would be infelicitous (because insincere or not genuine) were these things not true. But the propositions “I want the hammer” and “I believe it is appropriate for you to pass me

the hammer” are not presupposed if the original directive is embedded in an operator such as negation. They are not implied by someone who declares, “Do not pass me the hammer.” Nor are they assumed by a person who says any of the following: “The foreman thinks you should pass me the hammer”; “If you pass me the hammer, I will not know what to do with it”; or, “Do you think it is wise to pass me the hammer?”³⁵

6.3. Entailments

Failure of both projection and cancellation brings the phenomena I have in mind closest to a third kind of implication, namely entailment. However, they are not entailments of a logical sort. Logical entailments relate in a truth-functional fashion to their trigger statements. To wit, p logically entails q if and only if q is true whenever p is true. This formula does not fit the implications I have been discussing. The triggers in my examples are directives, and directives lack truth conditions. Commands such as “Pass me the hammer” and requests such as “Bring me another beer” are not the sort of statements that can be true or false. The same point holds *a fortiori* for aesthetic properties that serve directive functions. It is a category mistake to claim that being shocking or moving, for instance, is true or false.

Returning to the domain of pragmatics allows us to accommodate this point. Instead of talking about truth conditions, we can talk about felicity conditions—i.e. the conditions under which an act is performed successfully and non-defectively.³⁶ Commands, requests, instructions, and the like do possess these. For example, we say that a person gives advice in a successful and non-defective fashion only if he or she thinks the advised course of action will help the advisee.³⁷

We can use felicity conditions to construct an account of *pragmatic entailments*. Loosely speaking, the idea is that statements, gestures, etc. pragmatically entail their felicity conditions.³⁸ More formally, p pragmatically entails q if and only if q is true whenever p is felicitous.³⁹ For example, Professor Brown's believing that taking Introduction to Philosophy is beneficial for Sam is a felicity condition on Brown's advising Sam to enroll in the course. Brown's advice would be defective (because insincere) if she did not hold this belief. Therefore, the pragmatic entailment of Brown's advice is that she believes Sam will benefit from a semester of philosophy.

It bears repeating that we need not limit ourselves to linguistic utterances here. Directives spawn pragmatic entailments regardless of the form they take. Suggestively shaking my now empty beer mug at the bartender pragmatically entails "I want a beer" and "I find it fitting for the bartender to bring me one" in exactly the same way as uttering the command, "Pour me another." Similarly, Nietzsche's writing in a shrill and strident style pragmatically entails that he wants his reader's emotions aroused and believes they should be aroused just as much as if he had opened the *Genealogy* with the explicit instruction, "Engage this text on an emotional level."

7. The Question of Scope

Just how often do a philosophical text's aesthetic properties imply claims? As the forgoing account indicates, the answer depends on how often they function as directives. I believe they do so more often than it seems. In fact, they almost always do so in the sense that they almost always prompt us to view the text's subject matter with a certain attitude or in a

certain light. I defended this line of argument earlier with respect to texts that have conspicuous aesthetic features, such as Nietzsche's *Genealogy*. I will now extend it farther.

Consider some of the least likely cases, philosophical journal articles in the analytic tradition. We seldom read these texts with an eye toward their aesthetic properties. We rarely dwell on their aesthetic merits. Thus it is tempting to believe they do not have any of either, or at least not any of note. But it is possible to consider such works from an aesthetic point of view. We can set aside our interest in their philosophical merits in order to submit them to aesthetic analysis. When we do, we discover there is much to say.

In terms of their tone, philosophical journal articles are typically serious and stately rather than offensive, jubilant, or melancholic. Their diction tends to be formal rather than vulgar and profane. It is also usually precise and literal rather than vague, suggestive, or metaphorical. Analytic journal articles tend to be tightly knit and systematic in their organization rather than chaotic, diffuse, and fragmentary. Finally, their authorial voice is almost always distant and impersonal. Only in exceptional cases is it passionate or intimate.

Although we may not realize it, all of these properties affect us. They lead us to consider the content of the underlying work from a particular perspective or to adopt a specific attitude toward it. The dignified and stately tone of philosophy journal articles prompts us to take their theses seriously instead of treating them as fodder for amusement. Their exact and technical language engages the analytic parts of our minds. It gets us to think about the subject in question carefully and logically. Finally, the impersonal voice employed by their authors subtly encourages us to set aside our personal concerns and reflect on the claims being made in an unbiased fashion.

Because the aesthetic properties of philosophical texts in the analytic tradition have these effects on us, because they direct us in these ways, they imply claims: We ought to approach them seriously and objectively. We should engage their content with the rational parts of our minds. And we should trace the flow of their ideas closely and carefully.

As argued in previous sections, what generates these implications is a pragmatic consideration. We must suppose the authors of analytic philosophy journal articles assume or believe that a serious-minded and logical approach to their work is appropriate in order to make sense of the aesthetic properties they give their works. More precisely, we need this supposition to explain how their use of a dignified tone, precise diction, a systematic structure, and an impersonal voice constitutes rational and cooperative behavior. We would be flummoxed by someone who penned an article in such a style but hoped to evoke a deeply emotional response or a flippant reaction. We would be inclined to think that the person was incompetent or obtuse, not rational and cooperative.

8. Aesthetic Properties and Philosophical Value

An argument is now in the offing for my general thesis that a text's aesthetic properties can affect its philosophical value. As we have seen, a text's aesthetic properties can imply statements or claims. But these claims need not align with those that comprise the text's explicit semantic content. The former can say one thing, the latter something else. These two sets of claims can contradict each other.⁴⁰ Such a contradiction is a philosophical defect; it compromises the consistency of the text as a whole. In this way, possessing the wrong aesthetic properties can detract from a text's philosophical value. By the same token, possessing the right aesthetic properties can support the philosophical value of a text. If the

implications of a text's aesthetic properties coincide with its explicit content, the consistency of the text is upheld.

A thought experiment illustrates the point. Imagine an alternative version of Nietzsche's *Genealogy*. Suppose it contains all the explicit content of the original work. It includes the idea from the First Essay that the values of meekness and humility were initially promoted by oppressed peoples as a subtle way to attack their rich and powerful masters. It makes the claim found in the Second Essay that guilt is the result of a pent up drive for cruelty. But, most importantly for our purposes, it contains the thesis located in the middle of the Third Essay about acquiring moral knowledge: In order to fully appreciate moral truths, such as those forwarded in the *Genealogy*,⁴¹ we must engage them emotionally. If we approach them in a wholly dispassionate manner, our understanding of them will be impoverished.⁴²

Now suppose also that our imaginary text differs from Nietzsche's actual one in terms of its aesthetic properties. It is not written in a shrill and strident style. It is neither moving, nor shocking, nor unsettling. Rather, it proceeds in a dispassionate manner reminiscent of Spinoza's *Ethics*. It only addresses its readers' intellects. It only arouses those aspects of their minds devoted to abstract reasoning. In sum, it rephrases in an emotionally neutral fashion all of the claims and arguments contained in the *Genealogy*.

The imaginary work suffers from the following problem. On the one hand, the fact that it proceeds in a dispassionate fashion implies that a dispassionate approach to its content is fitting. We need not engage our emotions to grasp the truths—including the moral truths—it defends. On the other hand, the imaginary work explicitly states that a dispassionate approach to moral truths is inappropriate. Acquisition of moral knowledge

requires activation of the emotions. Thus, the work is internally inconsistent. One of the claims implied by its aesthetic properties contradict one of the claims that comprise its explicit semantic content.

The reason for this contradiction deserves emphasis. It arises because of the aesthetic makeup of the imaginary text. More specifically, it stems from the fact that the imaginary text lacks the very aesthetic properties that makes Nietzsche's text aesthetically valuable, namely its ability to move, shock and unsettle.⁴³ If the imaginary text had these aesthetic properties, it would be internally consistent.

To summarize, the decrease in aesthetic value that occurs when moving from the real text to the imaginary one results in a decrease in philosophical value. In particular, the value of internal consistency or coherence is lost. Conversely, the increase in aesthetic value that occurs when moving in the opposite direction results in an increase in philosophical value.⁴⁴ To wit, the value of consistency is gained.

9. Aesthetic Value and Philosophical Value

We can now draw some conclusions about the relationship between aesthetic value and philosophical value. I have shown that a text's aesthetic value properties can imply philosophical claims. These implicit claims can stand in various logical relationships with the text's explicit content. They can entail the truth or falsehood of any part of it. Consequently, their presence can uphold or undermine the consistency of the text. In both scenarios, the text's aesthetic value affects its philosophical value.

Three cautionary notes are in order. First, the claims implied by a text's aesthetic properties can also be logically irrelevant to its semantic content. It is possible for them to

entail neither the truth nor the falsehood of anything the text explicitly says. In such cases, the text's aesthetic properties might have no bearing on its philosophical value.

Second, the properties that positively affect a text's philosophical value need not be aesthetically meritorious. Just as there is bad art and bad literature, so too are there negative aesthetic value properties. Moreover, if properties with a positive valence can contribute to philosophical value, as in the case of Nietzsche's *Genealogy*, so too can those with a negative valence. There may be cases where the literary equivalent of Socrates's ugly visage contributes to the coherence of the text.⁴⁵ Consequently, even when aesthetic value does bear upon philosophical value, the correlation will not necessarily be direct.

Third, aesthetic value has only limited impact on philosophical value. The latter consists in a plurality of things, from the truth of the claims made by a text, to the degree of support it provides for these claims, to the influence of its arguments on perennial philosophical problems, to its overall consistency, etc. Aesthetic properties do not bear on all of these considerations. And for those it does affect, it is not the only relevant factor. Consistency, for example, is not simply a matter of the relationship between the claims implied by a text's aesthetic properties and those that comprise its explicit semantic content.

Even accounting for these three caveats, the following conclusion holds. In some cases, the possession of aesthetic value augments a text's philosophical value. Conversely, the lack of aesthetic merit sometimes engenders philosophical defects. Therefore, we ought to attend to aesthetic considerations when creating and evaluating philosophical works. The intuitive view that aesthetic value has nothing to do with philosophical value is mistaken.

Notes

¹ See, for example, Monroe C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism*, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1981), chap. 9–10; T. J. Diffey, “What Can We Learn From Art?,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 73, no. 2 (1995): 204–211; Peter Lamarque, *The Philosophy of Literature*, Foundations of the Philosophy of the Arts (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2009), 220–254; Peter Lamarque, “Cognitive Values in the Arts: Marking the Boundaries,” in *Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*, ed. Matthew Kieran (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 134; Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen, *Truth, Fiction, and Literature: A Philosophical Perspective* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1994), 1–5, 331–338; Jerome Stolnitz, “On the Cognitive Triviality of Art,” *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 32, no. 3 (1992): 191–200.

² See, for example, Berys Gaut, “Art and Cognition,” in *Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*, ed. Matthew Kieran (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006); Berys Gaut, *Art, Emotion and Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), chap. 8; Gordon Graham, *Philosophy of the Arts: An Introduction to Aesthetics*, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2005), chap. 4; M. W. Rowe, “Lamarque and Olsen on Literature and Truth,” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 47, no. 188 (1997): 322–341; Peter Kivy, *Philosophies of Arts: An Essay in Differences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), chap. 5; Katherine Thomson-Jones, “Inseparable Insight: Reconciling Cognitivism and Formalism in Aesthetics,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 63, no. 4 (2005): 375–384.

³ For other discussions of this idea, see Lee B. Brown, “Philosophy, Rhetoric, and Style,” *The Monist* 63, no. 4 (1980): 425–444; Arthur C. Danto, “Philosophy As/and/of

Literature,” *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 58, no. 1 (1984): 5–20; Charles Griswold, “Style and Philosophy: The Case of Plato’s Dialogues,” *The Monist* 63, no. 4 (1980): 530–546; Lawrence M. Hinman, “Philosophy and Style,” *The Monist* 63, no. 4 (1980): 512–529; Martha C. Nussbaum, “Form and Content, Philosophy and Literature,” in *Love’s Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 3–53.

⁴ Here I follow Peter Kivy, “What Makes ‘Aesthetic’ Terms Aesthetic?,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 36, no. 2 (1975): 211; Alan H. Goldman, *Aesthetic Value* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), 20.

⁵ Noël Carroll, *Philosophy of Art: A Contemporary Introduction*, Routledge Contemporary Introductions to Philosophy (New York: Routledge, 1999), 190.

⁶ For instance, Gaut says the truth of the theme of Dickens’s *Our Mutual Friend*, namely the worship of money corrupts people, contributes to its aesthetic value (*Art, Emotion and Ethics*, 182–183). If so, one of the novel’s aesthetic values bears upon its cognitive value by partially constituting it.

⁷ See Horace [Quintus Horatius Flaccus], *Ars Poetica*, trans. Henry Rushton Fairclough, Loeb Classical Library 194 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1929), l. 343–344.

⁸ See Paul Horwich, “The Value of Truth,” *Noûs* 40, no. 2 (2006): 355–356; Peter Lamarque, “Learning from Literature,” *The Dalhousie Review* 77, no. 1 (1997): 10; Lamarque, “Cognitive Values in the Arts,” 134.

⁹ The ease with which my conclusion follows, as well as its degree of interest, depends on how broadly we construe philosophical value. For instance, suppose it were to encompass the ability to stimulate further reflection. Beauty and the like can quite plainly

contribute to this end, as Elaine Scarry argues (*On Beauty and Being Just* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999], 28–33). Take once again Descartes’s *Meditations*. For centuries it has provoked ruminations about skepticism. But part of the reason it has done so, i.e. part of the reason philosophers continue to return to the book, is the elegance of its prose. The beauty of Descartes’s words itself incites deliberation. Thus we have a facile demonstration of how a work’s aesthetic value can affect its philosophical value. To avoid this shortcut, I will exclude “the ability to stimulate further reflection” from my stock of philosophical values.

¹⁰ Gaut, “Art and Cognition,” 116.

¹¹ Some maintain that the source of aesthetic value is not the properties of an object themselves but the experience of these properties. I do not wish to adjudicate this debate here. However, I believe much of what I say could be made to fit this alternative account. See Robert Stecker, “Aesthetic Experience and Aesthetic Value,” *Philosophy Compass* 1, no. 1 (2006): 1–10.

¹² Goldman, *Aesthetic Value*, 20; Göran Hermerén, *The Nature of Aesthetic Qualities*, *Studies in Aesthetics* 1 (Lund, Sweden: Lund University Press, 1988), 76, 144–159.

¹³ Hermerén, *The Nature of Aesthetic Qualities*, 149.

¹⁴ Goldman, *Aesthetic Value*, 20. We must take care here for several reasons: (i) The contribution of almost any particular aesthetic value to a work’s overall aesthetic merit can be overridden by the presence of other aesthetic values of the opposite valence. For example, a particular work of art might be elegant. But if it is also derivative, we might consider it an impoverished piece all things considered. Thus, aesthetic values are *pro tanto* in nature. See Gaut, *Art, Emotion and Ethics*, 57–66. (ii) Whether an aesthetic value property has

a positive or negative valence often depends on context. For instance, gracefulness is typically a good-making property. However, it might detract from an artwork intent upon exhibiting the brutality of war. See Robert Stecker, *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2010), 68. (iii) Whether an aesthetic property is evaluative at all may also be context-dependent. Consider mournfulness. Kivy maintains that it has a positive valence in a lament, a negative valence in an epithalamion, but “may very well be neutral if a feature of a violin sonata” (“What Makes ‘Aesthetic’ Terms Aesthetic?” 201).

¹⁵ Goldman, *Aesthetic Value*, 20–21; Hermerén, *The Nature of Aesthetic Qualities*, 76–79.

¹⁶ Merely showing that the aesthetic properties of a work bear upon its philosophic value will not establish my thesis that aesthetic value affects cognitive value. We might have a common cause story on our hands. The aesthetic property in question might serve as the basis of both an aesthetic value and a cognitive value without the aesthetic value having any bearing on the cognitive value. Thus, the two axiological realms would remain autonomous.

¹⁷ See Rowe, “Lamarque and Olsen on Literature and Truth.”

¹⁸ For a discussion of this point, see J. O. Urmson, “What Makes a Situation Aesthetic?,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes* 31 (1957): 75–92.

¹⁹ The opening lines provide the most notable example: “What is truth?” said jesting Pilate, and would not stay for an answer. Pilate was in advance of his time. For ‘truth’ itself is an abstract noun, a camel, that is, of a logical construction, which cannot get past the eye even of a grammarian. We approach it cap and categories in hand: we ask ourselves whether Truth is a substance (the Truth, the Body of Knowledge), or a quality (something like the colour red, inhering in truths), or a relation (‘correspondence’). But philosophers should take

something more nearly their own size to strain at. What needs discussing rather is the use, or certain uses, of the word ‘true’. In vino, possibly, ‘veritas’, but in a sober symposium ‘verum’” (“Truth,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes* 24 [1950]: 111).

²⁰ Martha Nussbaum attributes the view to the ancient Greeks, but what she says also reflects her own position: “Forms of writing were not seen as vessels into which different contents could be indifferently poured; form was itself a statement, a content” (“Form and Content, *Philosophy and Literature*,” 15).

²¹ Kivy says, “For the *way* in which the artist employs the medium is, in effect, part of the content, because it expresses something in the artist’s point of view about the content” (*Philosophies of Arts*, 117). See also Peter Kivy, “Paraphrasing Poetry (for Profit and Pleasure),” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 69, no. 4 (2011): 376.

²² Arthur Coleman Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 146–148; Danto, “Philosophy As/and/of Literature,” 7–8; Jenefer M. Robinson, “Style and Personality in the Literary Work,” *The Philosophical Review* 94, no. 2 (1985): 227–247; Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 1–25.

²³ See Nussbaum, “Form and Content, *Philosophy and Literature*,” 30–35.

²⁴ Some but not all formal properties are aesthetic properties; some but not all aesthetic properties are formal properties. I take a work’s aesthetic properties to include any properties that figure into our judgment of the work’s aesthetic value. A work’s formal properties include such things as its physical properties (e.g. having a particular height, weight, or density) and its sensory properties (e.g. being loud, red, or smooth). Sometimes a

particular physical property of a work is irrelevant to judgments about the work's aesthetic value. For instance, the density of Michelangelo's *David* would seem to have little bearing on our deliberations concerning its aesthetic merits.

²⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1989), sec. I.14.

²⁶ For discussions of how the emotions aroused by a text affect our understanding of it, see Noël Carroll, "Art, Narrative, and Emotion," in *Emotion and the Arts*, ed. Mette Hjorte and Sue Laver (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 199–203; Jenefer Robinson, *Deeper Than Reason: Emotion and Its Role in Literature, Music, and Art* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 2005), 105–135, 154–194.

²⁷ Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, sec. I.14.

²⁸ H. Paul Grice, "Logic and Conversation," in *Syntax and Semantics*, vol. 3: Speech Acts (New York: Academic Press, 1975), 45–48.

²⁹ Here I purposefully run together (a) the implications made by a text and (b) the implications typically drawn from the text by a reader. The reason is that, at an abstract level, the two are interrelated. The implications in question arise because of how readers conventionally engage with texts. If readers changed how they typically engaged with texts, if they stopped expecting texts to be the product of rational and cooperative agency, then the implications would fall away. However, on a concrete level, the distinction holds. The implications of any individual text are independent of how readers engage with it. The implications exist even if no one ever notices [them](#).

³⁰ J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, ed. J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), 19, 119; John Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 30, 68.

³¹ Grice, “Logic and Conversation,” 45–50.

³² *Ibid.*, 57.

³³ Robert Stalnaker, “Presuppositions,” *Journal of Philosophical Logic* 2, no. 4 (1973): 447; Robert Stalnaker, “Pragmatic Presuppositions,” in *Semantics and Philosophy*, ed. Milton Munitz and Peter Unger (New York: New York University Press, 1974), 198.

³⁴ Irene Heim, “On the Projection Problem for Presuppositions,” in *Formal Semantics: The Essential Readings*, ed. Paul Portner and Barbara Partee (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), 249–260; Lauri Karttunen, “Presupposition and Linguistic Context,” *Theoretical Linguistics* 1, no. 1–3 (1974): 181–194.

³⁵ The presuppositions “I want the hammer” and “I believe it is appropriate for you to pass me the hammer” *do* project when the command “Pass me the hammer” is embedded in some operators. For example, it projects from the statements “Will you ever pass me the hammer?” and “If you want it done right, pass me the hammer.” Still, there is an intuitive difference between how “I want the hammer” relates to “Pass me the hammer” and how “There is a present king of France” relates to “The present king of France is bald.” And the difference seems to consist in how easily the former statement in each pair projects when the latter statement is embedded in an operator.

³⁶ Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 14; Searle, *Speech Acts*, 54.

³⁷ Searle, *Speech Acts*, 67.

³⁸ For a similar suggestion, see *ibid.*, 65.

³⁹ Note that pragmatic entailments attach to sentences, speech acts, and gestures. It is not persons who have or make them. In this respect, pragmatic entailments differ from some popular accounts of presuppositions. See Stalnaker, “Pragmatic Presuppositions,” 200.

⁴⁰ For other discussions of the sort of form-content contradiction described here, see Hinman, “Philosophy and Style”; Nussbaum, “Form and Content, Philosophy and Literature.”

⁴¹ Some scholars maintain that Nietzsche is not interested in conveying moral truths in the *Genealogy*. His goal is to get his readers to have a psychologically healthier moral outlook, not a more accurate one. Indeed, some claim that Nietzsche does not even think there are moral truths. I agree that the goals of the *Genealogy* are purely philosophical. In addition, I agree that Nietzsche often comes across as a skeptic about the importance and existence of moral truths. However, I side with those who maintain that the *Genealogy* does make truth claims about morality and that it has as one of its philosophical goal the defense of these truth claims. See Maudemarie Clark, *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 1–27; Christopher Janaway, *Beyond Selflessness: Reading Nietzsche’s Genealogy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1–15; Brian Leiter, *The Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Nietzsche on Morality* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 264–279.

⁴² Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, sec. III.12. For a defense of my interpretation of this passage, see Janaway, *Beyond Selflessness*, 208–209; [REDACTED].

⁴³ Being moving, shocking, unsettling, and disturbing are not always evaluative properties, let alone ones with a positive valence. For instance, they make for a poor love sonnet. However, possession of them is part of what leads us to consider a text such as the *Genealogy* a great piece of existentialist literature.

⁴⁴ For a different defense of the philosophical importance of Nietzsche's literary style, see Janaway, *Beyond Selflessness*. For an opposing view, see Arthur C. Danto, *Nietzsche as Philosopher* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 13–14.

⁴⁵ Heidegger's *Being and Time* may constitute a case in which a text's negative aesthetic value augments its philosophical value. The stilted prose, strained metaphors, and unusual diction disrupt our focus and jolt us out of our usual patterns of thought. These effects fit well with Heidegger's view that conventional modes of philosophical reflection lead us away from the truth.