

Epistemic and Aesthetic Conflict

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Abstract: Do epistemic and aesthetic values ever conflict? The answer might appear to be no, given that background knowledge generally enhances aesthetic experience, and aesthetic experience in turn generates new knowledge. As Keats writes, “Beauty is truth, truth beauty” (Keats, 1996). Contra this line of thought, I argue that epistemic and aesthetic values can conflict when we over-rely on aesthetically enhancing background beliefs. The true and the beautiful can pull in different directions, forcing us to choose between flavors of normativity.

1. Introduction

Conflicts between the moral, prudential, and epistemic domains are familiar. Clifford’s notorious shipowner, who sends his rickety vessel out on one last expedition, eager for the insurance capital he will reap if she sinks, is at once prudentially rational and immoral (Clifford, 1877). The pragmatist who believes in God despite lacking evidence, due to the slim possibility of infinite happiness in the afterlife, is epistemically irrational but prudentially rational (Pascal, 1670). A police officer who uses base rates to infer that a black

person walking in a wealthy neighborhood is not a resident is epistemically rational but immoral (Kelly and Roedder, 2008; Gendler 2011).¹

Aesthetic norms also face conflict. Dilemmas arise when we confront great works by morally compromised artists, such as Wagner's *Ring Cycle*,² or great works that depict depraved characters, such as Nabokov's *Lolita*. Hume claimed that such immoral art is inevitably aesthetically flawed (Hume, 1857), while Wilde held that the aesthetic value of art is unaffected by its morality (Wilde, 1891b).³ Such conflicts between moral and aesthetic value have a rich intellectual history, but conflicts between epistemic and aesthetic value have been less widely discussed. It is natural to think that knowledge improves our aesthetic experience, and that aesthetic experience in turn makes us more knowledgeable. Do the epistemic and aesthetic always go hand in hand?

In this paper, I argue that epistemic and aesthetic value can conflict. To put it poetically, the true and the beautiful can pull us in different directions. This conflict arises when certain kinds of illusions decrease the epistemic value of one's aesthetic experience

¹ A person who makes such statistical generalizations is epistemically rational according to evidentialist and Bayesian views of epistemic rationality (Feldman and Conee, 1985; Jeffrey 1992; Joyce, 1998). For arguments that in cases of racial profiling, the profiler's beliefs are irrational due to moral encroachment, see Bolinger (2018), Moss (2018), Munton (2019), and Basu (2019).

² Wagner wrote essays expressing antisemitism and racism. His nationalistic operas were later taken up by the Nazis as symbols of Aryan-German heroism (Gutman, 1968).

³ For more on the relationship between art and morality see Plato (1992), Aristotle (1997), Carroll (2000; 2002), and Bermúdez and Gardner (2003).

while simultaneously increasing its aesthetic value. I illustrate this conflict with an example of paintings by Mark Rothko that were displayed under innovative curatorial conditions. The paintings had degraded over time, and corrective lighting was used to simulate an experience of the paintings in their original colors. This lighting increases the aesthetic value of the experience but decreases its epistemic value by rendering it an illusion. This normative conflict is driven even deeper when our own background beliefs play the role of the corrective lighting, restoring the painting through overreliance on our presuppositions. An agent's own mind can lead her into a state of epistemic and aesthetic conflict. These examples are noteworthy because while it is widely acknowledged that prior knowledge can enhance one's aesthetic experience (e.g., knowledge about the history of the French revolution helps a reader appreciate *Les Misérables* (Hugo, 1862)), the negative epistemic impacts of prior knowledge on aesthetic experience are underexplored. This type of normative conflict has flown under the radar.

The rest of the paper proceeds as follows. In §2, I set out the standards for conflict between different forms of value. In §3, I argue that when a viewer's expectations influence her experience of the degraded Rothko paintings, an epistemic and aesthetic conflict is generated. In §4, I respond to objections. In §5, I conclude by considering the implications of this conflict.

2. Conflicts and Value

2.1 Normative Conflict

Normative conflicts can arise between different kinds of normative entities. For example, normative conflicts arise between reasons when reason p supports q , while reason r supports $\neg q$. Normative conflicts arise between requirements when requirement p requires q ,

while requirement r requires $\neg q$ (Broome, 1999).⁴ Normative conflict can also occur between forms of value. Conflicts between forms of value are especially relevant in the aesthetic domain because we typically evaluate aesthetic objects (such as works of art or nature) in terms of aesthetic value rather than in terms of rationality or reasons.⁵ Conflicts between forms of value arise when a single event p causes an increase in value type q of r (where r is an action, mental state, or event), but a decrease in value type s of r .⁶ In such cases, it is unclear whether it is better or worse for p to occur from the all-things-considered point of view. For example, placing wind turbines in one's garden may cause an increase in the pragmatic value of the garden, but a decrease in its aesthetic value. Conflicts in value are my focus here.

Some conflicts in value occur due to forces external to an agent. For example, if a friend mistakenly tells you that your competitor in a race is injured, thereby causing you to strengthen your belief that you will win, their mistake may increase the pragmatic value of your belief in winning (because a strong belief causes you to perform better) but decrease its epistemic value (because it is rooted in falsehood). This is a conflict between pragmatic and epistemic value, but of a weak sort. While one event (your friend's mistake) has differential

⁴ In these examples q might be a belief, another kind of mental state, or an action.

⁵ Although see Gorodeisky and Marcus (2018) for arguments that we should view the aesthetic domain in terms of reasons and rationality. While I am sympathetic to this view, I do not assume it here.

⁶ I take this to be a sufficient condition on the existence of a conflict in value. I do not claim it is a necessary condition, because I leave open whether conflicts in normative value can manifest in other ways.

impacts on forms of value, the source of this tension is external. Your own mental processing and action do not generate this conflict, so there is little extent to which it reflects your character or is your responsibility to resolve. This conflict does not tell us much about you as a rational agent—you have merely been fooled as anyone would have been.

In other cases, conflicts in value stem from an agent herself (her own mind or actions), and so reflect a deeper kind of internal tension. When p , the event that causes the conflicting values, is an individual's own mental state or action, the resulting conflict tells us something about her normative character, rationality, and coherence (or lack thereof). For example, ignoring all evidence about the immoral character of your favorite artist may increase the aesthetic value of your experience of their work while decreasing the moral value of your experience. The source of this conflict in value is internal—your act of ignoring the evidence—and thus the resulting normative conflict reflects on you, rather than being a mere case of bad luck. While both forms of normative conflict are philosophically interesting, this second deeper sort more vividly poses the vexing question—what ought I to do, when pulled in these different normative directions?

Several kinds of answers to this question are available. On some views, one form of value systematically trumps the others. Moral value is often taken to occupy this trumping role (e.g., Mill, 1861; Kant, 1785; cf. Williams, 1981). Few theorists hold that aesthetic value should be promoted over moral value (e.g., Wilde, 1981a). A more common view is that forms of non-moral value should be promoted in particular domains. For example, Evidentialists hold that our beliefs should promote epistemic value above all others (e.g., Clifford, 1877; Feldman and Conee, 1985; Shah, 2006; cf. Rinard, 2017). Another kind of view postulates that values can be weighed against each other via an overarching form of value (e.g., Chang 2004). A different approach attempts to dissolve rather than resolve

normative conflicts by subsuming all forms of value under an all-things-considered “ought” (e.g., Sidgwick, 1874). Finally, one might hold that the different forms of value are incommensurable, and so normative conflicts are unresolvable (e.g., Berlin, 1991).

My primary interest in this paper is to argue for the existence of a particular kind of normative conflict, rather than to resolve it. Understanding the nature and scope of normative conflicts is of intrinsic philosophical interest. It also plays an important role in downstream theorizing about conflict resolution. I return to such downstream theorizing in §5.

The kind of normative conflict that I aim to illustrate is one in which a single event p , which originates from within an individual, causes an increase in aesthetic value of r (a mental attitude or action) but a decrease in epistemic value of r (or vice-versa). Understanding this kind of conflict requires an understanding of the relevant forms of epistemic and aesthetic value, and how they might be caused to increase or decrease.

2.2 Aesthetic Value

Take first aesthetic value. Aesthetic value comes in several species. Beauty is the most notorious, but philosophers have also argued that aesthetic value includes unity, complexity, and intensity (Beardsley, 1981), the instantiation of formal properties more generally (Bell, 1914), artistic achievement (Levinson, 2003), a particular kind of aesthetic pleasure (Kant, 1790), understanding (Goldman, 2006), and the development of our mental capacities (Beardsley, 1981). I do not argue for a particular view of the ultimate nature of aesthetic value here, or a particular view of how these different forms of value interrelate. Instead, I focus on how particular aesthetic values are intuitively increased or decreased.

The most commonly discussed bearers of aesthetic value are nature and artworks. This is evident from our practice of aesthetic evaluation. Tourists visiting Kyoto during

cherry blossom season describe the landscape as surreal and delicate. Film critics write that “La Strada” is “masterful” and “devastatingly poignant” (Wilmington, 1994). But our aesthetic experience can also bear aesthetic value (Beardsley, 1982; Walton, 1993; Railton, 1998; Goldman, 2006). This is also evident from our evaluative practice. The tourist visiting Kyoto in spring might say that the gardens were too crowded for her to properly take in the blossoms, leading to a suboptimal aesthetic experience. A Fellini fan might insist that when watching “La Strada” you must attend closely to Nino Rota’s score to have the best aesthetic experience. The fact that we can describe these experiences as aesthetically better or worse indicates that experience itself is a locus of at least one important kind of aesthetic value.⁷

One might object that aesthetic experiences only seem to bear aesthetic value because they provide us access to artworks’ aesthetic value, and can do so in better or worse ways.⁸ Yet examples in which access to an artwork’s aesthetic value is held constant while experience’s aesthetic value varies show that experiences themselves can in fact bear aesthetic value. Consider Frida Kahlo’s painting “The Two Fridas” (1939), which depicts two versions of Kahlo holding hands, their hearts exposed and connected by a dripping artery. Imagine two viewers whose experiences provide equal access to the painting’s aesthetic value. Both of their experiences occur in good museum conditions and are informed by knowledge of Kahlo’s historical context and personal relationships. Both viewers appreciate the beauty of the colors, lines, and figures, as well as the message of the

⁷ On some views, the aesthetic value of artworks reduces to the aesthetic value of our experiences (e.g., Beardsley, 1982; Goldman, 2006). I remain neutral on this point—my point here is just that aesthetic experiences themselves can bear aesthetic value.

⁸ I thank an anonymous referee for suggesting this possibility.

complexity of identity. For these reasons, the aesthetic value accorded to the painting by one viewer is equal to that accorded by the other viewer. Yet one viewer has an additional layer to her aesthetic experience. She is a twin, and so in response to the two identical figures depicted in the painting, she experiences a set of aesthetic feelings related to her twinhood that the other viewer lacks. The two viewer's aesthetic experiences are qualitatively different, and have different aesthetic value.⁹ This difference in value must be located in the experiences themselves, because there are no differences in their degrees of access to the painting's aesthetic value, or in their aesthetic judgments.

If aesthetic experiences can bear aesthetic value, it is important to understand what an aesthetic experience is. By 'aesthetic experience', I mean the suite of perceptual states, automatic judgments, emotions, moods, and states of understanding that are incited when we engage with an artwork or instance of natural beauty.^{10,11} This suite of states is also sometimes referred to as 'appreciation' (e.g., Goldman, 1995; Dickie, 1965). As the above example of the twin and non-twin viewers illustrates, aesthetic experiences can vary even when the aesthetic object is held constant. Differences in aesthetic experiences of a single work of art might come from the context in which the work is displayed, such as in a small

⁹ I do not claim that the twin's experience has greater or lesser aesthetic value than the non-twin's experience, merely that the experiences' values are qualitatively different.

¹⁰ Going forward, for concision I talk of aesthetic experience of artworks (and omit "or natural beauty").

¹¹ I remain neutral as to whether aesthetic experience/appreciation is best characterized by features internal to the experience (e.g., Dewey, 1934; Beardsley, 1958; Nanay, 2016) or features external to the experience (e.g., Beardsley, 1982; Dickie, 1988).

home versus in a grand gallery. Differences in aesthetic experiences of a work might also arise from features of the observer, such as her mood and expectations.¹² These different experiences might vary along multiple dimension, including how complete they are, how pleasurable they are, and how well they pick up on a work's properties.

Aesthetic experience contrasts with aesthetic judgment. As I will use the terms, they refer to distinct psychological processes with distinct clusters of properties. Aesthetic experience is relatively automatic and immediate, whereas aesthetic judgment is often (although not always) deliberate and reasoned. Aesthetic experience includes experiences of both basic perceptual properties (e.g., blueness, symmetry, loudness) and richly aesthetic and evaluative properties (e.g., beauty, elegance, unity) whereas aesthetic judgment concerns primarily the latter.¹³ Aesthetic experience includes a broad suite of mental states, whereas aesthetic judgment is typically more discrete (e.g., "*The Count of Monte Cristo* is one of the greatest novels of all time"). Aesthetic experience has phenomenal character, whereas aesthetic judgment may either have or lack phenomenal character. When an aesthetic judgment does have phenomenal character, it can figure in the suite of states that comprise aesthetic experience. For example, judging a film to be a masterpiece may be accompanied by the phenomenology of awe, which is part of one's aesthetic experience. Other aesthetic judgments may be more detached from experience. Aesthetic experience typically grounds

¹² I use the term 'observer' as a catchall here for the agent who encounters and experiences a work of art via any sensory modality, including the listener, the reader, the viewer, etc.

¹³ We can of course judge that a tapestry is blue or that a spoken word poem is loud, but these do not count as aesthetic judgments, as I use the term here. These are judgments about works of art, but they do not concern richly aesthetic or evaluative properties.

aesthetic judgment, perhaps along with reasons from expert critics. My focus here is primarily on aesthetic experience, but I return to aesthetic judgment in §3.

Some ways of experiencing a work of art are more aesthetically valuable than others.¹⁴ To get a feel for this idea, consider two observers of Magritte's "The Treachery of Images (Ceci n'est pas une Pipe)." Neither observer has prior knowledge of the work. One observer speaks French while the other only speaks English. Both observers appreciate the basic perceptible features of the painting (a perfectly nice painting of a pipe). But the French-speaker also grasps something more. She understands that the writing in the painting means "This is not a pipe," and so she also appreciates the painting's commentary on the relationship between objects and representations. The English-speaker misses out on this key piece of the painting's message, so the French-speaker has a more aesthetically valuable experience (at least with respect to the artist's intentions).

Music is rife with differences in the aesthetic value of experiences because background knowledge radically shapes our appreciation of musical works. Consider two listeners of a Mozart violin sonata, one of whom is a seasoned classical violinist and one of whom has no experience with classical music. The violinist's knowledge allows her to pick up on the aesthetic properties of the piece, such as its grace, dynamism, and the relationship

¹⁴ While the aesthetic value of an artwork significantly impacts the aesthetic value of our experiences of that artwork, I do not take a stance on the details of that relationship here. My focal examples are ones in which the work is held constant and our experience of it varies. For discussion of the relationship between the aesthetic value of a work and that of our experience, see Beardsley (1982), Walton (1993), Railton (1998), and Sharpe (2000).

between its parts. She plausibly has a more valuable aesthetic experience than the novice, to whom the piece is pleasant but less rich.¹⁵

2.3 Aesthetic Norms

What norms concern the value of aesthetic experience? A complete theory of the norms concerning aesthetic experience is beyond the scope of this paper, so I will focus on the norms that figure in my focal example. These are norms concerning experiencing artworks as members of categories. Walton developed an influential account of such norms in his “Categories of Art” (1970). For the sake of concreteness, I draw on Walton’s formulation, but the epistemic conflict in my focal case in section 3 does not rest on these details—any plausible account of categorical norms the reader prefers should do.

Categorical experience of artworks is widespread. A teenager listening to The Kinks’ “You Really Got Me” in 1964 might experience the song as British Invasion pop, while a teenager listening to the same song in 1977 might experience it as proto-punk. Gombrich brings out the idea of categorical perception in his description of the dynamism of Mondrian’s “Broadway Boogie-Woogie”. The painting appears infused with movement, electricity and “gay abandon” when seen against the backdrop of Mondrian’s typical precise and subdued corpus (Gombrich, 1984). We naturally apply categories to works of art and these categories shape our aesthetic experiences.

The central aesthetic norm of categorical experience is that experiences of a work as belonging to a correct category are better (i.e., more aesthetically valuable) than experiences of a work as belonging to an incorrect category. An experience of “You Really Got Me” as a

¹⁵ For further defenses of the claim that aesthetic experience is aesthetically evaluable see Walton (1970), Goldman (1995), and Gorodeisky and Marcus (2018).

proto-punk song involves attention to the guitar distortion, appreciation of the influential power chords, absorption of the intense energy, and an understanding of the transition from Beatles-style pop to a grittier sound. An experience of “You Really Got Me” as belonging to the radically incorrect category of aria misses all these rich features and instead highlights failures to conform to operatic conventions. Experiences of artworks as belonging to incorrect categories often come up flat in terms of both enjoyment and understanding.

Walton specifies four factors that determine whether a category is a correct one in which to experience a work of art:¹⁶ 1) the presence in the work of a large number of standard features of the category,¹⁷ 2) the fact that the work is more aesthetically pleasing if perceived in that category, 3) the artist’s intention for the work to be perceived in that category, and 4) the fact that the category is well-established in the society in which the work was produced (Walton, 1970). These factors include both historical features (3 and 4), and a purely pleasure-driven aspect (2). This mixture of considerations allows us to avoid the absurd conclusion that an experience of any scribble can be made aesthetically valuable by dreaming up a pleasure-inducing category, while preserving the compelling intuition that

¹⁶ Walton uses the term ‘perceive’ rather than ‘experience’. I use ‘experience’ to indicate that my notion of aesthetic experience includes not only strictly perceptual states such as visual representations of color and shape, but also the wider set of emotions, judgments, and states of understanding that encompass the overall experience of an artwork. Walton’s notion of perception is similarly broad, so this is a point of terminological rather than substantive disagreement.

¹⁷ Properties are standard if they are typical of works in that category. E.g., small, visible brush strokes are standard for the category of impressionist painting.

pleasure is a key purpose of art. These four factors may at times pull in different directions, so they are best used as rough guidelines rather than as strict requirements.

Walton argues not only for the normative thesis that there are correct and incorrect categories in which to experience a work of art, but also for the corresponding psychological thesis that the category in which we perceive a work of art can influence our experience of that work. Specifically, he argues that the category in which we experience a work of art can influence the aesthetic properties we attribute to that work. He claims that experiences of a work's aesthetic properties are intimately tied to within-category norms, so as our categorical judgments shift, our experience often shift as well. A viewer who first experiences Picasso's "The Demoiselles d'Avignon" as a realist painting might see it as messy, jagged, and disjointed. If she then discovers it is a work of cubism and begins to experience it as such, the painting's sharpness will convert to fluency and its elegance will emerge.

2.4 Top-down Effects

The influence of categories on aesthetic experience is a kind of top-down effect on aesthetic experience. Top-down effects are psychological phenomena in which higher-level mental states influence lower-level mental states. Cognitive penetration of perception is a widely discussed form of top-down effect in which cognitive states such as beliefs, fears, desires, or an individual's conceptual repertoire influence perceptual states or processing. For example, if your desire for chocolate chip cookies causes you to see a plate of oatmeal raisin cookies as filled with chocolate chips while your raisin-loving friend perceives the cookies veridically, your perception has been cognitively penetrated.

It is highly controversial whether cognitive penetration of perception occurs in the strict psychological sense of extra-perceptual states influencing perceptual processing or representations (Fodor, 1983; Pylyshyn, 1999; Firestone and Scholl, 2016). But top-down

effects can be understood more broadly, so that they also include influence from higher-level cognitive states such as background beliefs on our experiences, automatically formed perceptual judgments, emotions, moods, and states of understanding. Going forward, I use the term ‘top-down effects’ to pick out this looser sense of effects on automatic judgments, emotions, moods etc. that need not be strictly perceptual. It is far less controversial that top-down effects in this sense occur. Even the staunchest modularists can grant that one may feel an argument is stronger because it comes from a trusted source, or one may judge a drawing to be more beautiful because one’s child made it.

This looser notion of top-down effects captures categorical perception of artworks. As defined above, aesthetic experience includes not only strictly perceptual states of vision, audition, and other sensory modalities, but also the automatic judgments, emotions, moods, and states of understanding incited by a work of art. Our beliefs about category membership can change these aspects of our aesthetic experience, as when the viewer of “*Demoiselles d’Avignon*” begins to experience it as elegant after learning about cubism. She may begin to automatically judge the lines as graceful, she may enter a calmer mood, and she may come to understand the connections between different aspects of the composition.

The influence of artistic expertise also supports the idea that aesthetic experience can be subject to top-down effects. Consider again the classical violinist listening to a Mozart sonata. Her musical knowledge allows her to experience the piece differently from the novice, as she understands more detail, forms judgments about the piece’s structure, and feels awe at the levels of skill she detects. Controversy over the cognitive penetrability of perception aside, we can grant that aesthetic experience is subject to top-down effects.¹⁸

¹⁸ For further discussion of cognitive penetration and the experience of art see Stokes (2014).

I have argued so far that experiencing a work of art as a member of a category 1) can influence the aesthetic value of the experience, and 2) is a kind of top-down effect. Top-down effects can also influence the epistemic value of an experience. Thus top-down effects provide a useful focal point for investigating the possibility of epistemic and aesthetic conflict.

2.5. Epistemic Value

Like aesthetic value, epistemic value may take many forms, such as truth (Bonjour, 1985; Plantinga, 1993; Sosa, 2007; cf. Hazlett 2013) justification (Bonjour, 1985; Kvanvig, 2003; Weiner, 2009; cf. Carter and Jarvis, 2013), knowledge (Williamson, 2000; Greco, 2002; Hawthorne, 2004; Sosa, 2010; Kaplan, 1985), and understanding (Zagzebski, 1996; Kvanvig, 2003; Pritchard, 2009). I remain neutral as to whether any of these values is an ultimate epistemic value to which the others reduce. In my focal example, all these epistemic values participate in the conflict. This is unsurprising, because truth, justification, knowledge, and understanding frequently stand and fall together—although of course they can also come apart.¹⁹

To see how top-down effects can influence epistemic value, consider snap judgments formed due to stereotypes, rather than due to available evidence about individuals themselves. Such judgments are often both false and unjustified because they ignore relevant and available bodies of evidence. Siegel argues for a similar point with respect to top-down

¹⁹ For convenience, I write as if I accept pluralism about epistemic value, but my arguments do not rest on it. The reader can substitute her preferred form of epistemic value into the conflict introduced in §3.

effects on perceptual experience in particular (Siegel 2013; 2017a).²⁰ Consider a situation in which you assume your friend is always happy, so you experience them as happy despite the fact that their expression is truly neutral. Not only is your experience nonveridical, but it seems like it should not justify the belief that your friend is happy as such an experience normally would (Siegel, 2017a).²¹ This kind of deleterious epistemic influence extends beyond perception to top-down effects more generally. Expectations can certainly be a source of epistemic support, as in Bayesian models of reasoning, but when top-down effects cause an over-reliance on expectations to the detriment of other sources of evidence, they

²⁰ By directing her arguments at top-down effects on perceptual experience rather than on perceptual states, Siegel circumvents some of the debates over whether cognitive penetration of perception occurs. She takes perceptual experience to be a broader category than perception. The move I make here with respect to top-down effects on aesthetic experience is structurally similar. It is less controversial that there are top-down effects on aesthetic experience than that there are top-down effects on perceptual states because aesthetic experience contains automatic judgments and emotions.

²¹ Some epistemologists hold, contra Siegel, that perceptual experiences always provide justification for endorsing their contents (absent defeaters) regardless of the way those experiences are formed (e.g., Pryor, 2000; Huemer, 2013; Bengson, 2015, c.f. Jenkin forthcoming a; Jenkin forthcoming b). I do not aim to fully defend Siegel's position here. My broad notion of aesthetic experience includes states beyond perception, such as automatic judgment, emotion, and understanding whose epistemic statuses are uncontroversially dependent on the way they are formed. Nonetheless, the analogy between perceptual and aesthetic experience is illustrative.

can lead to mental states that lack the values of truth and justification. The epistemic values of knowledge and understanding are also diminished in their wake.

The examples surveyed in this section illustrate that top-down categorical beliefs can influence both the epistemic and aesthetic value of our mental states. Does top-down influence always enhance or diminish epistemic and aesthetic value in tandem? Or does it ever pull these values in opposite directions, generating a normative conflict? In the next section, I argue that such conflict does occur.

3. The Harvard Rothkos

3.1 The Cases

In 1964 Mark Rothko painted five vivid crimson and red panels known as the ‘Harvard Murals.’ These murals were hung in the penthouse dining hall in Harvard’s Holyoke Center. The penthouse’s windows allowed in ample sunlight, which illuminated the paintings beautifully but also has an unfortunate downside. Rothko had used a highly unstable pigment called Lithol Red, which quickly degraded in the sun. The faded paintings were taken down in 1979 and put in storage (Standeven, 2008).

In 2014 the murals were taken out of storage for an exhibit at the Harvard Art Museums. In lieu of traditional restoration techniques, the murals were displayed under colored lights, making them appear as if they still had their original colors. The lighting techniques were described on plaques near the artworks, but the lights themselves were not obvious. For one hour each day, the colored lights were turned off so that curious viewers could see the murals in their true degraded state.

The idea behind this restorative lighting was to improve viewers’ aesthetic experiences. The lighting created an experience that was true to both the original works and

to how Rothko intended the works to be experienced—two features we value in our aesthetic experiences.²² Absent this lighting, contemporary viewers' experience would differ significantly from the experience of original viewers in 1964, as well as from the experience Rothko intended his viewers to have. The restorative lighting shifted viewers' experience as to improve its aesthetic value.

The restorative lighting also allowed viewers to appreciate the full range of properties the murals express. Despite Rothko's use of abstract form, his paintings are rife with human feelings. Rothko described his work as "expressing only basic human emotions—tragedy, ecstasy, doom..." (Mark Rothko, in Baal-Teshuva 2003, p. 50). Color is crucial to the expression of these emotional properties. The boldness of the reds in the original Harvard murals incites a striking and complex emotional experience in the viewer. This experience is absent—or at best drastically impoverished—when those colors are degraded. The restorative lighting allows the viewer to access these emotional properties, thereby rendering her experiences more aesthetically valuable.²³

However, the restorative lighting also gave viewers an illusory experience. They saw the paintings as a darker shade of red than they truly are. This shift to nonveridicality marks a decrease in the epistemic value of viewers' experiences, because they lacked the central epistemic value of truth. Viewers' knowledge of the painting's true color was also impeded.

²² If the reader denies that the artist's intentions impact aesthetic value, there is still sufficient reason to think that experiencing these murals under restorative lighting is more aesthetically valuable. The lighting mimics the work's original condition and enhances the viewer's access to emotional properties.

²³ Cf. Moeller (2015).

Here we find an instance of conflict between forms of normative value, as defined in §2. A single event p (the addition of the restorative lighting) causes an increase in value type q (aesthetic value) of r (the viewer's aesthetic experience), but a decrease in value type s (epistemic value) of r (the viewer's aesthetic experience). While this normative conflict is of interest on its own, it is a conflict of the weaker sort. The restorative lighting comes from outside the viewer, so the fact that she is pulled in two different normative directions seems unfortunate rather than revealing of her epistemic and aesthetic character.²⁴ Any viewer would experience the same conflict. But a closely related thought experiment illustrates the possibility of a deeper normative conflict that originates within the viewer, and so reflects on her more strongly. Central to this thought experiment is the idea that an observer's own background beliefs might play the psychological role of the restorative lighting.

Consider a present-day museum visitor who is knowledgeable about Rothko's style, specifically his tendency to paint in bold, vibrant colors. She has seen photographs of many Rothko paintings, including the Harvard Murals in their original condition. However, she does not know that the murals' pigment has degraded. She visits the museum and sees the degraded murals under ordinary (non-restorative) lighting. Suppose that due to her knowledge that the murals are by Rothko and that Rothko paints in bold colors, she has an aesthetic experience of the degraded murals as a brighter shade of red than they truly are. This altered color experience allows her to fully access the emotional depth of the paintings.

²⁴ I assume in my discussion that the observer does not know about the restorative lighting and is under the illusion that the paintings are the color they appear to be. Otherwise, the epistemic and aesthetic implications would be further complicated by her possession of a defeater.

She does not realize that the true source of this rich aesthetic experience is from her categorical beliefs, rather than from the color of the painting itself. This is a kind of top-down effect on aesthetic experience, but it need not be cognitive penetration of perception—even if her categorical beliefs influence only her automatic judgments and emotions surrounding the color, her aesthetic experience will count as transformed by her categorical belief.

While this is a hypothetical example, there is psychological evidence supporting many forms of categorical influence on color experience. Subjects are better at discriminating colors across category boundaries (e.g., blue to green) than within categories (e.g., variations of blue), even when the degree of difference is constant (Bornstein and Korda, 1984; Witzel and Gegenfurtner, 2015). Training in color categories improves visual discrimination, as subjects become better able to pull apart dimensions of brightness and saturation (Goldstone, 1998). In “memory color” experiments, subjects experience objects with characteristic colors (e.g., yellow bananas and blue Smurfs) as more vividly colored than objects with simple geometric shapes (e.g., yellow rectangles and blue circles) (Hansen et al., 2006; Olkkonen, Hansen, and Gegenfurtner, 2008).²⁵ While these experiments do not directly test the potential of artistic categories to influence aesthetic color experience, they suggest that it is psychologically plausible.

There is also psychological evidence that color conveys emotional properties,

²⁵ There is debate over whether memory color effects are truly perceptual (Valenti and Firestone, 2019). Even if memory color only affects judgment, it would still be an instance of categorical influence on aesthetic experience because aesthetic experience includes not only perceptual states but also our judgments.

highlighting the aesthetic importance of experiencing the Rothkos in their original colors. Terms for colors and emotions are strongly associated (Osgood, 1960; Hupka et al., 1997). Red, the dominant color of the Harvard murals, typically prompts feelings of excitement and stimulation (Wexner, 1954). Associations between emotion and color vary according to saturation and brightness, indicating that pigment degradation will significantly impede access to the emotional meaning of a color (Osgood, 1960; Adams and Osgood, 1973; D'Andrade and Egan, 1974; Valdez and Mehrabian, 1994). More saturated colors are rated more pleasurable, arousing, and dominant than unsaturated colors (Valdez and Mehrabian, 1994). Brighter colors are also rated as more pleasurable than darker colors (Valdez and Mehrabian, 1994) as well as more active, happy, and positive (Osgood, 1960). When the degraded Rothkos are viewed under natural light, the viewer misses out on the emotional properties that were conveyed by the painting's original saturation and brightness. When the original colors are restored by either lighting or the influence of categorical expectations, the viewer experiences the full range of emotions the paintings express.

3.2. Aesthetic Upgrade

The restorative lighting in which the degraded paintings were displayed was specifically designed to give museum visitors the optimal aesthetic experience by capturing the paintings' original color, brushwork, and intensity (Sheets, 2014). The viewer with a categorically influenced experience reaps these same aesthetic benefits. Her experience is true to both the artist's intentions and the work's original appearance. Her experience of the colors as brighter and more saturated allows her to access and enjoy the emotional properties of the work. While the causal route to the viewer's experience differs in the two cases, the increase in aesthetic value is nonetheless equally present.

Applying Walton's guidelines, we can see more formally that the viewer experiences the paintings as belonging to an aesthetically correct category. Her experience of the paintings is influenced by her categorical belief that the paintings are Rothkos, along with her expectations that Rothkos tend to be brightly colored. Taking Walton's criteria sequentially, first, the murals have many standard features of the category of Rothkos. They are the typical size of Rothko paintings, they are oil on canvas, and they feature Rothko's characteristic rounded rectangles in solid colors.²⁶ Second, the murals are more aesthetically pleasing if experienced in the category of Rothkos. Seeing the murals as Rothkos creates an experience of brighter colors, which in turn allows access to the painting's emotional properties. Both the original colors themselves and the emotions they engender make the work more aesthetically pleasing for most viewers. Third, it is likely that Rothko intended these paintings to be perceived as in the category of Rothkos, so that the viewer could appreciate their relation to his greater body of work. This intention is evinced by Rothko's tendency to create sets of paintings to be presented together, such as his Harvard Murals, his forty Seagram's murals, and the Rothko Chapel (Baal Teshuva, 2003). And finally, the category of Rothkos is well established in the society in which the work was produced—the modern art world of the mid-20th century. Even today, Rothko is a well-known artist with a distinctive and characteristic style.²⁷

²⁶ For psychological evidence that objects in the prototypical colors of their categories are more pleasing, see Martindale and Moore (1988).

²⁷ I do not assume that every artist counts as their own established category. Artists require a certain level of distinctiveness and renown to do so. Rothko fits the bill.

Taken together, the fulfillment of these criteria indicates that the category of Rothkos is an aesthetically correct one in which to experience the paintings. By experiencing the paintings as Rothkos, the viewer's experience is more aesthetically valuable than it would be if she were to experience them as impressionist paintings, for example, or not as members of any category at all.

3.3 Epistemic Downgrade

What is the impact of the observer's categorical beliefs (i.e., that the painting is a Rothko and that Rothkos tend to be bright) on the epistemic value of experience? Despite the increase in aesthetic value, the categorical beliefs decrease the epistemic value of the experience. First, the central epistemic value of truth is eliminated. As in the version of the example featuring restorative lighting, the aesthetic experience of the colors is transformed from accurate to inaccurate.²⁸ Second, the influence of categorical beliefs decreases the justificatory value of the aesthetic experience. Even if her background beliefs about Rothkos are true, she relies on them too heavily, disregarding the actual colors of the canvas before her.

To see why this overreliance on background beliefs decreases the justificatory value of her aesthetic experience, consider a structurally similar case of belief formation. An art historian believes that Rothkos tend to be bright and highly saturated. A trusted colleague tells her that he has just seen a Rothko painting that is a faded pale pink in a gallery in

²⁸ If the reader holds that truth is the only epistemic value, then the rest of my discussion of epistemic value is superfluous. However, it may still be of interest to see how an increase in aesthetic value can coincide with a decrease in other epistemic properties such as justification, knowledge, and understanding.

Portugal. Our original historian disregards her colleague's report and forms the belief that the painting in Portugal is bright red, relying on her background belief rather than on her colleague's testimony. Categorical generalizations such as "Rothkos tend to be bright" admit of exceptions, and she has no reason to doubt her colleague's report, so her reasons on balance support the belief that the painting is pale pink. The historian over-weights her background beliefs, so her belief that the painting is bright red is unjustified.

Similarly, when the museum visitor's expectations influence her aesthetic experience of the colors of the Harvard Murals she over-weights her background beliefs about the category of Rothkos and under-weights the evidence directly before her from the pigment on the canvas. Even accurate categorical generalizations can play an epistemically pernicious role in insulating one from new information. One way to articulate this epistemic flaw is to say that the aesthetic experience itself is unjustified, just as a belief formed by overweighting evidence would be.

However, some may find it unusual to evaluate aesthetic experiences as justified or unjustified. Other kinds of experiences, such as perceptual experiences, are traditionally considered "unjustified justifiers" (Bonjour, 1985, p. 22), meaning they can justify further beliefs but do not themselves have a justificatory status. If one holds that aesthetic experiences are also unjustified justifiers, one could say that even though the museum visitor's aesthetic experience is not itself evaluable as justified or unjustified, it provides less justification for further beliefs formed on its basis than it would absent top-down influence. In this case, the aesthetic experience of the painting as bright red would provide diminished justification for the belief that the painting is bright red.

Aesthetic judgments formed in response to the museum visitor's cognitively influenced experience will also lose their justification. Suppose that our museum visitor is an

art critic. She writes an article extolling the paintings' aesthetic value based on her false experience of them in their original bright colors.²⁹ While the degraded Rothkos may in fact have significant aesthetic value, their brightness is absent and so cannot be the property that grounds their aesthetic value.³⁰ The critic's aesthetic judgment is based on a false impression of the paintings' brightness and so is unjustified.

These decreases in the epistemic values of truth and justification ramify to the epistemic values of knowledge and understanding. Given that the viewer's experience of the painting's color is neither veridical nor provides justification, she no longer knows the painting's color. She is also closed off from knowledge about the painting's decay that she might have gained from a veridical experience. She may form true beliefs about the paintings' original color, but these beliefs would be grounded in aesthetic experiences with diminished justificatory power and so would not amount to knowledge.

Given that the viewer arrives at her aesthetic experience by means of a kind of internally driven illusion, her experience is not apt to figure in an understanding of Rothko's broader body of work, or of American abstraction, or even of the paintings' compositional elements. Understanding is often taken to require that one's grasp of the relevant facts and relations be appropriately formed, rather than irrationally or by luck (Grimm, 2006; Pritchard, 2010; Kelp, 2021). Thus, epistemic value decreases along several important

²⁹ I thank an anonymous referee for suggesting this example.

³⁰ The paintings' aesthetic value might instead be grounded in their history, their cultural importance, their effect on viewers, or their non-color physical properties such as form or symmetry.

dimensions.³¹

In sum, in this example a single event p (the influence of background categorical beliefs) causes an increase in value type q (aesthetic value) of r (the viewer's aesthetic experience), but a decrease in value type s (epistemic value) of r (the viewer's aesthetic experience). The decrease in the epistemic value of the viewer's aesthetic experience ramifies to decreases in the epistemic value of the viewer's aesthetic judgment, aesthetic knowledge, and aesthetic understanding. Here, unlike the case of restorative lighting, the cause of the conflict is internal rather than external. While the restorative lighting would have the same normative impact on any viewer, the influence of background beliefs is particular to our viewer's unique psychology. She is only deceived by herself. My goal here is not to argue whether the viewer is ultimately responsible for this normative conflict, or for the exact impact it has on her rational standing. My point is that it is a deeper, more personal type of normative conflict due to its internal origin.

4. Objections

This conflict between epistemic and aesthetic value may seem initially surprising. Ordinarily, epistemic and aesthetic benefits go hand in hand, as when knowledge of classical music increases the aesthetic value of listening to a sonata. Given the standard camaraderie between epistemic and aesthetic value, one might doubt whether this is a genuine case of

³¹ For reasons of space, my treatments of these diverse forms of epistemic value are compressed. Even if the reader disagrees with select aspects of this discussion, the thrust of my argument should still hold. Taken together, the considerations offered above show that epistemic value is negatively impacted.

normative conflict. In this section, I respond to two objections from this skeptical perspective.

4.1 Different Objects

One form this worry might take is in wondering whether the object of increase in aesthetic value is truly the same as the object of decrease in epistemic value. To have a clear case of conflict in normative value, the same object must be differentially affected in terms of two different forms of value.³² The object of increase in aesthetic value here is the entire suite of states that make up the viewer's aesthetic experience—her visual states, judgments, moods, emotions, states of understanding, etc. This collection of states as a whole is aesthetically improved by the influence of her categorical expectations. The decrease in epistemic value, on the other hand, seems to most poignantly apply to her representation of the color of the murals, be it in visual experience or in judgment. Does a difference in objects render this normative conflict inert, or at least mitigate its severity?

While color representations may be the initial locus of the decrease in epistemic value, the rest of the states that make up aesthetic experience ultimately inherit this decrease in epistemic value as well. As we experience and judge the color of a work of art, our emotions, moods, judgments, and states of understanding are all informed by our color representations. Just as beliefs inherit their epistemic statuses from their bases, these further aspects of aesthetic experience inherit diminished epistemic value from poorly formed color representations. Some aspects of the viewer's aesthetic experience of the Rothkos, such as her judgment of the size of the paintings, may be psychologically isolated from her color

³² For discussion of the view that conflicts between epistemic and prudential norms can be dissolved by appeal to different objects. see Kelly (2002) and Shah (2006).

experience and so suffer neither increase in aesthetic value nor decrease in epistemic value. The collection of states that are either directly influenced by her beliefs about Rothko's typical color palette or subsequently influenced by the altered color representations will both increase in aesthetic value and decrease in epistemic value, however.

4.2 Requirements and Prohibitions

A second worry comes from the idea that many classic examples of normative conflict arise between requirements and prohibitions. For example, on a common interpretation of Pascal's wager, one is prudentially required to believe in God (because of the potential massive reward in the afterlife) yet epistemically forbidden from doing so (because there is insufficient evidence). The observer of the Rothko murals, though, is not aesthetically required to experience the murals as Rothkos or to undergo the ensuing categorical influence. While experiencing the murals as Rothkos is one correct way to experience them, there are other correct ways. For example, experiencing the murals as abstract expressionist paintings, or as reactions to mid-century American figure painting would likely also meet Walton's criteria for correctness. One might even be skeptical that there are any aesthetic requirements whatsoever, even if one grants that there are better and worse ways of experiencing a given work.

While it may be true that no aesthetic requirements figure in my focal example, clashes between requirements and prohibitions are not necessary for normative conflict. Normative conflict between forms of value can create the same kind of tension. Familiar examples of moral and aesthetic conflict illustrate this point. Consider a situation in which you discover that your favorite author leads an immoral life (by whatever standards you care to imagine). Continuing to buy their books would be morally dubious, (because you would be supporting someone immoral) but aesthetically beneficial (because you would have access

to new works). Here there is no conflict between prohibition and requirement because you are not aesthetically required to read any particular book. Yet there is a genuine conflict between moral and aesthetic value. The conflict between epistemic and aesthetic value in the case of the Harvard Rothkos is similarly genuine. As in paradigmatic cases of normative conflict, it is unclear what would be best from an all-things-considered point of view.

To make the point more vivid, consider a curator faced with the task of deciding how to display the degraded Rothkos.³³ She is subject to the same influence of background beliefs about the brightness of Rothkos on her aesthetic experience as the viewer in our initial example. She relies on her experience of the murals in deciding which gallery is best to house them, what information to include alongside them, and how long they should be on display. The epistemic status of her experience is important in these decisions because she strives for accurate curatorial practice and to accurately inform viewers about the work. Yet the aesthetic value of her experience is also paramount to her decisions because she wants to display the murals in the way they aesthetically merit, and in the way that ensures viewers have the best possible aesthetic experience. Is it better for her experience to be influenced by her background beliefs about the category of Rothkos or not? Background influence will better achieve her aesthetic ends but will impinge on her epistemic goals. Just as it is a vexing question whether one should believe in God given Pascal's Wager, it is a vexing question whether one's categorical beliefs should influence one's experience of the degraded Rothkos.

5. Conclusion

³³ I thank Ronni Gura Sadovsky for suggesting this example.

Why does this conflict between epistemic and aesthetic value matter? First, this case provides a new data point for use in developing domain-general solutions to normative conflict. Proposals that are initially motivated by conflicts in other normative domains can be tested by their application to aesthetic and epistemic conflict. For example, the evidentialist view that our mental states must always and only be in accordance with the evidence, no matter the countervailing norms (Clifford, 1877; Feldman and Conee, 1985), is challenged not only by compelling examples of non-evidential beliefs required by prudential and moral norms, but also by experiences whose aesthetic value is increased when they defy the evidence. Evidentialists must have a story to tell about why sacrificing aesthetic value is acceptable in cases like the degraded Rothkos.

This case of epistemic and aesthetic conflict also contributes to the growing literature on normative issues surrounding top-down effects on experience. Top-down effects have been usefully discussed in epistemology (Siegel, 2017; McGrath, 2013) and ethics (Murdoch, 1970; Cowan 2015), but are relatively unexplored in the aesthetic domain (although see Stokes, 2014). Thinking about our experiences of art in the framework of top-down effects may help us understand the positive epistemic and aesthetic impacts of aesthetic expertise.

For example, an art historian specializing in traditional Chinese scroll paintings, which are typically quite intricate, will be better than an untrained student at identifying certain common types of figures, activities, and patterns. The art historian's knowledge enriches her aesthetic experiences, making them informationally denser than a novice's. The art historian's experiences will justify a greater range of beliefs and may also have more aesthetic value because their informational density opens up more forms of appreciation. Top-down effects provide a useful framework for examining the how we can make our experiences of art more valuable.

Conflict between epistemic and aesthetic norms is not unique to the Harvard Rothkos. Other forms of top-down influence create similar conflicts across artistic media. A first-time reader of Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, who expects the novel's heroine Becky Sharp to be extremely clever (perhaps due to a misleading trailer for the film version), might interpret Becky's quips and schemes with a fond and magnifying eye, leading to an experience of Becky as cleverer than Thackeray's words make her out to be. This experience of Becky is disproportionate to the textual evidence and falsely reflects the character as written. Yet the experience might nonetheless be aesthetically valuable because it fits with Thackeray's proto-feminist vision and enhances certain dramatic elements of the plot. Similar examples of epistemic and aesthetic conflict are not hard to conjure once the requisite form is made clear.

Another species of epistemic and aesthetic conflict arises when top-down influence leads to an increase in epistemic value but a decrease in aesthetic value.³⁴ Consider the phenomenon of someone ruining a beloved work of art for you by pointing out its flaws. If a friend points out that all the depictions of women in your favorite novel are underdeveloped and unrealistic, you might enjoy the novel far less on your next reread. Your experience of the novel increases in epistemic value because you now accurately detect the poor quality of the author's depictions of women. Your experience also decreases in aesthetic value because it now includes an awareness of the author's poor character development and sexism, both of which are unpleasant. This conflict ramifies to aesthetic judgment. You now judge the work to be less aesthetically valuable than you did before, but this judgment is more epistemically justified.

³⁴ I thank an anonymous referee for suggesting a discussion of this type of conflict.

Another example of this type of conflict concerns art that exploits optical illusions. When we evade illusions that are crucial to a work of art, we increase our experience's epistemic value but decrease its aesthetic value. Edgar Mueller's 3-D street art depicts ravines, waterfalls, lava pits, and other steep drop-offs that seemingly plunge into the middle of the street ("Edgar Mueller's 3D street art", 2009). The illusion of depth (and its accompanying shock, fear, and awe) is central to the aesthetic experience of this work. A viewer who is very experienced with 2-D depictions of depth, such as an architect, might be immune to Mueller's depth illusions due to perceptual learning.³⁵ Relative to a standard viewer, the architect's experience would have increased epistemic value because she accurately represents the depth of the street. Yet her experience would have decreased aesthetic value because she misses out on the shock, fear, and awe that the work has the power to elicit.

I have argued here that epistemic and aesthetic values can starkly diverge, in both directions. While it may at first seem like such circumstances force us to choose between the epistemic and the aesthetic, our preferred mode of normative delinquency may not be up to us. The influence of background beliefs on aesthetic experience typically occurs unbidden, outside of consciousness and voluntary control. The knowledgeable museum visitor does not choose her expectations about Rothko's bright color palette to influence her experience of the Harvard Murals. She likely does not even know this influence occurs. While we can evaluate the normative impacts of top-down effects from a God's eye perspective, most of

³⁵ This is a hypothetical example, but it is made plausible by psychological evidence that some perceptual illusions can be reduced with training (e.g., Ludwig et al., 2014).

the time we cannot regulate our own minds in the moment. Even if we knew the ideal way to navigate epistemic and aesthetic conflict, we might not be able to conform to it.

While this lack of control over our aesthetic experience may seem disempowering, we are not entirely subject to the whims of our unconscious minds. Just as Pascal urges his readers to inculcate belief in God by attending mass and befriending the faithful (Pascal 1670/1995), we can indirectly modulate our aesthetic experiences. We can cultivate the sort of categorical knowledge that we hope will put us in the normatively best position, and prime that knowledge before visiting the gallery. We can compare our aesthetic experience to that of trusted experts when we fear undue top-down influence and use those expert reports as a barometer. While we may not always achieve perfect compliance along all normative dimensions, we can be attuned to the aesthetic sacrifices we make in favor of the epistemic, and to the aesthetic benefits we reap from epistemic imperfection.³⁶

³⁶ I thank Selim Berker, Robert Hopkins, John Kulvicki, Fiona Macpherson, Samantha Matherne, Bernhard Nickel, Adriana Renero, Becca Rothfeld, Susanna Siegel, Nico Silins, and Jake Quilty-Dunn for discussion and comments on this paper. I also thank audiences at the NYU Philosophy of Perception Works-in-Progress Group, the British Society for Aesthetics Annual Conference, the NEH summer institute on Presupposition and Perception, the American Society for Aesthetics Annual Conference, the Harvard Publication Workshop, and the British Society for Aesthetics Conference on Pictorial Experience. I also thank two anonymous referees and the editors of *The British Journal of Aesthetics*.

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