

Contemporary Aesthetics (Journal Archive)

Volume 13 *Volume 13 (2015)*

Article 15

2015

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Melchionne, Kevin (2015) "Norms of Cultivation," *Contemporary Aesthetics (Journal Archive)*: Vol. 13 , Article 15.

Available at: https://digitalcommons.risd.edu/liberalarts_contempaesthetics/vol13/iss1/15

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Norms of Cultivation

Kevin Melchionne

Abstract

In this paper I identify a new group of aesthetic norms, which I call *norms of cultivation*. Judgments of taste are often accompanied by forecasts or expectations about future aesthetic satisfaction. When we find something beautiful, we expect to find it beautiful in the future. Forecasting is at play in all sorts of aesthetically motivated behavior. Yet psychologists have observed an unreliability in such forecasts. As a result of forecasting error, what we take as our taste can be an unreliable guide in our aesthetic lives. Compensating for the unreliability of taste are norms of cultivation, implicit rules for engaging objects, such as avoiding overexposure to favored objects or exposure under unfavorable conditions. Norms of cultivation help to regularize aesthetic experience, mitigating unreliability in forecasts, and fostering the ongoing stability and coherence of taste.

Key Words

aesthetic experience, aesthetic judgment, taste

1. Introduction

Judgments of taste are often accompanied by forecasts, in other words, expectations about future aesthetic satisfaction.^[1] When we find something beautiful, we typically expect to find it beautiful in the future. Forecasting is at play in many sorts of aesthetically motivated behavior, from selecting a movie for online streaming to purchasing a rare masterpiece at auction. To the extent that we go about our aesthetic lives with confidence about where we will obtain satisfaction, we rely on forecasts. Confidence in our forecasts lends a sense of stability and coherence to taste.

Yet psychologists have observed that, for a variety of reasons, forecasts are often unreliable.^[2] As a result of forecasting error, our convictions about beauty cannot by themselves guide our aesthetic choices. They cannot ensure a steady flow of satisfying aesthetic experiences, a crucial though not exclusive goal of our aesthetic endeavors. Unreliability in affective forecasting suggests that something may be wrong, or at least incomplete, in how philosophers have conceived of the authority of taste in our aesthetic lives.

From a philosophical perspective, what makes forecasting error intriguing is that it is intrinsic to experience. Changes in appraisals of or responses to objects are as natural as the aesthetic appetite itself. We do not need the influence of mood, setting, or priming to account for the changes in experience that make forecasts unreliable (although these additional factors lend still more complications).^[3] Despite such unreliability, taste is commonly held to be a stable set of convictions. This assumption about stability is functional in our aesthetic planning. Without *some* consistency over time, it is not clear how we would act aesthetically; no matter how enlightened, our taste would have

no practical meaning in our lives. We would be unable to go out in the world and derive aesthetic satisfaction, have no sense of the next movie to watch or book to read. Without forecasts, our aesthetic lives would be entirely accidental. Our cultural behavior would be no more than an aimless wandering in a haze of aesthetic amnesia. For taste to guide our aesthetic lives, there must be a capacity to forecast. If it makes sense at all to have a philosophical account of taste, it makes sense to account for both forecasting and its errors.

To the extent that judgments of taste are accompanied by forecasts and forecasts are unreliable, how can taste serve as an influential or reliable guide in aesthetic life? The answer is that there is a difference between, on the one hand, our convictions and preferences and, on the other, knowing how to bring about our aesthetic satisfaction. In other words, there is a difference between taste and the *norms of cultivation*. The stability of taste is maintained in the face of affective change through implicit rules for engaging objects, such as avoiding overexposure to favored objects or exposure under unfavorable conditions. Norms of cultivation are crucial for guiding our choices in the aesthetic sphere, mitigating some kinds of unreliability in forecasting. When norms of cultivation are influential, individuals are better able to avoid forecasting error and to confirm their taste in future experience. Norms of cultivation optimize aesthetic choices. They compensate for affective change and forecasting error.

In Sections 2 and 3, I examine aesthetic unreliability through forecasting error. In Section 4, I discuss video-on-demand, or streaming, where data indicate a significant role for forecasting error. In Section 5, I outline the philosophical problem posed by affective change. In Section 6, I propose the norms of cultivation as an explanation for the coherence and stability of taste in the face of affective change. In Section 7, I discuss the broader implications of the norms of cultivation for the aesthetic self.

2. Forecasts

Psychologists observe that we are skillful at predicting whether events will be, in a general way, pleasant or unpleasant but that we tend to overestimate the intensity and duration of the feelings that future events will cause. Even when we know what a future event will entail, we have difficulty knowing how much satisfaction we will derive from it and whether the satisfaction will be worth the effort expended to bring it about. The strongest tendency is to overestimate the impact of future events. Consequently, we often engage in events that do not make us as happy as we thought they would. By the same token, disappointments in the future do not impact us as negatively as we tend to fear they will. Failed predictions are common in, for instance, romance, career choice, and shopping. Likewise, in the aesthetic realm, our judgments of taste are often accompanied by forecasts. When we find something beautiful, satisfying, or approve of it, we generally expect to find it beautiful, satisfying or worthy of approval tomorrow, next week, and in the distant future. However, failed predictions are common in the aesthetic realm, too.

Forecasts are an empirical feature of beliefs about satisfaction and suffering. A forecast may or may not accompany a judgment. It is not "analytic" in the judgment; the judgment does not entail a forecast in any logical sense. Forecasting can

improve with education and experience, though learning is inhibited by the difficulty of accurately recalling our past experience. Our ability to accurately recall past reactions is beset by many of the same biases that undermine our forecasts. For instance, in recalling prior events, it is common to exaggerate our reactions just as we do in anticipation of future events.[\[4\]](#)

Forecasts play a greater role in some judgments than in others because the assessment of future satisfaction is more crucial. At an auto dealership, consideration of the purchase of a luxury car would likely be strongly colored by a forecast. With cheaper models available, it would be hard to imagine making a purchase without the expectation of many years of future satisfaction. The stakes are high because the buyer will be locking in a certain experience to the exclusion of others. That forecast is crucial to the purchase; the driver makes a forecast as part of the evaluation. But, leaving the theater after a play that will not be produced again for many years, a forecast will have little practical significance and is not likely to be entertained. A forecast is possible, but not necessary.

3. Explanations for unreliable forecasting

There are several explanations for the unreliability of forecasting. They are non-exclusive and mutually reinforcing. Together, they create considerable headwinds for the forecaster. These explanations apply to all sorts of forecasts, including those involving aesthetic objects. Inaccurate forecasts are sometimes caused by what is termed *construal bias*, a failure to frame the future event accurately. We base our forecast on the memory of a prior event but we misremember it, focusing overly on the most intense parts, as well as the beginning and end, at the expense of the overall experience.[\[5\]](#) Events can be so complex that we fail to grasp the variety of ways that they could influence us in the future.[\[6\]](#) We also have a tendency to overestimate the impact of future events.[\[7\]](#) *Focal bias* causes us to think of future events in isolation, without assessing their impact in the context of other factors that might mitigate that impact.[\[8\]](#) We may fear some future situation, such as the possible loss of a loved one, because of the suffering it promises but we may not consider how other aspects of our lives or how other capacities we have will influence us and foster our resilience. Strong responses, either positive or negative, can trigger reactive processes that counteract or compensate for specific emotions. For instance, ego depletion caused by anxiety or stress may trigger ego-reinforcing activities like socializing, shopping, or eating.[\[9\]](#) Sometimes, the process is far simpler: as time passes, the event simply fails to preoccupy us as anticipated.[\[10\]](#)

Most significantly, we underestimate the power of hedonic or affective adaptation. Affective adaptation is the tendency of our feelings, either positive or negative, to diminish in intensity over time. Affective responses are weakened by anticipation and strengthened by novelty.[\[11\]](#) When we are exposed to an object, we know better what to expect of it in the future; consequently, our future response will be weaker. Indeed, the very act of anticipating how we might feel about a certain experience is a way of becoming accustomed to the experience, a form of adaptation that can reduce its impact. Familiarity with an event also reduces its impact because the original event becomes a new baseline for experience that future experiences must surpass to

induce pleasure.[12] Moreover, the very process of making sense of an experience can drain it of affective power, reducing the extraordinary to the ordinary.[13]

Affective adaptation is pervasive. It explains why favorite meals become boring when consumed too frequently and the greatest of novels do not usually sustain more than a couple of readings over a lifetime. Hedonic adaptation means that our pleasures and disappointments are not fixed. They change over time so that often, but not always, their impact on us diminishes. Affective adaptation explains the famous *hedonic treadmill* whereby individuals are compelled to continually seek out new sources of pleasure due to the waning influence of past sources. It is important for philosophers to avoid miscasting terms like *hedonic treadmill* and *affective adaptation* in terms of atomistic sensation, isolated events of pleasure and pain. Instead, psychologists see them in terms of the individual's ongoing efforts to sustain positive mood, self-appraisal, and flourishing. The hedonic treadmill is a deep-seated human tendency, through which, to one degree or another, we re-orient ourselves continually to new objects in order to sustain mood. Mood is range-bound, existing in a dynamic equilibrium. On a day-to-day basis, our place in the range may vary but rarely exceed or fall below it for long. By adapting to changes in circumstances, we tend to return to our hedonic range. To remain in the upper part of the range, we must run on the treadmill. Researchers in well-being consider affective adaptation one of the greatest challenges to remaining on the higher end of one's hedonic range.[14]

If the hedonic treadmill exists, then, in so far as our aesthetic lives are motivated by a desire for better moods and more satisfying experiences, there must also be an *aesthetic treadmill*. The aesthetic treadmill reflects the tendency for aesthetic satisfaction to ebb over time, motivating us to seek out new sources of experience to maintain current levels of aesthetic pleasure. Of course, our aesthetic lives are not entirely defined by the aesthetic treadmill. However, we cannot appeal to *a priori* theories of aesthetic judgment to settle the question. Psychologists tell us that individuals are constantly working to bring themselves to the higher end of their hedonic range.

In this paper, I assume that the aesthetic component of our lives is marked by the same efforts. Even as we run on the treadmill, our awareness of motivation is often limited. In this respect, some folks contend with hedonic change better than others, avoiding ruts of boredom through a predisposition to new experiences. Their curious nature pushes them back to the top of their hedonic range. Others are less given to hedonic adaptation, meaning that their treadmill runs slower or perhaps scarcely moves. They are capable of maintaining themselves at the higher end of their hedonic range with less reliance on novelty. In either case, the judicious use of the aesthetic treadmill reflects a kind of emotional skillfulness or sensibility, a tacit knowledge of what is required to remain on the higher end of one's hedonic range. The aesthetic treadmill illustrates how, even as forecasts remain unreliable, we can develop habits that reflect some degree of anticipation of the limited future utility of current satisfactions. These habits are often embedded in cultural practices that guide us toward optimal experiences. In other words, we program a certain flow of novelty through regular travel, entertainment, reading, and outings. Each of us balances

novelty and familiarity. Old pleasures are never entirely defunct. They can be revived after they lose their original familiarity, allowing us to return to objects holding canonical places in our taste and lending a cyclical character to our aesthetic lives.

4. Forecasting error in aesthetic experience

There is probably something powerfully adaptive for human beings in the tendency toward exaggerated predictions of future satisfaction or dissatisfaction.[\[15\]](#) If unreliable affective forecasting is as common as researchers believe, we should expect to find it influencing the consumption of art. Errors in affective forecasting occur with all sorts of choices, from complex ones like marriage to simple ones like purchases. In a world of poor forecasting, it would be remarkable if the consumption of culture was somehow exempt. Art lovers can underestimate the rapidity of hedonic adaptation to a painting or a song just as newlyweds can to a sofa set. And, focal bias can occur when, for instance, we overestimate the long-term impact of an initial cultural encounter, say, reading a certain novel. We are at risk of failing to see how subsequent novels relativize the initial experience, creating a broader perspective and weaker impact for the first novel.

But how common is forecasting error in aesthetic experience?

Error in forecasting is not easy to test for because it requires ongoing exposure to a controlled stimulus over time. It would be difficult to design an experimental setting. Nevertheless, forecasting error is evident in large data sets of cultural behavior such as video-on-demand (VOD) or streaming. Most research on VOD is designed to serve the needs of system designers seeking to render streaming more efficient by anticipating user patterns. The databases may also serve as a compelling natural experiment for aesthetic behavior.

Among the most widely discussed findings from VOD and other online shopping data is what has been termed the *long tail*.[\[16\]](#)

When it comes to the most popular videos, VOD downloads look much like rental patterns at the now defunct bricks-and-mortar retailers: at any moment, there is a narrow list of extremely popular movies with many downloads. But beyond the most popular titles, downloads fall precipitously, following a Zipf distribution. At the bottom of the curve for VOD, there is an extremely long tail of many obscure videos that are each accessed just a few times. The long tail indicates that, alongside the blockbusters, there exists a broad appetite for out-of-way options. With negligible storage costs, video-on-demand permits a deeper inventory than a bricks-and-mortar rental store. At the same time, monthly subscription plans mean that viewers are not financially constrained in their viewing. Consequently, VOD services can offer a wide variety of obscure titles, each garnering just a few downloads.

Besides the number of downloads, a significant difference between popular films and those on the long tail lies in the cancel rate, that is, the rate at which viewers interrupt the download.[\[17\]](#) In comparing long tail to popular usage, researchers observe that the cancel rate is significantly higher for popular films than for obscure ones. Overall cancel rates are remarkably high in VOD; 86% of all sessions are cancelled prior to completion. Most sessions are cancelled within the first 10 minutes and more than a third of sessions do not even last five

minutes. In contrast, people walk out of live performances and movie theaters very rarely. These findings reveal how common disappointment is in an environment of unconstrained consumption. Instead of an anomaly, it is the rule.

Two ready explanations can be dismissed. The first is that popular films are less satisfying than obscure films; obscure films do not, in general, receive higher ratings than more popular ones. Popularity and high ratings go hand in hand, despite the higher cancel rate. A second explanation is that viewers of obscure movies are a different group of viewers with different viewing habits. Evidence indicates that although there are users with a tendency to watch obscure films, popular offerings nevertheless constitute the overwhelming majority of their selections, too.^[18] Like those who restrict themselves to popular films, these viewers tend to rate popular films higher than obscure ones. If there is a lurking army of nerdy cinephiles, they do not seem to reach statistical significance.

Affective forecasting error represents a third explanation. At any given moment, the popular movies on a VOD service are usually the ones with recent theatrical releases. Thus, they are more likely to have already been seen by the audience. Greater satisfaction at the initial viewing may account for repeated viewings. But these repeated viewings disappoint at a higher rate, leading to cancellation: “people watching the most popular videos are likely to have seen them before, either in another medium (theater or DVD) or in a prior VOD session. Therefore, they lose interest more easily during the movie, resulting in shorter session times.”^[19]

There are two relevant observations about the cancel rate phenomenon. First, it illustrates how hedonic adaptation can play a significant role in aesthetic behavior, at least when it comes to narratives (it is probably less influential with music). Here, on a fairly large scale, we get a glimpse of the influence of unreliable affective forecasting in cultural consumption. Second, even as viewers cancel repeat viewings at a higher rate than initial viewings, it is important to observe that most viewers avoid repeat viewings altogether. Wandering out on the long tail, they prefer a new film at each session, even though they cannot be sure that the new film will deliver as much pleasure as the films already seen. Intuitively, viewers of new films recognize that the lower rated film will deliver greater satisfaction on a first viewing than a better rated film on the second. In this avoidance of repetition lies an acknowledgement of hedonic adaptation and the aesthetic treadmill. The cancellation rate phenomenon does exist: a certain portion of the population is in fact unaware of hedonic adaptation. At the same time, by seeking out obscure titles on the “long tail” rather than watching what they have already seen in the theaters, many people evade hedonic adaptation.

As an aside, the cancel rate phenomenon also suggests that the transactional status of an aesthetic experience—that is, the mode of payment—may be more influential than aestheticians have allowed. When paying “*a la carte*,” as one does at the theater, or with pay per view, viewers are much less likely to abandon a session. But when viewers are not paying for each film separately, dissatisfaction is higher. With remarkably high rates of cancellation among VOD subscribers, the unconstrained

consumption of the subscription model introduces new questions about aesthetic satisfaction. Does this difference illustrate the power of the sunk cost bias, that is, the tendency to continue to invest based on the degree of past investment rather than expected return? Or does direct payment somehow compel us to be more appreciative, and enjoy the cultural product that we have purchased? The difference between responses to *a la carte* and subscription based consumption illustrates how the transactional status of a cultural experience changes our responses and our behavior. Unconstrained consumption seems to make us more dissatisfied with any particular offering. The difference suggests that, if cultural consumers want to remain at the higher end of their hedonic range, they should exercise caution in situations of unconstrained consumption typical of the age of the internet. As we shall see, unconstrained consumption violates a norm of cultivation (avoiding overexposure) and is likely to erode satisfaction.

5. Forecasting taste

When I make a judgment of taste, I am making an affect-dependent judgment. Affect dependency means that the appraisal is colored to some degree with emotion, pleasure, feeling, a psychological response with which the judgment is entwined. Among aestheticians, there is some question about the nature of the affect dependency of aesthetic judgments. From the beginning of the discipline, philosophers have held that aesthetic judgments were distinctive in that they were premised on a subjective feeling. However, the nature of that feeling has long been a source of difficulty because the role and influence of feeling is unanswerable on an *a priori* basis. *Even as aesthetic judgments have an affective dimension, there is no invariant relationship between affect and judgment.*

In light of the richness and complexity of aesthetic life, one cannot “make an argument” for any particular role for affect. The influence of affect upon a judgment can vary by virtue of any number of conditions, such as individual, setting, artistic intention or genre, cultural background, or kind of affect, to name just a few. The concept of *affect* is itself capacious and unwieldy though without a superior alternative. The possibilities for the relationship between affect and judgment are daunting, and there is no way to sort out the complex role of affect in aesthetic judgments merely by appealing to an *a priori* model, as philosophers routinely do. Nevertheless, in every theory of taste there must be a degree of affect dependency. Thus, the aesthetician can neither appeal to an *a priori* model nor side-step the problem by claiming that problems of affect, well-documented by psychologists, have no bearing on aesthetic theory. Aestheticians occupy terrain far more complex than typically acknowledged.

It is possible to assess the role of affect in judgment by looking at empirical studies designed to capture the influence of affect under a variety of conditions. Admittedly, this is a challenging project; it is an open question as to how applicable contemporary psychological research is to aesthetic theory. However, I dismiss out of hand the view that there is nothing to learn from the efforts of the psychologists. Instead, the intuition guiding this paper is that the findings have implications for a range of theories of taste. The challenge for philosophers is to assess and

apply the research appropriately.

Affective responses are intrinsically unstable over repeated exposures; they change over time. Nevertheless, the judgments of taste typically carry a sense of time-independence, that is, an expectation that the current level of satisfaction is not likely to change dramatically. As we discussed, this expectation is rooted in the psychology of beliefs about future affective states. To one extent or another, there is a natural, dynamic gap between, on the one hand, our real affective responses to objects over time and, on the other, our convictions about value.

Individuals tend to believe that their aesthetic experience is more stable than it really is, for the impact of an object is likely to change over multiple exposures. Contending with this tension is a significant aspect of our aesthetic life over time. In so far as my taste depends on the quality of the affect, must it change as well? Given the potential for forecasting error, how do we explain our aesthetic lives over time? In other words, if taste is affect-dependent but time-invariant, how is it possible? Is it reasonable to conceive of a well-ordered, richly affective aesthetic life with stable taste? If so, how?

Call this the problem of intrasubjective validity. We can understand this problem through an analogy to the expectation of intersubjective consensus that has puzzled aestheticians since before Hume and Kant. A judgment of beauty often comes with an expectation of intersubjective agreement, a conviction that others should agree. And, *I am included in this intersubjective claim in the future*. The classic puzzle of intersubjective validity is why I should expect other discerning people to find beautiful what I find beautiful. Likewise, the puzzle of intrasubjective validity is why I should expect myself to find beautiful in the future what I find beautiful today.

6. Norms of cultivation

Norms of cultivation help us to find beautiful in the future what we find beautiful today. Aesthetic experience must be marked with at least a veneer of stability over time. Otherwise, as we observed earlier, aesthetic life would not be possible. Norms of cultivation are intuitive rules of thumb, aptitudes, skills, and tactics that nurture or sustain aesthetic experience. They afford to our preferences stability over time that they might otherwise lack. Among the norms of cultivation are avoiding overexposure, controlling of the setting for experience, and responding to appetite. It is likely that there are others.

Rather than compromise aesthetic experience, norms of cultivation guide us to structure it so as to maximize the coherence of taste over time, helping us to remain appropriately connected to ongoing sources of satisfaction. Norms of cultivation anticipate hedonic change and work to lessen its impact. They help to regularize our encounters over time, keep forecasts true, and in so doing help to ensure the stability of taste.

Reliance on norms of cultivation is a competency that mitigates the influence of affective adaptation and other sources of aesthetic disappointment. This competency is often but not necessarily tacit. Individuals may acquire an awareness of the cycles of satisfaction and consciously orchestrate their exposure

to aesthetic objects to optimize experience. These norms allow us to frame experience so as to ensure the sustainability of ongoing sources of satisfaction and secure new sources of pleasure at an appropriate rate. They illustrate how our aesthetic choices, though guided in part by taste, rely on other competencies. By itself, taste is inadequate for aesthetically satisfying life.

Examples of norms of cultivation:

1. *"Don't overdo it:" the norm of exposure control*

We have observed that affective adaptation is one of the greatest challenges to ongoing aesthetic satisfaction. Aesthetic pleasure waxes and wanes. It is "lumpy" and can "wear out." Future satisfaction is not guaranteed by past satisfaction. When exposed to the same aesthetic objects over time, we tend not have continually confirming experiences. What I like today is not a reliable predictor what I will like in the future. Indeed, the very energy with which I pursue a current preference may result in overexposure, preparing the way for its later waning.

To avoid affective adaptation, we must control the frequency of our exposure to preferred objects. We keep our experience vital by avoiding overexposure to any single object, no matter how favored. By itself, taste does not protect us from affective adaptation. If we blindly followed our taste, we would not be able to set up the best occasions for experience on an ongoing basis. On the contrary, we would soon begin to dislike and disapprove of what our taste blindly tells us we like and approve of. But, when we vary our exposure, we intuitively reduce the risk of hedonic adaptation and increase the likelihood that we "confirm" our taste in subsequent exposures. To avoid wearing out current sources of satisfaction, we seek out new ones. There is an intuitive "discipline of variation," an enforced rotation of aesthetic objects, or to use Apple's terminology, a "shuffle." It is not an accident that the shuffle function is among the most popular features in the iPod. It builds upon a natural need for balance between familiarity and surprise. When not provided automatically by a machine, the shuffle is a substantive skill that we must develop. We revisit old standbys in the context of this ongoing discipline of variation.

Exposure control is visible at the social level in the regular recycling of styles and artistic reputations. The sometimes cruel cycles of artistic fashion are a sign of the norm of exposure control at work. Revivals can be seen as the norm of exposure control returning to visibility artists or styles from the past made new by oblivion.

2. *"Set the right ambience:" The norm of context control*

Works of art—some more than others—require a certain setting to be appreciated. To optimize experience, the individual must control the context of the experience as much as the way he or she attends the object. The setting may include the physical environment, the time or season, personal energy (for instance, avoiding fatigue, hunger).

I once had the privilege of visiting the home of a prominent Philadelphia collector who was eager to show off a wall sculpture by Donald Judd. Though on a posh street south of Rittenhouse

Square, the collector's home was nevertheless a classic Philadelphia row house, and the rooms were accordingly small. My companion and I were brought up the stairs and into an ordinary bedroom where, between the wall and a large bed, we leaned over the Judd and took in its shiny and expensive surface. Among the other pieces of furniture in the room, the Judd sculpture seemed to be no more than an especially austere console, ready for a tray of scotch, tumbler glasses and an ice bucket. What the collector missed, of course, was the physical environment for the work. One cannot sit down on the edge of a king-sized mattress in the small bedroom of an early nineteenth-century house and expect to appreciate a Donald Judd from the 1970s hanging three feet from one's nose. It was simply not the right ambience for the work.

If you ever worried about undermining a preference by engaging it under inappropriate conditions, you've dealt with context control. It is best to look at minimalist art in spare galleries, which enhance the aesthetic of the work. By the same token, it is probably not worth ordering take-out gourmet sushi only to eat it slumped against a wall at the bus terminal. Rather than taste, it is the norm of context control that leads us to avoid the bus station and better secure our satisfaction at the sushi bar.

3. *"Scratch the right itch:" the norm of fancy*

Errors in forecast often are caused by failing to account for the influence of *fancy*, in other words, the cycles of curiosity or inclination that make us more interested and more easily satisfied at one moment than another. *Fancy* means our predisposition at any moment to want to have aesthetic experiences of a certain sort (or not to have them all). Our aesthetic lives are not spent making aesthetic judgments about objects that come to us arbitrarily. Instead, our energy is spent hunting down the objects that we are in the mood to experience. We do not merely want to have experience; instead, we are optimizers or satisficers, forsaking what interests us less in favor what we think might interest us more. Aesthetic competency involves, in part, having an adequate—though still vague—sense of what we want to experience. If the local theater only has adolescent blockbusters on its screens, we drive to the next town for the Iranian feature reviewed on National Public Radio. We tailor our Netflix queue so that the movies we really want to see are next in line. We read travel guides and cookbooks to see what most strikes our fancy. In these actions, our aesthetic experience is prefaced by an appetite, hankering, yen, penchant, or itch. Then, in a kind of happy confirmation bias, we engage in the experiences that we believe will satisfy our appetite. *It is not so much what we like or what we approve of but what we feel like doing that offers satisfaction.* If we are not in the correct frame of mind, then we may judge a work of art unfavorably without being able to acknowledge that, in fact, it is the influence of appetite or mood that drives the judgment.

7. Norms of cultivation as aesthetic self-regulation

The answer to the question of how we can expect ourselves to find beautiful tomorrow what we find beautiful today may, in part, lie in simply accepting that sometimes we will not be able to secure ongoing, stable, predictable satisfaction from our preferred aesthetic objects. It is not reasonable to expect forecasts to always work. Our aesthetic lives are full of disappointment and

confusion. We misinterpret the sources of our satisfaction and chase the false promises offered by reviews, samples, and reproductions, wasting time and energy on misguided aesthetic explorations. We are distracted by extraneous stimuli and primed by the influence of authoritative opinion. We ruin our preferences by overdoing them. We do not take heed of the influence of our moods. We do not pay enough attention to setting up the right conditions for experience. There is a churn in aesthetic life, a swirl of appetite, curiosity, and familiarity. Sometimes, it adds up to no more than aimless wandering.

On the other hand, if I abide by the norms of cultivation, that is to say, if I avoid overexposing myself to familiar sources of pleasure, take care to engage works within the appropriate context, and follow my fancy, then chances are better that I will be less vulnerable to forecasting error. With more aesthetic success, I will gravitate to the higher end of my hedonic range and, overall, have a more satisfying aesthetic life. If I disregard the norms of cultivation, I will undermine my experience by engaging works when I cannot be expected to really enjoy them. Ineffective at this self-regulation, I will likely have less than an optimal aesthetic life, continually confronting boredom or overstimulation without any sense of the right "recipe" for my disposition.

What we experience as the stability of taste over time rests in part on the norms of cultivation. The norms of cultivation help to impart stability to preferences by helping us to encounter works of art under favorable conditions. Through the norms of cultivation, we are more likely to encounter aesthetic objects on terms favorable to satisfaction. To remain at the higher end of one's hedonic range (with more satisfaction and more accurate hedonic forecasts), an individual must build the norms of cultivation into his or her cultural habits. Norms of cultivation help to stabilize taste and are the mark of a well-organized and skillful aesthetic life, that is, a cultivated life. In a vital aesthetic life, norms of cultivation work alongside taste, tailoring it to optimize experience.

The norms of cultivation are valuable for this optimization alone. However, norms of cultivation also play a role in the construction of personality and character. When we speak of what it means to be a cultivated person, we mean more than a capacity to judge and interpret. An aesthetic personality is composed not just of preferences or convictions. It is not just an aggregation of judgments of taste. The aesthetic self is also marked by a certain application of the norms of cultivation. Like our taste, this application of the norms of cultivation reflects our disposition or sensibility; it characterizes us. For instance, each of us may be predisposed to a certain pace of new or familiar stimuli, i.e., the norm of exposure control. This pace may be as crucial to our aesthetic well-being as any taste convictions we might harbor. The extent to which we vary favored aesthetic objects, establish appropriate settings, or follow our appetite or mood, says as much about who we are as aesthetic persons as our taste convictions.

In this way, the norms of cultivation help us to understand what our aesthetic lives add up to over time. Once again, we have to move carefully from the psychological formulation to the aesthetic one, in this case from the concept of affective or

hedonic regulation to aesthetic regulation. Affective regulation denotes the varied processes by which individuals seek to control the emotions that they have.^[20] It is sometimes called “emotional intelligence,” a term that which has entered the popular lexicon in recent years. Affective regulation can involve, for instance, selecting the kinds of situations we put ourselves in, modifying them, determining the strength and nature of attention, controlling responses, and determining our attitudes. Likewise, the norms of cultivation are a means of aesthetic self-regulation, through rules for engaging objects.

The main part of what it takes to be an aesthetically skillful person, a cultivated person, is not so much the ability to make right judgments about aesthetic objects as the ability to secure aesthetic regulation through the norms of cultivation. In our aesthetic lives, we are not for the most part judges seeking to determine whether the works of art that come before us are good or bad, like a juror in a piano competition. Instead, we are optimizers or satisficers looking to secure greater aesthetic satisfaction from the objects that we pursue, in other words, like a browser on Netflix. We seek out the objects that we believe offer that satisfaction and cast our attitude in the best way to procure it. More hunters than game wardens, we are looking for experiences that are likely to satisfy our appetite. Aesthetic skill or *cultivation* is a matter of slanting our exposure and attitudes in ways that promote this satisfaction. Aesthetic autonomy amounts above all to the pursuit and gratification of appetite.

8. Conclusion

To read in aesthetics, one might infer that our aesthetic lives are on a happy, one-way street of ever more astute judgment and ever greater aesthetic satisfaction. Our aesthetic lives are all unmitigated success stories, complicated only by the occasional work of conceptual art. Aesthetic experience is never marked by ambivalence about our feelings or confusion as to its causes. We are never disappointed by our favorites. We never get bored. After reading in aesthetics, one would have to conclude that the process of trying to grasp our feelings and apply them to future aesthetic choices—the whole churning tumult of our enthusiasms—lacks any complication worthy of theoretical scrutiny. We simply behold and judge.

Aesthetic theory needs to address the challenges posed by a more complicated psychology of taste, where modes of aesthetic attention are mediated not just by cognition, but also by complex psychological tendencies like forecasting error and hedonic adaptation. Norms of cultivation suggest a more comprehensive approach to taste and aesthetic experience offers a better picture of aesthetic life. This approach may help us to better understand how the aesthetic values play authoritative roles in the real rhythms of aesthetic life.

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Published March 17, 2015.

Endnotes

[1] Many thanks to Amy Baehr, Alan Bowden, Barry Feldman, James Harold, Matthew Kieran, Dominic Lopes, and the reviewers for this journal for reading and commenting on earlier versions of this article.

[2] For a brief introduction, see Timothy D. Wilson and Daniel T. Gilbert, "Affective Forecasting: Knowing What to Want," *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, Vol. 14 (2006), No. 3, 131-134. For an in-depth overview of the field, see Timothy D. Wilson and Daniel T. Gilbert "Affective Forecasting," *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 35 (2003), 345-409.

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