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Art, Value, and Relationships of Partiality

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ART, VALUE, AND RELATIONSHIPS OF PARTIALITY

ANTHONY CROSS

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Abstract

We are often partial to a particular set of artworks—favorite films, “desert island” disks, or much-loved novels. We treasure these works particularly dearly, even though we may recognize that there are other artworks equally if not more deserving of our attention. Is there any good reason for such attachment? Or is it merely an expression of one’s idiosyncratic taste, and something for which no reasons might be given? I argue that there *are* reasons for being partial to particular works of art, even if one recognizes that there are other artworks equally if not more deserving of one’s attention. These reasons are intimately connected with the value of one’s historical relationship with those artworks. My dissertation presents a philosophical account of the significance of such relationships with works of art. I argue that valuing such relationships is analogous to valuing one’s relationships with one’s friends, one’s projects, or one’s ideals: each is an instance of the more general phenomenon of partiality. After presenting a general account of partiality, I use this analogical approach to demonstrate that one’s concern for a work of art often extends beyond its artistic value, impartially construed—a point which, I argue, has been little appreciated in contemporary philosophy of art. I deploy this more nuanced account to challenge the idea that our interest in artworks lies entirely in the value of the experiences yielded by engaging with them; to offer a novel account of the role and function of reasoning in art criticism; and to give a clearer picture of the moral and aesthetic considerations wrapped up in our relationships to artworks and artists.

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¹Cross, "Obligations to Artworks as Duties of Love."

few years.

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To Margo and Willa, finally.

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Introduction

We are often partial to a particular set of artworks—favorite films, “desert island” disks, or much-loved novels. We treasure these works particularly dearly, even though we may recognize that there are other artworks equally if not more deserving of our attention. Is there any good reason for such attachment? Or is it merely an expression of one’s idiosyncratic taste—something for which no reasons might be given? I argue that there *are* reasons for being partial to particular works of art, even if one recognizes that there are other artworks equally if not more deserving of one’s attention. These reasons are intimately connected with the value of one’s historical relationship with those artworks. My dissertation presents a philosophical account of the significance of such relationships with works of art. I argue that valuing such relationships is analogous to valuing one’s relationships with one’s friends, one’s projects, or one’s ideals: each is an instance of reasonable partiality, which involves an individual’s appreciation of a set of reasons which may not warrant the same concern on the part of all other rational agents.

Making sense of partiality is nothing new in *ethics*; it has been a major theme of the last several decades of inquiry in moral philosophy. Looking back at the field in the middle of the last century, we find a near-exclusive concern with morality, narrowly construed. Little philosophical attention was devoted to personal relationships; after all, moral obligations are *universal* and *impartial*. They apply to every agent, independent of his or her idiosyncratic personal relationships; and every agent has largely the same moral obligations to every other individual within the domain of their moral concern. This focus left little room for

consideration of the importance of an individual's particular personal relationships. When the topic did come up, either it was viewed only from the perspective of one's *moral* duties to those with whom one has personal relationships—for example, W.D. Ross's discussion of the moral duties of fidelity, reparation, and gratitude which by their nature depend on one's past relationships with other individuals—or instead viewed as a separate sphere of consideration entirely, not to be confused with moral obligations proper.²

In the 1970s and '80s this approach to normative philosophy came under criticism from multiple directions: Bernard Williams, Michael Stocker, and Susan Wolf all offered notable criticisms of traditional moral theories as failing to do justice to the centrality of individual projects and relationships.³ At around the same time, feminist ethics argued that an exclusive focus on impartial justice, rights, and moral obligations reflected a systematic male bias in the discipline.⁴ All agreed that personal relationships, projects, and commitments required greater philosophical attention.

In the wake of such criticisms, most contemporary approaches to normative ethics no longer confine themselves to offering accounts of our impartial moral obligations. It's commonly acknowledged that various relationships, projects, and commitments can provide us with reasons for action that may indeed compete with impartial moral reasons when it comes to deliberating about what we ought to do, all things considered. Furthermore, there has been a great deal of substantive inquiry into the nature and value of personal relationships like friendship, loving partnerships, and familial relations.⁵

Contemporary philosophy of art has yet to undergo a similar disciplinary shift. Much contemporary philosophy of art writes off partiality as a nonrational expression of mere taste, focusing almost exclusively on questions concerning the impartial evaluation of works of art.⁶

²Ross, *The Right and the Good*, pp. 21-27.

³Williams, "Persons, Character and Morality"; Stocker, "The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories"; Wolf, "Moral Saints".

⁴See, for example, Held, "Feminist Transformations of Moral Theory".

⁵For representative edited volumes, see Badhwar, *Friendship* and Lamb, *Love Analyzed*.

⁶For example see Dickie, *Evaluating Art* and Goldman, *Aesthetic Value*.

An exception that proves the rule is the work of Alexander Nehamas, who takes seriously the idea that our interactions with artworks are deeply personal.⁷ This dissertation owes much to the direction of research indicated by Nehamas; I have been especially influenced by his provision of an extremely vivid example of what such a personal relationship with an artwork can be.⁸ A great deal of the intellectual work of this dissertation consists in developing a clearer and more precise account of the nature and value of such relationships, and in situating them within a broader philosophical account of relationships of partiality more generally. That said, my project differs substantially from Nehamas's; I am far more optimistic than he is about the prospects for developing an account of impartial artistic value. Nehamas dismisses such a possibility, claiming that artistic judgment "never commands universal agreement, and neither a beautiful object nor a work of art ever engages a catholic community."⁹ From the inevitability of such disagreement, Nehamas infers that there is no sense in which we can judge that one work of art is objectively better *as a work of art* than another; there is for Nehamas only individual and personal taste, which may or may not overlap with the tastes of other individuals. This is a conclusion that I want to resist. Although I don't develop a full account of artistic value in the dissertation, I do discuss in Chapter 2 an approach to resolving questions about artistic value that is broadly Humean in outline, insofar as it argues that ideal critics are our best guides to artistic value. Despite its shortcomings, I believe that such an approach is nevertheless promising, and could be developed into a full-fledged account of impartial artistic value—a project for further work. A central question of this dissertation is therefore how such considerations of impartial artistic value can be reconciled with the importance of individual and personal relationships with artworks.

In the first chapter, I consider the general puzzle of partiality: what explains the fact that we take ourselves to have *reasons of partiality*, i.e. good reasons to be partial to those

⁷Nehamas, *Only a Promise of Happiness*.

⁸ibid., ch. 4.

⁹ibid., p. 81.

individuals with whom we share special relationships? I argue that, in the case of personal relationships, such reasons can be explained entirely in terms of a set of more fundamental values and reasons that such relationships facilitate and instantiate. These include: the value of personal and joint projects; the value of the individual participants in these relationships; and general moral values such as trust, care, reciprocity, and gratitude. My view is therefore a form of reductionism about reasons of partiality. This approach departs from a popular non-reductionist view—defended by Samuel Scheffler and Niko Kolodny, among others—that special relationships are normatively fundamental entities which give rise to reasons of partiality independently. I argue that, properly formulated, a reductionist account of partiality can offer a better explanation of the diversity of reasonable partiality than non-reductionism, while also answering common challenges posed by many non-reductionists.¹⁰

This general discussion of partiality within personal relationships sets the stage for the second chapter, in which I argue that valuing a relationship with a work of art is in many ways similar to valuing a friendship. I develop a framework for thinking about relationships with artworks, focusing on the example of Stanley Cavell’s writings on film.¹¹ I argue that, like friendships, the value of such relationships with art can be explained by reference to a set of independent goods which such relationships instantiate, facilitate, and exemplify. I then argue that such relationships provide us with reasons to resist “trading up” to relationships with other artworks that offer us intrinsically better experiences—reasons similar in kind to the reasons one has not to abandon one’s friends for those whose company is more entertaining. The upshot of my argument is that a popular picture of artistic appreciation is mistaken. According to this view, most recently defended by Jerrold Levinson, our interaction with artworks should ideally be governed exclusively by considerations of *artistic value*—where artistic value is construed as consisting in the capacity to offer intrin-

¹⁰Representative examples of what I refer to as “non-reductionism” include Scheffler, “Relationships and Responsibilities”; Kolodny, “Love as Valuing a Relationship”; Wallace, “Duties of Love”; and Jeske, *Rationality and Moral Theory*.

¹¹In particular, I focus on Cavell’s relationship with the films he discusses in Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*.

sically valuable experiences to spectators.¹² I argue that other factors besides such a capacity should play an equal if not greater role in determining which artworks one should prefer; chief among these factors is the history of one's interaction with the artwork. Partiality to particular works of art can be explained and justified by reference to the significant historical relationships that individuals have with these works. This has implications for further topics in the philosophy of art, including our understanding of the nature of our engagement with, criticism of, and obligations to works of art. The final two chapters of the dissertation address two of these implications.

In the third chapter, I explore a question about our ethical responsibilities to artworks: do we have genuine obligations to artworks themselves—obligations that aren't grounded in further obligations to other persons? On one influential line of thought, artworks are the bearers of moral rights; these rights ground our obligations to artworks. I argue that this approach is untenable, but draw on its insights to argue for a different way of grounding obligations to artworks. In particular, I argue that our obligations to artworks depend on our standing in a particular kind of relationship to those artworks—one of love. Obligations to artworks, I argue, are the obligations that one incurs in virtue of loving those artworks. If my argument is successful, this provides a further reason for us not to trade up and abandon our existing relationships with artworks: doing so might involve the violation of such obligations.

The fourth chapter brings my account of relationships with artworks to bear on the nature of art criticism. It is often maintained that art criticism, done properly, is impersonal and objective. On this picture, art critics engage in description and interpretation in order to provide reasons for accepting evaluative judgments of the work. A great deal of philosophical debate has focused on the question whether the reasons proffered in art-critical discourse really do support objective artistic evaluations, especially given the difficulty of specifying

¹²Levinson's position on artistic value is developed in Levinson, "Pleasure and the Value of Works of Art"; he provides an account of its practical relevance in Levinson, "Hume's Standard of Taste" and Levinson, "Artistic Worth and Personal Taste".

general principles of evaluation for the arts. I argue that this approach misconstrues the function of description and interpretation in art criticism; rather than aiming to support a belief or judgment about value, I argue that instead such characterizations function to provide reasons *for action*. I argue that a focus on practical rather than epistemic reasons yields an understanding of criticism that fits better with our intuitions about the value of reading art criticism, and which makes room for a nuanced distinction between criticism that aims at universality and criticism that is resolutely personal. I conclude by arguing that personal criticism is valuable as art criticism: rather than offering us information about which artworks are impartially best, such criticism instead shows us what relationships with works of art can be—information which we readily apply to our own relationships with artworks.

Chapter 1

Partiality and Its Reasons

Abstract

This chapter considers the puzzle of partiality: what explains the fact that we take ourselves to have reasons of partiality, i.e. good reasons to be partial to those individuals with whom we share special relationships? I argue that, in the case of personal relationships, such reasons can be explained entirely in terms of a set of more fundamental values that such relationships facilitate and instantiate. These include: the value of personal and joint projects; the value of the individual participants in these relationships; and general moral values such as trust, care, reciprocity, and gratitude. My view, which I call the Complex Theory of reasons of partiality, is therefore a form of reductionism about reasons of partiality. This approach departs from a popular non-reductionist view—defended by Samuel Scheffler and Niko Kolodny, among others—that special relationships are normatively fundamental entities which independently give rise to reasons of partiality. I first argue that the Complex Theory offers a better explanation of partiality than rival forms of reductionism. I then argue that the main arguments for non-reductionism are not persuasive. Finally, I argue that the Complex Theory can offer a better explanation of which rela-

tionships warrant partiality than the explanation offered by non-reductionists; this is a reason to prefer the Complex Theory to non-reductionist theories more generally.

1.1 The Puzzle of Partiality

Suppose that you're out on a midwinter stroll alongside the river when you hear a commotion ahead—a splash of water and calls of distress. Running forward, you happen upon the scene of two individuals who've fallen off a pier into the swift-flowing, ice-cold river. There happens to be one life preserver on the pier, which you grab while running towards the edge and prepare to throw. Because the river is moving quickly, you'll only be able to throw the life preserver to one of the individuals who has fallen in; you'll be able to tow that person to safety, but the other individual will be carried away by the river. As you reach the end of the pier, you realize with a shock that one of the individuals in the river is your mother. Without another thought, you throw the life preserver to your mother, towing her in to shore as the other individual—a stranger to you—floats away down the river.¹

After the fact, your friends might ask you why you acted in the way that you did. Although you might feel as though you've acted rightly, on reflection you might nevertheless worry about your justification for acting to save your mother rather than the stranger. This is to face the *puzzle of partiality*: What, if anything, *warrants* your sense that you've acted rightly in being partial?

1.1.1 Partiality and Its Reasons

We can get clearer on the puzzle of partiality by reflecting on the phenomenon of partiality within special relationships. As I understand it, *partiality* consists in differential concern towards those with whom one shares special relationships: romantic partners, friends, par-

¹This example is a variation on the one that Bernard Williams discusses in Williams, "Persons, Character and Morality", pp. 17-19. I return to Williams's discussion of such cases below.

ents, children, and so on. It manifests itself in deliberation and action: you choose to aid your mother rather than the stranger; and more generally, you might prefer to spend time with your friends or privilege the interests of your children over those of others. Partiality also manifests itself in differential emotional investment: If you hear on the news that a stranger has died, perhaps you feel a momentary pang of sadness or make a remark about the awful news to your friends. If instead you hear that your close friend has died, it would in most cases be grounds for emotional devastation. Some have even argued that partiality manifests itself in our beliefs and epistemic practices: Timmy's parents think that his piano recital performance of *Für Elise* is the best in history, and in *The Third Man* Holly Martins refuses to believe that his friend Harry Lime is a hardened criminal—all despite abundant evidence to the contrary.²

What is striking about the phenomenon of partiality within special relationships is not just its existence, but also the fact that we generally take its manifestations to be reasonable. We view our actions and attitudes not just as brute facts but rather as appropriate—or even required—responses to certain features of our circumstances. Let's characterize this with a bit of terminology: in participating in a special relationship, we take ourselves to be responding to a set of what we might call *reasons of partiality*: a set of considerations that count in favor of being partial in one's actions and attitudes towards another individual with whom one shares a special relationship.³

More precisely then, the puzzle of partiality is the question why we think that such reasons are in fact *good* reasons. Why should I have reasons to be partial to some individual just because that individual is my friend, or my parent, or so on?⁴ What is it about such

²For more discussion of the phenomenon of epistemic partiality, see Stroud, "Epistemic Partiality in Friendship".

³I follow Keller, *Partiality* in my terminology. Others have referred to such reasons as "relationship-dependent reasons" (e.g. Scheffler, "Projects, Relationships, and Reasons") or "reasons of intimacy" (e.g. Jeske, *Rationality and Moral Theory*). As best as I can tell, this is only a terminological difference: all parties to the literature are concerned with considerations that count in favor of the sorts of partiality that I've discussed above. One important note: I am using the term 'reason' in an expansive manner that includes obligations and requirements: your duty to help your friend is a reason for you to help them, albeit a particularly weighty one, and one for which your friend can blame you if you fail to help them.

⁴For the purposes of this chapter, I will leave aside consideration of generalized skepticism about the

relationships that explains the existence and the force of reasons of partiality? Why should I treat these individuals preferentially, especially given the reasonable assumption that all individuals deserve equal moral consideration? To answer these questions is to provide a solution to the puzzle of partiality.

1.1.2 How to Solve the Puzzle: Two Strategies

In this chapter I discuss two strategies for solving the puzzle of partiality. One strategy, quite popular of late, is *non-reductionism*. Non-reductionists argue that reasons of partiality can be explained simply by reference to the intrinsic or final value of special relationships themselves.⁵ They maintain that, insofar as such relationships are finally valuable, they serve as sources of reasons of partiality; valuing a special relationship involves seeing it—and considerations associated with it—as counting in favor of partiality.⁶ On this approach, special relationships are *fundamental* in explaining reasons of partiality: In explaining the existence and normative authority of these reasons, one need not appeal to any further normative facts beyond the existence of special relationships themselves. This strategy provides an answer to the puzzle of partiality by introducing a new primitive—the significant relationship—that grounds reasons of partiality.

The other strategy—which I favor—is *reductionism* about reasons of partiality.⁷ Reductionists argue that special relationships are *not* fundamental in explaining reasons of partiality. Rather, a full explanation of our reasons of partiality requires reference to some further

claim that we ever have reason to be partial in the way I've described above. cf. Scheffler's discussion of such skepticism in Scheffler, "Morality and Reasonable Partiality", pp. 105-106.

⁵Examples of the non-reductionist approach include Scheffler, "Relationships and Responsibilities", p. 197; Kolodny, "Love as Valuing a Relationship", pp. 150-151; Wallace, "Duties of Love", p. 187; and Jeske, *Rationality and Moral Theory*, ch. 2.

⁶*ibid.*, ch.4 and Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, pp. 88-90 pursue a similar, but distinct, strategy: each has argued that facts about the existence of special relationships in themselves directly constitute reasons of partiality. For insightful discussion of how Jeske's and Scanlon's positions differ from the value-based views discussed above, see Keller, *Partiality*, ch. 3. As far as I can tell, this makes no difference for my argument: my criticisms of non-reductionism should apply equally to these kinds of view.

⁷Here I understand reduction as an *explanatory* notion. B reduces to A if A is required to explain B. cf. Chang, "Value Pluralism", p. 16140.

set of normative facts beyond the mere existence of the relationships themselves. On this approach, relationships are *derivative* sources of reasons of partiality: Reductionists aim to explain the class of reasons of partiality by reference to some other set of more fundamental reasons and values which special relationships facilitate or instantiate—independent values such as happiness, knowledge, moral virtue, achievement, and so on.

Reductionism about reasons of partiality has traditionally not fared very well, largely because reductionists have generally offered explanations of partiality in terms of some *one* fundamental value. For example, utilitarians like Sidgwick attempt to explain partiality entirely in terms of its contributions to general happiness⁸ whereas voluntarists attempt to explain partiality solely in terms of voluntarily incurred commitments.⁹ The problem with these kinds of reductionism is that they can't do justice to the wide variety of reasons of partiality that we encounter in our special relationships. Partiality manifests itself in many different ways, and we may encounter very different reasons of partiality depending on the particular relationship in question. Utilitarians, for example, seem to have a difficult time capturing the deep sense of felt obligation that arises in some relationships of partiality¹⁰ whereas voluntarists fail to do justice to the idea that we may possess reasons to be partial to, for example, our families that are not sourced in a specific voluntary commitment. Monistic forms of reductionism tend to fail in offering explanations of partiality for just this reason. What's needed to do justice to this diversity, I argue, is a more sophisticated, pluralistic form of reductionism. I develop such a theory—which I call the Complex Theory of reasons of partiality—below. I will argue that it provides a better explanation of the phenomena of partiality than competing non-reductionist theories. What's more, as I argue in the concluding section of the chapter, the Complex Theory paves the way for understanding instances of partiality that extend beyond our relationships with other persons—including relationships with *artworks*, which I discuss in the following chapter.

⁸Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, pp. 430–439.

⁹For an example of such a voluntarist approach, see Hart, “Are There Any Natural Rights?” Robert Goodin presents an extended critique of such an approach in Goodin, *Protecting the Vulnerable*, ch. 3.

¹⁰For an objection along these lines, see Jollimore, “Friendship Without Partiality?”, pp. 70–71.

1.2 The Complex Theory of Reasons of Partiality

The Complex Theory can be stated rather simply:

COMPLEX THEORY: Reasons of partiality can be explained entirely in terms of a set of independent values that special relationships facilitate or instantiate.

On its own, the Complex Theory doesn't say much; what's needed is some further elaboration about the set of independent values which special relationships facilitate or instantiate. Here are three such values that special relationships facilitate or instantiate:

1. The value of individuals' projects;
2. The value of individual persons; and
3. Moral values of trust, vulnerability, reciprocity and gratitude.

While this list may not be a complete list of the values that relationships facilitate or instantiate, I do think that it *is* a complete list of those values that play a major role in explaining partiality within special relationships.¹¹ This amounts to a reductionist explanation of reasons of partiality in special relationships. In the remainder of this section, I'll provide some initial motivation for the Complex Theory; in the next section, I'll provide further support for the Complex Theory by showing how it builds on theories of partiality which each take *one* of the items in the above list as central in explaining partiality.

As already suggested above, the major motivation for the Complex Theory is the recognition that special relationships—and the reasons of partiality that attend them—are a rather diverse bunch. This diversity occurs at two levels. First, there are many different kinds of special relationships. We have reasons to be partial to our friends, our romantic partners,

¹¹My approach bears important similarities to reductionist attempts to explain the value of special relationships in terms of a set of independent values. Two convincing examples of this approach are Ross, *The Right and the Good*, pp. 140-141; Hurka, *The Best Things in Life*, ch. 7. My approach differs from these in that—as stated above—I am only aiming to explain the phenomenon of partiality within special relationships—rather than the value of special relationships more generally. There may be further ways in which special relationships are valuable which nevertheless do not play a role in explaining why we have reasons to be partial within them.

our families, our associates—and, according to some, to our fellow citizens or members of our society. Within each of these kinds, there is even greater diversity: some friendships involve a commitment to shared projects and joint activity; others involve a dedication to mutual support and interdependency; while others involve some combination of each of these. Individual friendships might differ from each other as much as friendships differ from parent-child relationships. The Complex Theory can accommodate this intuition by acknowledging a wide range of values that generate reasons of partiality; together, the set of these values is sufficient to explain why we have reason to be partial to those with whom we share special relationships.

Central to the plausibility of the Complex Theory is the important disclaimer that not every special relationship will involve the facilitation or instantiation of all three of the specified kinds of values and reasons. Although I think that most special relationships involve some combination of these three kinds of values, it's possible that many will not: For one, some special relationships will involve no moral obligations. Perhaps both participants might consciously release each other from all such obligations of this sort. Other relationships will not involve projects: in one's relationship with an estranged partner or a distant friend, one might no longer view one's relationship as constituting or involving one's ground projects. Finally, some relationships might fail to present their participants with privileged or effective means of responding to the value of persons: take, for example, the case with which the chapter began, where one has an equal opportunity to save one's mother and a stranger who, by stipulation, have equal value as persons.

The major advantage of the Complex Theory is that it can explain why, in each of these cases, we might still have reasons to be partial. In a relationship in which there are no moral obligations, one might nevertheless still be motivated to be partial by the fact that caring for a loved one is one's ground project. In a relationship which no longer constitutes or involves one's ground projects, one might nevertheless still have moral obligations to be partial which are sourced in the expectations and dependencies that one has accepted within

the context of one's relationship. Finally, one might suspect that project-based reasons and moral obligations fail to exhaust our reasons to be partial; in such a case, as I will explain below, one might still nevertheless have reasons to be partial which are sourced in the value of the individual with whom one shares the special relationship. In virtue of this flexibility, the Complex Theory gets the extension of reasons of partiality correct: it is able to explain, in a very diverse set of cases, why we take ourselves to have reasons of partiality.

The Complex Theory also delivers an account of reasons of partiality that accords with our common-sense intuitions about the kinds of reasons that reasons of partiality are. It is able to deliver a picture of partiality in which we are responding to the *right kind* of reasons to be partial. In particular—and as I discuss further below—reasons of partiality seem to be a rather heterogenous bunch. Some paradigmatic reasons of partiality appear to us to be *agent-relative* reasons: your promise to favor your friend applies only to *you*, and not to any other agents. But there also appear to be legitimate reasons of partiality which are *agent-neutral* in character: as utilitarians are quick to point out, adopting a policy of partiality may be the best means of promoting general welfare—and to this extent, everyone has an agent-neutral reason to be partial within their own personal relationships. The Complex Theory, insofar as it explains reasons of partiality by reference to a set of values that includes agent-relative *and* agent-neutral values, is able to do justice to both kinds of reasons of partiality.¹²

Beyond these general remarks, the overall plausibility of the Complex Theory will depend on the particular story to be told about how each of the three values in question generates reasons of partiality within the context of special relationships. How and why do the value of projects, the value of individuals, and the moral values I've listed generate reasons to be partial to our friends and loved ones? I explore this issue in the next section by examining three approaches to explaining partiality, each of which aims to explain partiality *entirely* in terms of one of these values. As a complete explanation of partiality, each of these three

¹²I provide an account of the distinction between agent-relative and agent-neutral reasons in Section 1.3.2 below.

approaches fails; however, each *does* provide valuable insight into how each value generates a subset of the class of reasons of partiality. Incorporating them into the Complex Theory will yield an account of partiality which is both extensionally and qualitatively adequate to fully explain reasons of partiality.

1.3 Three (Partial) Theories of Partiality

The Complex Theory builds on three other reductionist approaches to the puzzle of partiality which are well-represented in the literature: the projects view, the individuals view, and the moral obligations view. Each of these views gives us a story about how the particular value in question generates reasons of partiality within the context of special relationships. However, none of these views has the resources to provide an adequate explanation of partiality on its own. In showing how each of these views go wrong, I'll also demonstrate how the Complex Theory—which explains partiality by reference to the set of all three values—is better able to explain partiality.

1.3.1 The Projects View

The example with which I began the chapter owes much to Bernard Williams. Williams famously deploys a similar example as a means of challenging the predominant picture of the moral agent as impartially motivated: if, in such a case as the one I described, one were to contemplate the impartial moral permissibility of saving one's mother rather than the stranger, this would constitute "one thought too many."¹³ While this claim about motivation has attracted a great deal of interest, what's less often noted is the implicit account of reasons of partiality upon which Williams's claim relies.

Williams's account is an instance of what we might call the *projects* view.¹⁴ According

¹³Williams, "Persons, Character and Morality", p. 18.

¹⁴For further examples of the projects view, see Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love*; Stroud, "Permissible Partiality, Projects, and Plural Agency". cf. Simon Keller's discussion of the view in Keller, *Partiality*, ch. 2.

to the projects view, one's reasons of partiality are explained by reference to the reasons generated by one's projects, along with the claim that many personal relationships constitute or involve such projects. On this view, caring for a loved one and participating in a special relationship is similar in kind to—to take Williams's example—being dedicated to pacifism, or working on writing one's novel. Insofar as each one of us has reasons to be partial to our own projects, this will also give us reason to be partial to those relationships of ours which constitute or involve such projects.¹⁵

To gauge the plausibility of the projects view, we first need to get clearer on the notion of a project. Williams introduces the notion of a *ground project* as follows:

A man may have, for a lot of his life or even just for some part of it, a *ground project* or set of projects which are closely related to his existence and which to a significant degree give a meaning to his life.¹⁶

We can expand on Williams's initial statement in several ways: First, we might suggest that ground projects consist of a set of concerns, interests, aims or goals. Some of these may be outcome oriented, e.g. finishing a novel, whereas others might be ongoing, e.g. volunteering at the hospital. Ground projects are distinguished from mere desires or preferences by (a) the extent to which agents find such projects to give their lives meaning; and (b) the existence of a history of concern and commitment to the project.¹⁷ My long-term commitment to writing a book is quite different from my occasional yen to, say, experience space travel. The latter is not a project to which I am especially committed or which I find deeply meaningful, nor is it one that I have acted on or intend to act on. Finally, it seems plausible that being committed to such a ground project involves taking oneself to have reasons to devote oneself to it, which following Scheffler we might refer to as *project-dependent reasons*.¹⁸

¹⁵I take it for granted here that we *really do* have reasons to be partial to our own projects. A more thorough consideration and defense of this position is to be found in Samuel Scheffler's account of an "agent-centered prerogative" to focus on one's own projects in Scheffler, *The Rejection of Consequentialism*, ch. 3.

¹⁶Williams, "Persons, Character and Morality", p. 12.

¹⁷I don't develop the notion of meaningfulness here. However, I am very sympathetic to the fitting fulfillment view defended by Susan Wolf in Wolf et al., *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters*, pp. 25-33.

¹⁸Scheffler, "Projects, Relationships, and Reasons". Of course, project-dependent reasons are open to the

The main claim of the projects view is that we can explain reasons of partiality as instantiations of such project-dependent reasons. This might occur in two ways: First, as Williams suggests, a commitment to another person might constitute a ground project in and of itself. For example, in a loving relationship, caring for one's beloved often comes to be more or less central to one's life. Romantic partners usually have a stable, long-standing concern in understanding and contributing to each other's good. In many cases, this concern can become meaningful in its own right: being there for one's beloved in good times and bad, supporting them, and caring for them can come to play an important role in the self-conception of each. Insofar as such caring for another individual takes on the role of a ground project, and insofar as such caring calls for favoring that individual's concern over others, such projects will generate reasons of partiality.

Of course, special relationships usually involve much more than their participants' robust concern in doing good for each other.¹⁹ Take, for example, two parents of a newborn: they change diapers, trade late-night wake-ups, arrange visits to the doctor, and juggle visiting relatives. They deliberate about how to raise their child, together: what kind of life should the child have? What do they need to do in order to support this? They are in agreement about the importance of some things, but disagree about others. They're hashing it out as they go, all while trying to eke out a couple hours of sleep here and there. Neither is particularly focused on their individual project to care for the other. What they are dedicated to is something else—namely, the *joint* project of raising their child. This is a project that they perform together, as a plural agent of sorts.²⁰ It is also central to their lives, and deeply meaningful to both of them. This gives us a second route to project-dependent reasons of partiality within special relationships: insofar as I am involved with my relationship partner

same set of questions that I've asked about reasons of partiality. I remain neutral here on the question of whether we should pursue a non-reductionist or a reductionist account of project-dependent reasons.

¹⁹As David Velleman has pointed out in Velleman, "Love as Moral Emotion", p. 353, a lover "whose love was a bundle of these urges, to care and share and please and impress—such a lover would be an interfering, ingratiating nightmare."

²⁰For a more in-depth discussion of plural agency within the context of friendships in particular, cf. Helm, *Love, Friendship, and the Self*, ch. 8.

in pursuing a joint project—such as raising our child—this gives me reason to show greater concern for my partner than for others, insofar as without my partner, pursuing the joint project simply would not be possible.²¹

As promising as the projects view might seem, it faces a serious objection. This is the problem of duties of partiality: A number of our reasons of partiality present themselves as requirements, obligations, or duties concerning the individuals with whom we share special relationships. Parents have duties of care to their children and friends are bound to be loyal to each other. Samuel Scheffler has argued that reasons of partiality differ from project-dependent reasons in this respect:

We normally suppose that many of our relationship-dependent reasons are reasons on which we are morally required or obligated to act, at least in so far as they are not outweighed or otherwise defeated by competing considerations. By contrast, we do not normally think that we are obligated to act on our project-dependent reasons, but merely that we are permitted or entitled to do so, even when they are the strongest reasons we have.²²

Consider the case of writing a novel; perhaps the fact that this is one's project gives one reasons to devote a great deal of time and resources to finishing it. However, as Scheffler would have it, one isn't *required* to continue working on it. If one ceases to view it as a meaningful endeavor that one cares about, one is permitted to give it up, as one has no obligations to the project itself. Projects don't generate duties or obligations, but special relationships are shot through with such obligations: parents are obligated to care for the children, married partners are obligated to care for each other, and friends are obligated to be loyal to each other. Thus the projects view fails to yield an explanation of reasons of

²¹Stroud, "Permissible Partiality, Projects, and Plural Agency", pp. 145-149 offers further discussion of the role of joint projects in explaining reasons of partiality.

²²Scheffler, "Projects, Relationships, and Reasons", p. 258. I return to Scheffler's claim—and the worry that projects do not generate obligations—in a later chapter, in which I discuss the question of whether we can possess genuine obligations to artworks.

partiality that is extensionally adequate.²³

The Complex Theory takes on board the strengths of the projects view, insofar as it also explains some of our reasons of partiality in terms of the value of personal projects. However, it avoids the main objection facing the projects view, insofar as it provides room for obligations of partiality generated by the moral requirements to respect the commitments entered into and expectations raised within the context of special relationships.²⁴

1.3.2 The Individuals View

Iris Murdoch suggests that “love is knowledge of the individual.”²⁵ In this claim, we find the seed of another attempt to explain our reasons of partiality which we can refer to as the *individuals* view. The individuals view attempts to explain reasons of partiality entirely by reference to the value of the individuals with whom we share our special relationships.²⁶ The details of the view will depend on a further account of the value of persons: there are therefore Kantian versions of the individuals view, utilitarian versions of the individuals view, and so on. The basic thought goes something like this: individuals have a certain value—usually explained in terms of their welfare or their autonomy—and this value generates reasons for all agents to respond to it in appropriate ways. However, participating in a special relationship gives us an especially efficient means of experiencing, understanding, and responding to the value of the individuals with whom we share those relationships. We can respond to their value much better than we can respond to the value of strangers—just as others can respond to the value of their friends and loved ones much more effectively than we can. Therefore, we each have reasons to be partial to our friends and loved ones,

²³ Another way to put this objection would be to say that, if one were to cease to actually care about a project, one would be permitted to end one’s commitment to it. However, this doesn’t seem to be true of a number of our special relationships: if one ceases to care about one’s child, one cannot simply abandon the child as one would a failed novel. Diane Jeske offers an objection to the projects view along these lines in Jeske, *Rationality and Moral Theory*, ch. 2.

²⁴ I discuss these further below, in presenting the moral obligations view.

²⁵ Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, p. 28.

²⁶ For variants of this view see Velleman, “Love as Moral Emotion”; Keller, *Partiality*, ch. 4-5; Setiya, “Love and the Value of a Life”.

on the grounds that this is the best way to respond to the value of persons generally.²⁷

There are two major problems for the individuals view. The first problem is that it depends on an empirical claim that partiality within special relationships is really the best means of responding to the value of persons. Is this true? While this is a difficult question to answer conclusively, defenders of the individuals view are generally able to make a good case for their claim. Frank Jackson has argued that being partial to our nearest and dearest accords best with our motivational structures: we are much less likely to lose motivational steam in promoting the good of individuals that we antecedently care about.²⁸ Kantians on the other hand might argue that responding in full to the autonomy of persons involves a significant outlay of time, energy, and resources, making it the case that we humans are only able to do so within the context of a few special relationships.²⁹

The second and more serious problem for the individuals view is the fact that reasons to respond to the value of persons seem to differ in kind from some paradigmatic kinds of reasons of partiality. Suppose that we vary the case from the beginning of the chapter, and that I arrive at the pier rather than you. Suppose also that I am able to save only your mother, rather than the stranger. I would certainly take myself to have good reasons to save your mother. The fact that she is in danger along with facts about my causal ability to help her would count in favor of my throwing her the life preserver. These would be reasons that anyone would have in the circumstances, sourced in your mother's value as an individual. Even if this were the case, I wouldn't take myself to have the same *kinds* of reasons as you do to assist her. You are moved to save your mother by the fact that this is *your mother*, the person who raised you and cared for you in your childhood, with whom you have a particular history. To put it simply, I don't have access to the same kinds of reasons of partiality that you have; she is not my mother.

Another way to put the point would be to say that all reasons to respond to the value

²⁷Arguments for this point differ on the basis of the account that one gives of the nature of the value of individuals; I discuss several such arguments below.

²⁸Jackson, "Decision-Theoretic Consequentialism and the Nearest and Dearest Objection", p. 480.

²⁹cf. Velleman, "Love as Moral Emotion", pp. 370-373.

of persons are *agent-neutral*, insofar as they are reasons that all agents within similar causal positions would share, whereas at least some reasons of partiality are *agent-relative*, insofar as they are reasons that one possesses in virtue of something more than just one's causal position.³⁰ The problem for the individuals view, then, is that the reasons of partiality which the value of individuals generate are exclusively agent-neutral reasons, whereas some (if not all) reasons of partiality are agent-relative. This is problematic because we often take acting on the basis of agent-relative reasons to be a central means of expressing the personal nature of our commitments to our friends and loved ones; it is therefore important that my reasons to be partial to you are reasons that apply to *me specifically*—and not to an agent, generically described, in a similar causal position.³¹ Therefore, reasons of partiality cannot be explained entirely in terms of the value of individuals.

Simon Keller attempts to respond to this objection on behalf of the individuals view by arguing that while, strictly speaking, reasons of partiality can be explained entirely in terms of facts about the value of individuals, such facts may nevertheless generate agent-relative reasons for action—thereby avoiding the difficulty I've identified above.³² Keller develops this thought by appealing to Johnathan Dancy's distinction between “favorers”, facts that count in favor of actions, and “enablers”, facts that enable favorers to function as such.³³ Dancy explains the distinction in terms of the following contrast: the fact that I have made a promise to you to return your book *favors* my returning it, whereas the fact that I am able to do so—because I've brought the book with me to see you, say—is a fact that *enables* my promise to count in favor of the action of returning your book. Had I not brought your book, my promise would perhaps count in favor of *other* actions: going to retrieve your

³⁰This is only a definition of agent-relative *reasons*—and not agent-relative values. That said, I think that the most natural way to explain the existence of such reasons is in terms of agent-relative values, which generate reasons only for a particular subset of the class of agents. ‘Neutral’ values would be values relativized to the class of *all* agents. This would amount to a value-based theory of reasons, paired with the claim that all value is relative. However, almost all of what I say here should be compatible with either Scanlon-style reasons fundamentalism or with a neutral-value based theory of reasons.

³¹Troy Jollimore makes a similar point in Jollimore, “Friendship Without Partiality?”, pp. 75–76.

³²Keller, *Partiality*, pp. 133–136.

³³Dancy, *Ethics Without Principles*, pp. 38–41.

book, making a note to myself to bring it next time, and so on.³⁴

Keller then applies this framework to what he calls the “particularist” version of the individuals view, given its debts to Dancy:

Reasons of partiality are facts about the value of individuals, so when you give special treatment within a special relationship your reason for acting is that your act would be good for the person with whom your relationship is shared. This is your reason-giving fact; it is the favorer for your action. What enables that fact to be your reason—what enables it to be a favorer—is the further fact that this person is someone with whom you share a particular relationship. Speaking generally, on the particularist version of the individuals view, facts about the value of individuals are reasons, and facts about relationships are enablers. The fact that you share a relationship with someone is not itself a reason of partiality, but it enables other facts to be reasons of partiality.³⁵

The basic thought is that one is only able to *have* reasons to respond to the value of an individual person if one stands in the right kind of relationship to them—for example, one of friendship. On this view, being your friend *enables* facts about your value as a person to count in favor of my responding to said value—in a way that the values of other individuals who are not my friends do not.

Keller’s suggestion would allow reasons of partiality to be agent-relative, insofar as one only has access to these reasons if one is in a particular special relationship. The problem with this approach, as Keller admits, is that “there is no explanation here of *why* the fact that you share a relationship with someone should enable her self-standing value to generate special reasons for you.”³⁶ Taking Keller’s route therefore amounts to giving up on the goal of offering a reductionist explanation of reasons of partiality; it amounts to a form of non-reductionism about reasons of partiality, insofar as special relationships are fundamental in

³⁴Dancy, *Ethics Without Principles*, pp. 38–41.

³⁵Keller, *Partiality*, p. 135.

³⁶*Ibid.*, p. 135.

explaining reasons of partiality.

The Complex Theory, on the other hand, is able to explain this difference in kind: It's likely that you either view your relationship with your mother as a ground project, or that you take yourself to have obligations of gratitude and reciprocity to your mother due to her history of caring for you in your early life. Both of these aspects of your relationship would explain why you have additional reasons which I lack—reasons which are relative to you in virtue of the history that you and your mother share.

This is not to deny that the value of individuals does provide us with reasons to be partial; indeed, one major lesson to take away from the individuals view is the fact that some (if not all) reasons of partiality *are* agent-neutral in character. The class of reasons of partiality is diverse, and involves both agent-relative *and* agent-neutral reasons. It is just this kind of diversity that the Complex Theory reflects.

1.3.3 The Moral Obligations View

The *moral obligations* view is narrower in scope than the projects view or the individuals view: it aims only to explain the responsibilities or duties of partiality that one has towards those individuals with whom one shares special relationships. The proposal is that the responsibilities that we have to the individuals with whom we share special relationships can be explained entirely in virtue of more general moral requirements. These might include at least the following: requirements of *trust* to meet the expectations of others that we have intentionally raised through our past actions;³⁷ requirements of *vulnerability* to care for those whom we have led to be dependent on us; and requirements of *reciprocity* and *gratitude*, to repay or respond in kind to individuals who have benefitted us in the past.

Such moral requirements are, in principle, requirements that we might have to anyone, including individuals with whom we do not share special relationships.³⁸ However, as pro-

³⁷cf. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, pp. 296-309.

³⁸It is true that we must have *some* relationship with an individual in order to have these sorts of moral obligations to them—however, this relationship may simply consist in having made a promise to someone,

ponents of the moral obligations view observe, special relationships serve as especially dense networks of such requirements; this is what differentiates them from, for example, one-off promises that we make to strangers.³⁹ According to the moral obligations view, these obligations exhaust the requirements of partiality: we can understand your obligation to save your mother entirely in terms of, say, your duties of reciprocity and gratitude for her past care to you.

R. Jay Wallace has objected to the moral obligations view on the grounds that that our duties within special relationships—which he refers to as duties of love—differ both in quality and in extension from more general moral obligations. He argues instead that duties of love are *sui generis* obligations which “escape the net of moral principles that the reductionist appeals to.”⁴⁰ If Wallace is right, this would indicate that requirements of partiality cannot be wholly reduced to more general moral obligations.

Wallace presents two sets of considerations meant to support this claim. First, he claims that the duties of love seem to differ strikingly in kind from duties accrued on the basis of general moral principles. To motivate this claim, Wallace appeals to the following thought experiment:

Imagine a situation in which we have benefited in comparable measure from the efforts of someone unknown and unrelated to us—a secret benefactor, say, who randomly singled us out to be the recipient of their largesse, where this in turn has had enormous positive effects on our life....We would no doubt have extensive moral obligations to such a benefactor, under general principles of generosity and reciprocity, but the nature and quality of these obligations would make them very different from the duties we have to our actual aging parents.⁴¹

having received aid, or having raised an expectation. Intuitively, such relationships differ from what we refer to as “special” relationships in the fact that they can be described in terms of a single past interaction that can be described generically—as “having made a promise” or “having received aid”—rather than as an extended history of many interactions that must be described in particular terms.

³⁹cf. Wolf, “Morality and Partiality”, p. 247.

⁴⁰Wallace, “Duties of Love”, p. 185.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 186.

The point of Wallace's claim is that the *quality* of our concern for our parents would be quite different from the quality of our concern for the anonymous benefactor.⁴²

Second, Wallace claims that duties of love differ *extensionally* from moral obligations; he claims that there may be duties of love even when one has no moral obligations. To support this claim, Wallace appeals to a case in which one's life partner is at the end of their life and one is faced with the decision of whether or not to spend time with them in the hospital. However, Wallace stipulates that in this case, both partners have released each other from all obligations, and no further duties of care or of reciprocity or gratitude apply. There are therefore no obligations sourced in these moral duties. Wallace claims that in such a case,

We might nevertheless feel under these circumstances that we owe it to our beloved to be there for them in this phase of our lives, and that it would somehow be disloyal of us to turn our backs on them in the present situation. This would seem to be a *sui generis* duty of love, which cannot plausibly be reduced to moral principles of the kind that potentially apply to other cases, since by hypothesis we would not be in violation of such principles if we were to fail to live up to the duty that is in question.⁴³

Given that, by stipulation, there are no moral obligations in this case, Wallace argues that this constitutes evidence for a distinct class of duties of love.

While each of these cases seems to have a strong intuitive pull, I think that we can nevertheless explain both without appeal to a class of *sui generis* duties of love. In the first case, the difference in the quality of concern for our parents can be explained by the fact that caring for our parents is likely one of our ground projects, whereas this simply isn't possible with respect to an anonymous benefactor. This explains the sense in which caring for our parents and carrying out our obligations to them is more meaningful to us—and therefore

⁴²Wallace doesn't fully explain or provide an example for what he means by the fact that there is a difference in the "quality" of such obligations. I think that the most plausible way to explain this concerns the fact that such obligations particularly focused on an individual in the case of one's parent, while they are not similarly focused in the case of the anonymous benefactor.

⁴³Wallace, "Duties of Love", p. 186.

different in kind—from our consideration of our obligations to an anonymous benefactor. My response to the second case is quite similar: it's likely that in the end of life case, caring for one's partner remains as one of one's ground projects, even if one is no longer morally obligated to remain dedicated to it.⁴⁴ We can explain the sense in which one would feel disloyal not as a kind of disloyalty to one's partner, but rather as a worry about one's own integrity to one's ground projects.

One might reply on behalf of Wallace by arguing that in this case one appears to have a *duty* to visit one's loved one in the hospital, and by reaffirming the point that projects do not generate duties. One avenue of response to this reply would be to underline the weight of our project-dependent reasons: as Harry Frankfurt has argued, such reasons often present themselves as especially weighty reasons—Frankfurt characterizes them as “volitional necessities.”⁴⁵ Even if these are not reasons involving moral duties, they might nevertheless be reasons with similar weights. A second avenue of response would be to argue that there *are* duties bound up with our personal projects, albeit not duties *to* those projects; one might argue that, in committing oneself to a particular project, one accrues a duty to oneself to remain committed to the project, all other things being equal.⁴⁶

I've argued that the moral obligations view has resources to respond to Wallace's objections. However, there is one further problem for the moral obligations view as an explanation of reasons of partiality: insofar as it only aims to deal with the obligations that we face within special relationships, it does little to explain much of the broader class of reasons of partiality. Partiality is not always a matter of appreciating one's duties or obligations. We take considerations about our friends and loved ones to favor or warrant certain kinds of action rather than requiring them: it would be good to take my friend out for his birth-

⁴⁴It may be the case that the attempt to release one another from all obligations would be a step in the direction of removing caring for one's partner from one's ground projects. Even so, I suspect that ground projects are often resistant to such attempts to change; one's commitment to the project might linger despite one's best efforts to enable one's abandoning it.

⁴⁵Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love*, pp. 45-47.

⁴⁶I favor the second response; I pick up this suggestion in the third chapter, and argue that we may have such “duties of love” with respect to our relationships with particular artworks that we love. The duties are fundamentally grounded, I argue, in a commitment made to oneself.

day, but in normal cases if I do so, I don't do so because I'm *required* to do so.⁴⁷ Even if the moral obligations view can serve as a satisfying reductive account of all *obligations* of partiality—and I think it can, although I cannot fully argue the point here—it nevertheless cannot serve as a comprehensive reductive account of all of our reasons of partiality. Like the projects view, it isn't extensionally adequate to explain all of our reasons of partiality.

The Complex Theory, on the other hand, has the resources to explain reasons of partiality which are not obligations or requirements. The Complex Theory incorporates the strengths of the moral obligations theory—the thought that most if not all requirements within special relationships can be explained by reference to particular instantiations of more general moral duties—while supplementing this account of the duties of partiality with a further account of reasons of partiality sourced in personal projects and the value of individuals. Because of this flexibility, the Complex Theory is able to give an extensionally adequate explanation of the reasons of partiality.

1.3.4 The Complex Theory and Completeness

I've argued that three prominent reductionist accounts of the reasons of partiality provide us with at best partial explanations of our reasons of partiality. The Complex Theory is a synthesis of these three theories: it incorporates the strengths of each in order to provide an explanation of reasons of partiality that is both qualitatively and extensionally adequate.

Is the Complex Theory complete as an explanation of reasons of partiality? I believe that the Complex Theory is sufficient for explaining the great majority of the class of reasons of partiality, although it is possible that there may be further values that special relationships facilitate or exemplify. In this spirit, the Complex Theory should be regarded as a theory in progress: it remains open to the accommodation of new classes of value in providing the best explanation of the class of reasons of partiality.

⁴⁷To be clear: even if one *were* required to take one's friend out to lunch, there may also be further reasons of partiality that favor doing it which do not rise to the level of moral requirements. The moral obligations view cannot explain these.

Consider the following variation of the initial example: Suppose that you are walking to the pier to meet your sister for the first time; you were twins separated at birth, and the two of you have never met. You only know that she will be wearing a red coat. As you arrive at the pier, you see two people in the water, one of whom is wearing a red coat. You choose to save the person in the red coat, because she is your sister.⁴⁸

This seems like a reasonable thing to do, but the Complex Theory seems to have a difficult time explaining it. In this case, your reason for saving your sister can't be explained by reference to your projects—you don't have a relationship-based project with your sister, as you don't have a relationship at all.⁴⁹ It can't be explained by reference to your moral obligations; you have no moral obligations to your sister that you don't have towards the stranger. And finally, it can't be explained by reference to your ability to better respond to the value of your sister; without a history of interaction with and concern for your sister, it seems unlikely that you could better respond to her value than you could respond to the value of the other stranger.

There are two strategies of responding to such a case on behalf of the Complex Theory. First, one might respond by arguing that in this case, one *doesn't* have any reason to be partial to one's sister. Perhaps, if one were to choose to save one's sister, this would come to constitute a relationship which might then generate reasons of partiality. Perhaps it is the prospect of forming such a relationship which might lead one to favor saving the woman in the red coat; perhaps the goal of forming such a relationship is in fact one of one's ground projects.⁵⁰ Even if this were true, and one were to have a reason to save the person in the red coat, this wouldn't be a reason of partiality in the sense that I've developed the term above, insofar as it isn't a reason to be partial to an individual that derives from one's having a special relationship with them.

⁴⁸I owe this example to Gavin Lawrence.

⁴⁹The fact that she is your sister is a biological *relation*, rather than a relationship—and I take it that the bare fact of such a relation, on its own, is not normatively significant. For more on this distinction and its normative significance, see Kolodny, "Love as Valuing a Relationship", p. 149.

⁵⁰I thank Barbara Herman and Alexander Nehamas for suggesting different versions of this line of response.

On the other hand, it's also possible to adopt an accommodationist strategy by dropping the claim that the Complex Theory is complete. Perhaps there is some other kind of value which also generates reasons of partiality which the Complex Theory does not reference. This might explain the existence of reasons of partiality in the above example, such that it *would* be reasonable to save the woman in the red coat. While I prefer the former strategy, I would be amenable to the latter pending some plausible explanation of the above case. I think that the Complex Theory is sufficient for explaining the great majority of the class of reasons of partiality, although it is possible that there may be further values that special relationships facilitate or exemplify. In this spirit, the Complex Theory should be regarded as a theory in progress: it remains open to the accommodation of new classes of value in providing the best explanation of the class of reasons of partiality.

Despite the strengths of the Complex Theory as a reductionist explanation of reasons of partiality, one might nevertheless argue that there are reasons to prefer a non-reductionist explanation of reasons of partiality. In the next section, I show that the most promising direct arguments for non-reductionism are unconvincing; this sets the stage for my defense of the Complex Theory on the grounds that it yields greater explanatory benefits than non-reductionist explanations of reasons of partiality.

1.4 The Fundamentality Claim and Non-Reductionism

The core of the non-reductionist approach to the puzzle of partiality is the claim that special relationships are *fundamental* in explaining reasons of partiality. Recall that this is the claim that reasons of partiality can be wholly explained in terms of facts about the existence of special relationships: the final value of such relationships generates reasons of partiality. One needs to cite no further normative facts in order to explain reasons of partiality.

What direct arguments are there for the non-reductionist position? Here I consider what I take to be the most promising arguments for non-reductionism: first is the claim that

our common sense understanding of such reasons views their normative force as deriving simply from facts about the existence of special relationships. Second is the claim that there are some reasons of partiality that simply cannot be explained by reference to independent values which relationships facilitate or instantiate.

R. Jay Wallace presents an argument for this claim at the level of requirements. First, he notes that in justifying our behavior to others, we need only cite the facts of our relationship in order to justify certain things that we must do for our loved ones. For example, one might legitimately explain the cancellation of one's appearance at an upcoming conference simply by explaining that one's mother is in the hospital. This serves to articulate one's duty to go to the hospital to be with one's mother. Wallace then notes that "there is nothing to justify the obligations that I articulate in these cases beyond the fact that I have a relationship of one of these kinds with someone."⁵¹

Wallace's description is convincing: we often do cite our special relationships to justify our partiality. What's more, while Wallace's example applies only to obligations within special relationships, I think that this practice of justification applies more generally: quite often, we cite our special relationships as providing us with reasons to be partial, rather than requirements or obligations. Suppose that I am trying to decide on what to do with my day when my friend Henry calls me to tell me that he's in town and visiting for the day only. If someone were to ask me why I'd decide to spend time with Henry rather than going to the local soup kitchen, I might simply say that Henry is my friend. This is usually enough to provide justification for my action.

Wallace's argument is that this practice of citing our special relationships as a means of justifying partiality provides us with the "normative appearance" that special relationships in and of themselves *do* provide independent justification for partiality. Absent any reason to reject this picture, Wallace argues that we should therefore opt for the non-reductionist picture, according to which relationships themselves are finally valuable, and thereby inde-

⁵¹Wallace, "Duties of Love", p. 184.

pends to provide us with reasons to be partial.⁵²

I think that Wallace is correct that in many conversational contexts, a justification of this sort will suffice. However, I don't think that this directly settles the matter of whether or not relationships themselves are normatively fundamental. After all, couldn't it be the case that appealing to my relationship serves as a shorthand for appealing to the independent reasons and values which my relationship facilitates or instantiates?

Wallace anticipates this response; he admits that it is possible to adopt a view according to which, "referring to the nature of your relationship to the person for whose sake you are acting can be a convenient way of conveying to your interlocutor information about the real normative basis of the obligations you take yourself to have."⁵³ However, he suggests that it doesn't seem to gel with what he refers to as "normative appearances."⁵⁴ Common sense seems to indicate that appealing to the existence of one's relationship is all that is necessary to provide justification. Therefore, unless there is compelling reason to opt for the reductionist position, Wallace claims that we should instead opt for non-reductionism.

In response to Wallace, I think it's far from clear that the "normative appearances" support non-reductionism. It's not obvious that a strategy of citing the fact of one's relationship as justification for partiality will work in *all* conversational contexts: Imagine a case in which one is with one's therapist, discussing one's recent trip to the hospital to visit one's mother. The therapist might ask the further question of *why* one took oneself to have such an obligation: what is it about one's relationship with one's mother that explains the existence of such an obligation? In this case, simply repeating the claim that she is one's mother wouldn't seem to suffice. It's likely that one would then describe one's relationship with one's mother; I'd wager that this description would make reference to many of the qualities of relationships in virtue of which they facilitate or instantiate the independent values I've identified above. Perhaps the fact that in many contexts such an explanation will suffice relies on the

⁵²Wallace, "Duties of Love", p. 184. Scheffler makes a similar argument in Scheffler, "Relationships and Responsibilities", pp. 195-196.

⁵³Wallace, "Duties of Love", p. 185.

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 185.

assumption that, generally speaking, such relationships facilitate or instantiate these independent values. What is at issue with the therapist is the question of whether or not this is true in one's own *particular* case. In this context, mentioning the fact that one is in such a relationship does little to no justificatory work.

It is at least as plausible on the basis of our conversational practices that our reasons of partiality issue from an independent set of values that special relationships facilitate or instantiate. Appealing to the conversational practice of claiming that one's relationship warrants partiality doesn't settle the matter of whether or not such relationships are normatively fundamental.

A second argument for non-reductionism involves the appeal to cases where reasons of partiality cannot be fully explained by citing a set of independent goods that relationships facilitate or instantiate; such cases, non-reductionists argue, indicate that relationships themselves ground reasons of partiality. However, this strategy doesn't militate for non-reductionism either; reductionists might simply argue that, if such cases could be found, they'd simply show that present reductionist accounts of relationships of partiality need further refinement.⁵⁵ The point is that, on their own, the existence of such cases doesn't tell against reductionism *in general*, even if they might tell against particular reductionist theories.

Perhaps one might attempt to offer a direct counterexample to the claim that the normative authority of reasons of partiality derives from a set of independent reasons and values that special relationships facilitate or instantiate. What's needed is an example of a relationship in which no independent goods would be facilitated or instantiated. If such a relationship alone nevertheless generated reasons of partiality, then this would constitute an example that would show that relationships really are normatively fundamental. This would amount to a sort of Moorean isolation test of personal relationships: in isolating the

⁵⁵Indeed, this was largely the motivation for developing the Complex Theory of partiality—a more sophisticated reductionism designed to explain a greater range of relationships of partiality. I admit, of course, that proof would be in the pudding: we'd need to look to particular cases to see if the Complex Theory could accommodate them, or if it in turn would need revision.

relationships themselves from any of their connections to other goods, we might determine whether the bare fact of the relationships in question might seem to present us with reasons of partiality.⁵⁶

Barring examples involving strange sci-fi scenarios it is very difficult to imagine how we could even contemplate such a case. The fact is that our personal relationships are constituted by their interactions with other objects; on most views, personal relationships consist in histories of interaction between two particular individuals. As such, our relationships are embedded in our lives and our histories to a point that, in simply trying to isolate the fact of the relationship itself from any particular relata, one loses any grip on what it is that one is even talking about. If this is true, then it may be the case that it is not possible to conclusively, directly settle the matter between non-reductionists and reductionists about reasons of partiality.⁵⁷

Given that the above two arguments fail, it is at least as plausible that special relationships are normatively derivative: our reasons of partiality within such relationships can be explained in virtue of the set of independent values and reasons which such relationships facilitate or instantiate. On these grounds, there is no reason to favor non-reductionism as compared to the reductionism of the Complex Theory.

There is, however, an indirect means of settling the question: we might see which theory proves more fruitful in explaining certain aspects of our evaluative practice. It seems to me the Complex Theory has important ramifications for explaining the evaluations both of classes of relationships and of particular relationships. In particular, it allows us to answer a set of questions surrounding the justification of partiality in these individual cases which

⁵⁶Note that a stronger argument is required here than would be required to show that the Complex Theory is incorrect as a reductionist explanation of reasons of partiality; in order to show that the Complex Theory is false, one would need to show that there exist some reasons of partiality that cannot be explained by reference to the value of personal projects, the value of individuals, or more general moral obligations. (That said, I believe that no such reasons of partiality exist, and that the Complex Theory is correct.) What is the issue here is not whether the Complex Theory is the correct reductionist account, but rather whether there are reasons to prefer non-reductionism to *any* reductionist explanation of reasons of partiality.

⁵⁷Simon Keller explores several more arguments against the claim that special relationships are intrinsically valuable in this sense in Keller, *Partiality*, pp. 56-64.

non-reductionists have a difficult time answering. I turn to this topic below.

1.5 Explanatory Benefits

Some of our relationships warrant our partiality; we seem justified in responding to reasons of partiality within them. Such relationships might uncontroversially include: what Aristotle called friendships of character; stable and supportive romantic relationships between equal partners; familial bonds between parents and children; and pedagogical relationships between teachers and students. Participants in each of these types of relationship treat these relationships as sources of reasons to act in certain ways within the context of the relationship in question and doing so seems appropriate upon reflection to (almost) everyone. However, there also seems to be a class of personal relationships that do not warrant such reason-responsiveness, even if they might seem to present participants within those relationships with reasons to act in certain ways. Examples might include *folies à deux*, abusive relationships, relationships founded upon deception, and so on. Even if these relationships might seem to present their participants with reasons to be partial, it should be clear that these reasons have no normative force. As an example, consider Holly Martins's relationship with Harry Lime in *The Third Man*: on one plausible reading of the film, Harry has deceived Holly about the nature of their relationship. Holly believes that they remain friends, and that Harry still cares about him. Harry on the other hand thinks of Holly not as a friend, but rather as a means to his own advancement.⁵⁸ In such circumstances, Holly's partiality to Harry is a mistake: the relationship is not one that warrants Holly's special treatment of Harry.

What explains the difference between these two sorts of relationships? In other words, how might we explain the fact that some relationships do present us with reasons to be

⁵⁸Julia Driver argues against such a reading, and claims that Harry does maintain a genuine friendship with Holly in Driver, "Justice, Mercy, and Friendship in *The Third Man*", p. 278; I'm sympathetic to her reading, but my point here is simply to provide an example in which one member of a relationship is mistaken about whether the relationship really does warrant partiality. So let us suppose, for the sake of an example, that Harry really isn't a friend to Holly.

partial to the individual with whom we share the relationship (and to respond to reasons of partiality therein) whereas others do not? In a recent paper, Niko Kolodny has raised this question very clearly:

Imagine the exhaustive List of partiality principles, of all of the true normative claims of the form:

one has reason for parental partiality toward one's children,
one has reason for spousal partiality toward one's spouse,
and so on. We need not imagine the List fully enumerated. It is enough to imagine it including relatively uncontroversial cases, like parental and spousal partiality, and excluding relatively uncontroversial cases, like prison-gang and blood-type partiality. Our challenge is then to explain the List: to explain why all and only the partiality principles that it contains are true.⁵⁹

The challenge, then, is to provide some principled means of explaining why certain of our relationships—those relationships on the List—warrant partiality while those not on the list do not.

I contend that, by accepting the Complex Theory, one will be able to provide a better explanation of the List than one would if one were to accept a non-reductionist account of reasons of partiality. This provides indirect, although perhaps not conclusive, evidence for the former view. To show this, I'll first lay out such an explanation, then I'll compare it to the explanation offered by Kolodny on behalf of non-reductionists.

On my view, what explains the List is simply the fact that some relationships do facilitate or instantiate a set of independent values, whereas others do not. Those relationships which constitute or involve ground projects, contribute to the value of the individual participants, or exemplify moral virtues of trust, care, reciprocity or gratitude will warrant our partiality, insofar as these independent values provide reasons of partiality to participants in those relationships. This explains why the set of partiality principles populating the List are true.

⁵⁹Kolodny, "Which Relationships Justify Partiality?", pp. 170-171.

Those relationships which do not facilitate or instantiate any such values or reasons, or relationships in which these values are trumped by negative considerations, are relationships which do not warrant our partiality. They do not warrant a corresponding partiality principle on the List. This explanation of the List is relatively straightforward, and it involves the introduction of no new theoretical resources.

What options for explanation of the List are open to the non-reductionist? One option is simply to maintain that some relationships do warrant our partiality, whereas others do not, dependent upon whether those relationships do or do not generate reasons. However, this isn't much of an explanation at all: it simply replaces the problem of explaining the list with another problem of explaining how we might determine which relationships generate such reasons.

Kolodny attempts to do better than this on the part of the non-reductionist: in order to explain the list he appeals to the phenomenon of *resonance*. According to Kolodny, resonance is an instance where “one has reason to respond to X in a way that is similar to the way that one has reason to respond to its counterpart in another dimension of importance, but that reflects the distinctive importance of the dimension to which X belongs.”⁶⁰

To make the general phenomenon clearer, I'll illustrate with the example of personal projects. Suppose that I have a long history of trying to catalog each and every species of ant in the Philippines. (Thousands, at last count.) Given that, from an impartial perspective, this is valuable as an instance of scientific inquiry, anyone might have reasons to respect it, not to interfere, etc. But given my own history of working on the project—and the fact that it is one of my ground projects—this end has an importance for me that goes beyond such neutral reasons: in my commitment to the project I respond to a distinctive class of project-dependent reasons that the project grounds. According to Kolodny, the agent-relative value that my project has for me resonates with the agent-neutral value that it has for everyone; my reasons to respond to the project, although they go beyond what most other individuals

⁶⁰Kolodny, “Which Relationships Justify Partiality?”, p. 181.

without such a history might take to be their reasons, are somehow similar. Now, compare this case with one in which I have a long history of trying to count every blade of grass on the lawn outside the philosophy department. (Millions, at last count.) Presumably no one has any good agent-neutral reasons to engage in attempting to carry out such a project. So, although I take myself to have reasons to count each and every blade of grass, the importance of this project does not resonate with any agent-neutral goods.

Kolodny's suggestion is that the phenomenon of resonance can provide an explanation of the List: namely, any personal relationship in which an individual's concern for the final value of the relationship resonates with some other set of values or reasons will be a relationship that warrants partiality. To elaborate, let's begin with the non-reductionist suggestion that a personal relationship, which consists of a history of discrete shared encounters, will generate a set of agent-relative reasons for an individual to react to that relationship in ways suitable to the relationship. From an impartial perspective, we might understand each of these discrete shared encounters as (potentially) generating a set of reasons to respond for *any* individual: a kindness warrants one's gratitude, a promise should be kept, an individual's need should be provided for. Kolodny's suggestion is that, in cases where a relationship justifies partiality, the reasons of partiality generated by a relationship will resonate with the agent-neutral reasons generated by each of the discrete encounters. In cases where each of the discrete encounters generate no agent-neutral reasons, then the participant's reasons do not resonate with anything, and this explains why that relationship does not belong on the List.

The problem for Kolodny is that it is very difficult to understand the relationship of resonance, except as an instance of facilitation or instantiation. What I mean by this is that the most natural way to understand how reasons generated by the final value of relationships are similar in kind to reasons generated by independent values would be in terms of the facilitation or instantiation of these values. Consider the example of the project again: my reason to continue cataloging bugs instantiates the good of knowledge and facilitates scientific in-

quiry. Being partial in my special relationships—and responding to reasons of partiality therein—instantiates my ground projects and facilitates more general moral values. This seems to be the most natural means of understanding what it is for reasons of partiality to “resonate” with independent goods. Opting for this understanding of resonance gives us a clear understanding of why such instances of resonance would explain those partiality principles which are on the List: namely, it gives us an explanation identical to the reductionist explanation I defended above.

Kolodny is quick to deny this possibility, insisting that resonance is not an instance of facilitation. But it’s not clear what the relationship is meant to consist in, or what explains why resonance is the determining factor for inclusion on the List. This leaves him with the unwelcome conclusion that “a deeper explanation of resonance is elusive.”⁶¹ Kolodny is therefore left with an explanation that either reduces to the explanation I offered above, or results in the introduction of an unexplained and mysterious relationship of “resonance.”

Adopting the Complex Theory offers a better explanation of why certain of our relationships justify our partiality, whereas others do not. In arguing for this, I’ve considered only one non-reductionist explanation—Kolodny’s—and have argued that it either reduces to my own explanation, or involves the introduction of additional (and not required) theoretical posits. It is possible that a better explanation might be forthcoming. However, in the meantime, I suggest that this provides at least some indirect evidence that the reasons of partiality can be explained in virtue of a set of independent values and reasons.

1.6 Conclusion

I set out to discuss two strategies for responding to the puzzle of partiality: a non-reductionist approach, according to which special relationships are normatively fundamental, and a reductionist approach, according to which special relationships are normatively derivative. I argued for a version of the latter—the Complex Theory—according to which reasons of

⁶¹Kolodny, “Which Relationships Justify Partiality?”, p. 181.

partiality can be wholly explained in terms of the value of personal projects, the value of individuals, and moral values of trust, care, reciprocity, and gratitude. I argued against the main arguments for non-reductionism—that such an account is supported by common sense, and that there are reasons of partiality that cannot be explained by existing reductionist theories—and furthermore showed how the Complex Theory can readily explain which relationships in particular warrant partiality. Given the difficulties for non-reductionists in explaining this phenomenon, I argued that this provided indirect support for the Complex Theory.

I'll conclude by highlighting what I take to be three major takeaway lessons about partiality. First, if the Complex Theory is correct, then perhaps asking general questions about partiality can only get us so far. Reasons of partiality are a heterogeneous bunch, grounded in a number of different values that significant relationships facilitate and instantiate. Rather than reflecting on the common character of these reasons, the Complex Theory pushes us to look more carefully at the range of values that significant relationships facilitate and instantiate. It encourages us to better understand: why projects might be ethically significant and how relationships constitute or facilitate individual or joint projects; whether and how certain kinds of relationships benefit the individuals who participate in them; and the structure of expectations and requirements that form within the context of continued and repeated interactions over time. This approach would also allow us to raise questions about how such values might conflict, both with each other and with the demands of impartial morality. It is quite often argued that our special relationships can be morally dangerous.⁶² Adopting the Complex Theory leads us to develop a fine-grained account of how this might (or might not) be the case: it allows us to concentrate on whether and how the value of ground projects or the values of trust and loyalty might pull against impartial moral values.

The second lesson is that what ultimately explains partiality is not some special class of

⁶²cf. Wolf, "Morality and Partiality", pp. 254-256; and Cocking and Kennett, "Friendship and Moral Danger". Alexander Nehamas discusses the issue at length—and provides a compelling example of such a morally dangerous relationship in his reading of *Thelma and Louise*—in Nehamas, *On Friendship*, ch. 6.

personal relationships, but rather facts about values that are potentially realizable in many kinds of relationships. This paves the way for the examination of other instances of partiality that might occur outside of personal relationships. Take, for example, one's relationship with a work of art to which one is partial. Can such partiality be accommodated as reasonable, or is it instead only a manifestation of personal preference for which no justification can be given? The Complex Theory gives us a means of answering this question by guiding us towards the particular values that such relationships instantiate or facilitate. I think that there is reason to believe that such relationships facilitate and instantiate a similar set of values as do personal relationships—and this fact has a role to play in justifying partiality to those artworks with which one has such relationships. I pursue this line of thought at length in the following chapters. A similar approach might be applied to relationships with one's country or with one's personal ideals. Accepting the reductionist approach embodied by the Complex Theory can therefore give us a foothold in explaining whether or not partiality is warranted in such non-central cases.

The final lesson is one that I offer to non-reductionists in particular: Perhaps the non-reductionist might take on board everything that I've said about how personal relationships facilitate and instantiate a set of independent values—and thereby accept that we can explain some reasons of partiality by reference to these goods—while maintaining that the final value of special relationships nevertheless generate the remainder. Perhaps a case could be made for this position. The non-reductionist will also be quick to point out that I haven't provided knock-down argument against non-reductionism here; my argument doesn't conclusively show that *none* of our reasons of partiality are grounded in the non-derivative final value of relationships. The risk of such a position involves the tendency to overstate the similarities of special relationships and to underestimate the extent to which the value of such relationships can be explained by reference to other, more basic values; the non-reductionist should be careful not to obscure either the diversity of relationships of partiality or the important connections that such relationships bear to other dimensions of value within our lives—a

point which, I hope, my discussion of reasons of partiality makes clear.

Chapter 2

Relationships with Artworks

Abstract

Should one's individual preferences for works of art always track the artistically best? If one's current preferences are for the artistically suboptimal, should one aim to *trade up*, replacing one's current artistic loves for those which are, ultimately, better? I think that the answer is: "Not necessarily." In this chapter, I argue that there may be good reasons to resist the notion that such aesthetic idealization is always the best course of action. My argument is analogical in structure: Just as there are reasons not to dump our current friends for individuals who possess better qualities, there are similar reasons not to abandon our current relationships with sub-optimal artworks. Appreciating this claim ultimately places limits on the hopes for the Humean approach in aesthetics as an ideal for structuring our interactions with artworks.

2.1 Aesthetic Idealization and Trading Up

Suppose that you and I are having a conversation about our favorite novels. A partisan of Joyce, you go to bat for *Ulysses*: you think his "all-including most farraginous chronicle" is

the best novel written in English. I disagree, opting for Melville as the master of the form. *Ulysses* isn't bad, I say, but *Moby Dick* is a better book. Disagreements like these are the bread and butter not only of philosophical aesthetics but of everyday life as well. They naturally raise questions about the nature of artistic value and the possibility of correctness in artistic evaluation: Is one of us correct? And if so, in virtue of what?

The most well-known means of dealing with this kind of disagreement has its roots in Hume. A familiar thought from Hume is that we might resolve our disagreement by consulting a set of ideal critics whose judgment would settle the matter for us. Such critics would be ideal in virtue of their possession of a particular set of qualities—sensitivity, practice, comparison, freedom from bias and good sense—that sets them apart from the average appreciator of art. Their verdicts about artistic value would, in Hume's terminology, provide us with “a *Standard of Taste*; a rule, by which the various sentiments of men may be reconciled; at least, a decision afforded, confirming one sentiment, and condemning another.”¹ Call this strategy for responding to the problem of disagreement by adverting to an ideal critic the *Humean* approach.

Why should we believe that ideal critics are the best guide to artistic value? Here, the Humean makes a further, and seemingly plausible, assumption—namely, that the artistic value of a work of art is largely determined by the quality of the experience that it is capable of affording.² From this assumption, the Humean argues that ideal critics, in virtue of the particular qualities that they possess, are best qualified to appreciate—and ultimately to compare—the quality of the experiences that individual artworks can afford. This makes ideal critics our best bet when it comes to making accurate comparative judgments of artistic value. In a nutshell, this is the Humean rationale for accepting the judgments of ideal critics as authoritative with respect to questions of artistic value.³

¹Hume, “Of The Standard Of Taste”, p. 230.

²cf. Budd, *Values of Art*, pp. 4-8.

³As I am presenting it, Humeanism is neutral on the question of whether artistic value itself can be analyzed without reference to the preferences of ideal critics. This departs somewhat from most forms of Humeanism—in aesthetics and in value theory more generally—which hold that it is facts about ideal observers that are truth-makers for facts about values. cf. Lewis, “Dispositional Theories of Value”. I'm also putting aside a large

For all the good that the Humean approach does in providing us with a means of resolving disputes about artistic value, it nevertheless leaves a pressing practical question unanswered: Suppose that our original disagreement over Joyce and Melville was resolved in your favor, by dint of consulting the consensus of ideal critics. I now find that my own artistic preferences do not match those of the ideal critics. By Humean lights, I prefer the artistically suboptimal. What should I do now? Should I attempt to alter my own preferences to match those of the ideal critics? Or should I rather maintain my own appreciative preferences?

One way of responding to this question is to insist that we ought to treat the judgment of ideal critics not just as a benchmark for resolving conflicts about artistic value but rather as an ideal that we, individually, ought to try to approximate in our own appreciative preferences. In other words, we ought to treat the true critic as a kind of regulative ideal for our aesthetic lives: each of us ought to try to both make our preferences identical to those of ideal critics, and to develop qualities similar to those which make ideal critics ideal. We all ought to try to *aesthetically idealize*.

For most of us, the effects of aesthetic idealization would be quite drastic: it would involve trading all those artworks with which we currently have appreciative relationships for those which are ultimately artistically best.⁴ We'd substitute *The Searchers* for *Star Wars*, Dickens for Dan Brown, Bach for bubblegum pop, and so on. As Jerrold Levinson, an influential defender of aesthetic idealization, puts it, "a person who is not an ideal critic

number of worries that have traditionally occupied commentators on the Humean tradition, including at least the following questions: Is there any reason to believe that there exist any ideal critics? Is there any reason to believe that, if they do exist, such critics will actually reach consensus in their appreciative preferences? Finally, and most pressingly, should we understand artistic value as experiential—that is, as consisting primarily in the capacity to yield intrinsically valuable experiences? There may be good reason to believe that the answers to each of these questions is no—but addressing each would take us well beyond the focus of the present chapter. I address the last of these questions again in the fourth chapter, in which I argue that experientialism about artistic value is false; I do not develop a substantive account of artistic value in the dissertation, although I am sympathetic to the idea that the judgments of ideal critics *track* but do not *determine* artistic value.

⁴Aside from changes in the set of artworks that we prefer, aesthetic idealization might also involve further large-scale changes in our discriminatory capacities, our background knowledge, etc. Some of these are discussed in Kieran, "Why Ideal Critics are Not Ideal", pp. 281-3 and Riggle, "Levinson on the Aesthetic Ideal". I largely put aside this aspect of aesthetic idealization here and only consider the issue of trading up.

should rationally seek, so far as possible, to exchange the ensemble of artistic objects that currently elicit his or her approval and enjoyment for some other ensemble that is approved and enjoyed by the sort of person he or she is not”—namely, an ideal critic.⁵

Is there good reason to undergo the ambitious undertaking of aesthetic idealization? The defender of aesthetic idealization is quick to build an argument out of Humean materials. The argument goes like this: As art appreciators, we have an interest in having the richest, most fulfilling experiences possible. Works with greater artistic value have the capacity to yield experiences of greater value. It follows that we should prefer those artworks with greater artistic value. Our best guides in identifying works with greater artistic value will be the set of ideal critics. Therefore, we ought to attempt to individually approximate the preferences of ideal critics insofar as we are antecedently interested in maximizing the quality of our experiences of artworks.⁶

But is this a sufficient reason for each of us to trade up? I suspect that it is not. Why not? I think that the beginnings of an answer can be found in the following analogy: Consider the fact that, for the most part, each of us is partial to a particular set of other persons—our friends. We prefer to spend time with them, we appreciate their particular qualities, and we take pleasure in their company. Now suppose that it is pointed out to me by my friendship guru that, in fact, most of my friendships are non-ideal with respect to the experiences they provide me. I could have much more fulfilling experiences if I started spending time with new friends who would tell funnier jokes, have slightly better hair, mix up more delicious cocktails, and so on. In fact, the guru has identified a set of such individuals for me, and is willing to make the requisite introductions. He has also determined that I would get along swimmingly with these new individuals. Suppose also that I have good reason to believe that the guru is correct: he is an ideal judge of which relationships would provide me with the most fulfilling experiences. Does this give me a compelling reason to “trade up” by dumping

⁵Levinson, “Artistic Worth and Personal Taste”, p. 225.

⁶This argument is the main claim of Levinson, “Hume’s Standard of Taste”.

my current friends and establishing new friendships?⁷ Intuitively, the answer in this case is No: even if we recognize that our existing relationships may be less than ideal with respect to the experiences they afford, there doesn't ultimately seem to be reason to "idealize" in this way with respect to our friendships. We don't think it irrational or inappropriate to maintain our existing friendships even if they are less than ideal in this respect.⁸

The same is true of *aesthetic* idealization: just as there isn't compelling reason to trade up to ideal-with-respect-to-satisfying-experiences friends, so too might there be insufficient reason to trade up to ideal artworks. Levinson anticipates this objection; he notes that it might seem that:

persisting attachment to and preference for artworks that one has already established an appreciative relationship with is not obviously more irrational than attachment to and preference for friends to whom one is related most often by happenstance, and who may not in the abstract be optimal in the friendship benefits they afford.⁹

Levinson dismisses this worry, citing "significant differences between our relations to persons and our relations to works of art, differences in the obligations and opportunities involved in the two cases."¹⁰ However, Levinson does not provide any explicit further discussion of or argument for this claim; this is a lacuna that needs addressing.

While it is no doubt true that there *are* significant differences between our relation-

⁷The language of "trading up" in this context—meant to be reminiscent of upgrading one's car or computer, no doubt—is due to Nozick, "Love's Bond", p. 76.

⁸Alexander Nehamas has pointed out to me the following objection: even if the individuals identified by the guru were funnier, better looking, and so on, it's not obvious that one *would* enjoy their company more than the company of one's existing friends. So, to that extent, we have a reason to stay in our existing relationships that is grounded in pleasure or enjoyment itself. Two responses: First, while I think it may be true that *now* one enjoys the company of one's existing friends more, this is only because one has not yet developed a relationship with these new individuals. The guru is not just sensitive to which individuals are funnier or better looking; he is, in fact, sensitive to which individuals would allow one to have more pleasurable *relationships*. Second, I think that it is easy to confuse the fact that one's overall preference is to stay with one's current friends with the thought that that preference is based on one's current relationships being ultimately more pleasurable. I think that the former preference is in fact quite reasonable, but one's reasons for choosing to stay are not ultimately grounded in the fact that the relationships are more pleasurable. More on this below.

⁹Levinson, "Artistic Worth and Personal Taste", p. 230.

¹⁰*ibid.*, p. 230.

ships with persons and our relationships with works of art, I think that there are enough similarities between the two to support skepticism about the attractiveness of aesthetic idealization on these grounds. In the remainder of this paper, I first characterize those aspects of friendships which give us reasons not to “trade up” to other individuals even if they would provide us with more fulfilling experiences than our current friends. Second, I argue that the very same features of these interpersonal relationships can be found in (some of) our relationships with artworks. This gives us sufficient reason in these cases *not* to aesthetically idealize. Finally, I defend this claim against objections and use it to appraise the Humean approach more generally.

2.2 Against “Upgrading” One’s Friends

Let’s return to the example I sketched above: my friendship guru has presented me with a set of potential new friends who—provided that I cease my current friendships in order to trade up—would provide me with more valuable experiences than those on offer in my current friendships. I suggested that in this case, there is a great deal of intuitive pull to the idea that I shouldn’t trade up. The trick comes in explaining exactly *why* this is the case; as Robert Nozick has put it:

A readiness to trade up, looking for someone with “better” characteristics, does not fit with an attitude of love. An illuminating view should explain why not, yet why, nevertheless, the attitude of love is not irrational.¹¹

In other words, in order for the common-sense understanding of a loving friendship to be vindicated, one needs some justification for continuing attachment to individuals who are recognizably suboptimal in their personal qualities.¹² What is it about my current friends

¹¹Nozick, “Love’s Bond”, p. 76.

¹²In fact, Nozick’s view is stronger—as the quote above makes clear. Nozick thinks that it isn’t just continuing attachment that must be explained; Nozick thinks that it would be incompatible with love even to *look* to trade up to other friends. I am not so sure about this; loving one individual seems compatible with being open to coming to love others.

that makes it the case that *not* trading up is ultimately reasonable?

One salient difference between my current friends and those individuals identified by the guru is the fact that I have an established historical relationship with my friends. We share a friendship. I do not have any such relationship with the guru's picks. Perhaps it is the value of these relationships—in addition to the qualities of the individuals with whom I share them—that explains my continued commitment to them.¹³

This point is broadly in keeping with the ideas developed in the previous chapter, that the normative force of our reasons to be partial to our friends is a result of the values that our relationships with them facilitate and instantiate; in order to further explain our reasons to be partial, we will need to think carefully about the particular values that our friendships facilitate and instantiate.

Consider the fact that I cite my friendship with Henry as a reason for my being more concerned with his well-being than I would be for that of a stranger, or for treating him preferentially compared to individuals who are not my friends. Jennifer Whiting suggests that it is my relationship with Henry itself that provides me with reasons to be partial in this way:

Once someone has become my friend, I then have reasons to care for her which I did not previously have, and which I would not now have, had I never come to care in the first place. And I then have reasons to care for her which I do not have to care for other equally deserving persons about whom I never came to care.

This is presumably because the *friendship relation itself* (as distinct from factors which may serve to explain its existence) is taken to provide reasons for concern

¹³One might also point out another difference between one's existing friends and the new individuals: one *loves* one's friends, whereas one does not love the guru's picks. Perhaps love, as Nozick says, calls for continued attachment and resistance to trading up. Even if this were so, it would be open to us to ask: *why* do we think that our continued love is reasonable? In responding, I—like Niko Kolodny—would cite the value of one's existing relationship as a reason for such love. cf. Kolodny, "Love as Valuing a Relationship". In this respect, I conceive of love as something that can be rationally appraised—even if it cannot always be rationally controlled. (For more on this aspect of love in the context of friendship, see Thomas, *Living Morally*, pp. 102-103.) I therefore disagree with the "no-reasons" view of love developed by Harry Frankfurt in Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love*, ch. 2, according to which love simply is not something subject to rational appraisal.

additional to those (if any) existing prior to its establishment.¹⁴

On Whiting's view, one's existing relationship serves as an additional source of reasons which go beyond those reasons associated with, for example, the valued qualities of the person that one shares the relationship with. With respect to Henry, even if his valuable qualities warrant my concern as much as those of any other individual, I have added reasons to treat him preferentially which are the result of my having a particular actually-existing relationship with him. Following Samuel Scheffler, we can refer to such reasons as *relationship-dependent reasons*.¹⁵

Perhaps among the relationship-dependent reasons that I possess are reasons not to trade up. Once I am Henry's friend, my relationship with him might give me reasons not to dump him and upgrade to a friendship with Hilde, even if Hilde happens to be smarter, funnier, and so on. If this were true, it would provide us with a means of answering Nozick's initial challenge: it would show us that one ultimately might have sufficient reason not to trade up—reason which would ultimately rest on the value of one's existing relationship, as considered independently from the non-relational qualities of one's current and potential friends.¹⁶ But is it really the case that relationships such as friendship provide us with reasons not to trade up?

We can make some headway on this question by reflecting on the nature and value of friendship.¹⁷ At the very least, a friendship consists in an ongoing pattern of actions and attitudes between two particular persons that persists over time. It is a relationship that is both historical and ongoing; to call Henry my friend *now* is to affirm the fact that we share a history of interaction and concern which constitutes our friendship. Plausibly, it is this

¹⁴Whiting, "Impersonal Friends", p. 7.

¹⁵Scheffler, *Equality and tradition*, pp. 48–49. cf. also Scheffler, "Relationships and Responsibilities"; Kolodny, "Love as Valuing a Relationship"; Wallace, "Duties of Love".

¹⁶Of course, one's existing relationships might not provide *conclusive* reasons not to trade up: it's possible that considerations in favor of trading up might still outweigh these relationship-dependent considerations against. I discuss this more below.

¹⁷The sort of friendship I aim to characterize below is that of a genuine, intimate friendship; it is a familiar enough cultural ideal, although I do not mean to make a normative claim that it is the best form of friendship or the only "genuine" form of friendship. Some kinds of friendship, such as friendships of convenience or friendships centered on shared activities, might not possess the features I list.

historical relationship which generates relationship-dependent reasons within the context of friendship.¹⁸

Why and *how* does the existence of such a history of interaction and concern provide us with reasons to resist the pull of trading up? I believe that there are two general features of such historical relationships which provide reasons not to trade up: first, in virtue of participating in friendships we incur obligations and responsibilities. Some of these require us not to trade up. Second, friendships often bear an important relationship to our practical identity—one which might lead us to resist trading up. I elaborate on each of these features of friendship in the two sections below.

2.2.1 Friendship and Obligations

In any interpersonal interaction, our actions are constrained by moral obligations towards those with whom we interact. Some of these are obligations not to violate expectations which we have intentionally raised on the part of those with whom we interact.¹⁹ For example, if I promise to return your book to you when I've finished reading it, then I am morally obligated to return it to you. Participating in intimate personal relationships, however, can give rise to an especially extensive network of such expectations, which ground corresponding moral obligations. In friendship, might there be such obligations to one's current friend not to trade up? The answer is usually yes—but to see why, we'll need to look more carefully at the kinds of expectations that are generated by participating in a friendship.

Consider an example: Suppose that my friend has a special interest in the early films of Pedro Almodóvar. Understanding this, upon learning about an upcoming screening I go out of my way to get tickets for both of us, brush up on Almodóvar before hand, and do whatever else I think might be in some respect beneficial to my friend's interest—this being

¹⁸Perhaps not all relationship-dependent reasons depend on the existence of such a history. Plausibly cases of love at first sight or parental love are different from friendship, in that they might generate reasons without the existence of such a history.

¹⁹cf. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, pp. 296–317.

what good friends do for each other. Now suppose that, having gone to see the Almodóvar film—and, perhaps, having enjoyed it—I make it known to my friend that I greatly enjoyed it, implying that I'd be happy to see more films with her in the future. Perhaps she begins to make plans around our seeing several other films together and comes to view me as someone she can count on to take to see films that are a bit too edgy for her other friends.

What this rather innocuous example illustrates is the ease with which, in a friendship, we can raise our friends' expectations about our future behavior. Plausibly, raising these expectations grounds moral obligations on our part. In the case above, I would be letting my friend down if I blew off her invitations to go to the movies for no good reason; this would be violating her general expectations about my behavior which I had intentionally raised after our viewing the Almodóvar film, and would likely lead to the frustration of the plans that she made on account of her expectations about my behavior.

These obligations are no different in kind from those that we accrue when we raise the expectations of strangers about our behavior. I could just as easily make a similar commitment to a stranger about seeing films together and this would ground the same kind of moral obligation on my part not to violate the commitment. The difference in the case of friendship lies in both the depth and the breadth of the expectations that we raise on the part of our friends. As Harry Frankfurt has put it,

Our relationships with those we love are frequently intimate, and intimate relationships lead inevitably to the formation of expectations and modes of dependency by which unusually weighty obligations are engendered. Because of the peculiarly intense and relatively unguarded character of the relationships within which they arise, these obligations tend to be more serious than those that are normally generated within relationships of lesser consequence.²⁰

As Frankfurt notes, given the extent of the interaction between friends and the level of intimacy and trust present in such relationships, the possibility of both raising extensive

²⁰Frankfurt, "On Caring", p. 171.

obligations and incurring significant obligations to meet these expectations is particularly acute.

Do these obligations provide one with reasons not to trade up to new friends? This will depend in large part on the details of the friendship in question. Perhaps we can imagine a friendship in which both friends have no expectations whatsoever about their friend's commitment to remaining in the relationship, pursuing common activity, and so on. But I think this is far from the ordinary. Many close friendships involve commitments to shared interests, goals, and projects, developed within the context of the friendship itself. Nancy Sherman has referred to this aspect of friendship as a "shared life" between friends:

In true friendship, we might say, friends realize shared ends which develop through the friendship and which come to be constitutive of it. Specific common interests are thus a product rather than a precondition of the relationship. Together my friend and I develop a love of Georgian houses, having had no real interest in them earlier.²¹

To the extent that friends share ends in this way—and, as Sherman notes, this sharing of ends may come to be constitutive of their relationship—each presumably forms expectations about the continuing participation of the other in the pursuit of said ends. My friend comes to count on me as part of the duo who goes to see art-house films together.²² Without explicit release from such expectations or other extenuating circumstances, I have an obligation to her to continue in my pursuit of this shared end—and, by extension, to continue the relationship.²³

Importantly, it is my history of interaction and shared activity with my friend that is ultimately responsible for the generation of these obligations; without such a history, one would not have accrued any of these obligations.²⁴ This is the first respect in which one's

²¹Sherman, "Aristotle on the Shared Life", pp. 98-101.

²²For more on plural agency in friendship, cf. Stroud, "Permissible Partiality, Projects, and Plural Agency"; Helm, *Love, Friendship, and the Self*, ch. 8.

²³Kolodny discusses several circumstances in which one might plausibly be released from such obligations in a friendship in Kolodny, "Love as Valuing a Relationship", pp. 163-166.

²⁴Some have argued that, in addition to these moral obligations, there may also be *sui generis* "duties of

relationship with one's friends might generate reasons not to trade up. I pursue the second below.

2.2.2 Friendship and the Self

It is a commonplace that our friendships play a role in distinguishing us as individuals—but how exactly do these personal relationships play such a role? Dean Cocking and Jeannette Kennett have written insightfully about the relationship between friendships and the self.²⁵ On their view, friendship involves a commitment to being directed by one's friend's interests and a commitment to the interpretation of one's friend.²⁶ Below, I develop their account, and then deploy it to make a claim about the relationship between friendship, the self, and trading up.

The first aspect of this account of friendship is a commitment to direction. A commitment to direction involves a friend's being "receptive to developing interests or activities, which they do not already pursue, primarily because they are the interests or activities of the other."²⁷ Going with my friend to see the Almodóvar film might be an example of this; I might have no antecedent interest in Almodóvar's films, but as a friend I allow my friend's interest to direct me towards buying tickets and going along. What is particularly important about such openness to direction is the fact that engaging in these activities might have significant ramifications; I might find myself with new beliefs, new sets of interests, and new attitudes that are a product of my being directed by my friendship. These may persist well beyond the boundaries of my friendship and into the rest of my life.²⁸

According to Cocking and Kennett, friendship also involves a commitment to interpret—love—obligations that one accrues simply in virtue of loving another individual. The most notable example of such an argument is Wallace, "Duties of Love". I discuss Wallace's argument at length in the first chapter, and argue that it's more plausible to assume that such obligations can be explained in terms of more basic moral obligations incurred within the relationships itself. I therefore accept that there may be such obligations within a loving relationship, but conclude that they are not *sui generis*.

²⁵Cocking and Kennett, "Friendship and the Self", "Friendship and Moral Danger".

²⁶Cocking and Kennett, "Friendship and the Self", pp. 503-506.

²⁷*Ibid.*, p. 504.

²⁸This point is well argued in Rorty, "The Historicity of Psychological Attitudes".

tation. If I aim to be directed by my friend's interests, I thereby commit myself to interpreting him. It is only by interpreting him in the context of our friendship that I am able to be sensitive to who he is, to what his interests are, and to what we ought to do together as a result. More substantively, Cocking and Kennett argue that such interpretation is reciprocal: I not only interpret Henry, but I also license his interpretations of me. What's more, Cocking and Kennett argue that in a friendship we come to rely on our friend's interpretations of us by granting them more authority than we would grant the interpretations of, say, a stranger.²⁹ If a friend draws attention to some aspect of my actions—perhaps she's noticed that I seem worried or preoccupied about something—she might put into words something that I hadn't previously noticed. More important, her interpretation may affect how I view myself and how I later act on the basis of such an interpretation—both in the context of our relationship, and beyond it.

I think that we can use Cocking and Kennett's account of friendship to develop a much clearer picture of the relationship between friendship and the self. Through the process of direction, friendships function as causal mechanisms whereby we can acquire new desires, new aspirations, and new values than those that we had prior to participation in the friendship. Through our friends' interpretations of us, we might gain insight into our own interests. We can cash out the effect of friends on us in terms of what Christine Korsgaard calls a *practical identity*: "a description under which you value yourself, a description under which you find your life to be worth living and your actions to be worth undertaking."³⁰ Our friends ultimately have a major role to play in constituting our practical identities and offering us knowledge of them.³¹ It is one's history of interaction with one's friend—and the

²⁹Cocking and Kennett don't ultimately explain *why* we grant such an authority. Most plausibly, we think that friends are in the best position to know us and interpret us as a result of our intimacy, our history, etc. Thus the old adage that your friends often know you better than you know yourself. Laurence Thomas, on the other hand, argues that privileging one's friends' advice and interpretation of oneself is a means of affirming intimacy within the relationship. Thomas, *Living Morally*, ch. 4.

³⁰Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, p. 101. Korsgaard here seems to be developing Williams's notion of a "ground project." cf. Williams, "Persons, Character and Morality". Although there are differences between these two notions, I treat them here as equivalent; one might substitute "ground project" for "practical identity" in what follows.

³¹This functions in two ways: First, being Henry's friend means that I view "friend of Henry" as part of my

direction and interpretation that occurs therein—that leads to these effects on our practical identities.

Going back to our original concern, why might this fact about my history with my friends provide me with reasons not to trade up? There are at least two distinct reasons why:

First, many of the particular interests, activities, and projects that I acquire within a friendship as a result of direction will involve my friend in some direct way. Recall Nancy Sherman's example of developing a love of Georgian houses together within a friendship: presumably what I love is not just admiring Georgian houses, but admiring Georgian houses *together* with my particular friend. Now consider the fact that, as a result of my friendship, I've come to regard this as a particularly important part of my practical identity. Were I to end my friendship, this would lead to me abandoning this part of my practical identity. In the same vein, Nozick suggests that "a willingness to trade up, to destroy the very *we* you largely identify with, would then be a willingness to destroy your self."³² Harry Frankfurt has suggested that such change would constitute a kind of psychological violence, which we seek to avoid due to "a quite primitive human need to establish and to maintain volitional unity."³³ Abandoning an important practical identity constitutes a threat to this volitional unity—one which could be disorienting or alienating and which, for such psychological reasons, we are keen to avoid.

Of course, sometimes we *should* abandon parts of our practical identity. This indicates that the psychological rationale discussed above is distinct from the *normative* question of what sort of practical identity we ought to have. From such a perspective, there is a further normative worry about trading up: even if my guru's picks are funnier or smarter than

practical identity. Second, as a result of a history of direction and interpretation within our friendship, I will come to acquire entirely new practical identities: lover of Almodóvar films, friend of someone else, Georgian architecture enthusiast, and so on.

³²Nozick, "Love's Bond", p. 78. Nozick is talking about romantic partnerships in particular, but I think that his remarks apply equally well to intimate companion friendships. For a longer discussion of the idea that friendship involves creation of a "we" over and above the two friends, see Helm, *Love, Friendship, and the Self*, ch. 8.

³³Frankfurt, *Necessity, Volition, and Love*, p. 139.

my current friends, I might nevertheless be worried about how my friendship with these new individuals might come to affect me, given the possibility of my future direction and interpretation by them. This is ultimately a concern about the effects of a relationship on oneself: aside from the pleasures that I may take in my new friendships, I might nevertheless be troubled by what I perceive to be the effects of entering such a relationship on my practical identity. Would I become a less distinctive individual? A less interesting person, perhaps, with more mundane interests? A more or less virtuous person? All things considered, I might prefer who I am now to who I might become were I to abandon my current friends for new friends.

In the above two sections, I've identified two kinds of reasons not to trade up: first, the moral obligations accrued within a history of interaction and concern; and second, the close connection between one's historical relationship and one's practical identity. These reasons are *relationship-dependent*: one accrues these reasons in virtue of the existence of a particular historical relationship with one's friend.

Before moving on to consider the case of one's existing appreciative relationships with artworks, it is worth noting two points: First, I do not take the above to constitute a full account of the nature of friendship, nor do I aim to give a full taxonomy of the sorts of relationship-dependent reasons that we might take friendships to generate.³⁴

Second, and more importantly, I do not take the above considerations to *always* constitute sufficient reason not to trade up. There may be cases in which one is not under any obligations to one's current friends—although I suspect that such cases would be quite rare. It is also the case that considerations about practical identity cut both ways: just as there might be reason to resist the urge to upgrade one's friends on the grounds that it would change one's practical identity for the worse, there might also be reasons to upgrade because it would change one's practical identity for the *better*. Whether or not this is the case will of course depend on one's present practical identity, as well as the direction and interpreta-

³⁴I discuss the notion of a relationship-dependent reason—and, in particular, how such relationships provide us with reasons for partiality—in the previous chapter.

tion on offer in a potential new friendship. However, as I argue below, such worries about practical identity are more pressing in the case of aesthetic idealization, in which coming to prefer the artistically ideal might seem to present one with a grave threat to the distinctiveness of those aspects of one's practical identity that are connected with our appreciation and engagement with artworks.

The disclaimers aside, the argument above shows that aspects of one's historical relationships, and not only the individuals themselves or the non-relational qualities they possess, can be sources of reasons in their own right. These relationship-dependent reasons, I've argued, give us a means of responding to Nozick's initial challenge—in many circumstances, these considerations make it reasonable to resist the pull of upgrading one's friends. As I will argue below, a similar set of considerations has its source in our existing appreciative relationships with artworks.

2.3 Relationships with Art

Admittedly, the idea of thinking about works of art as similar to one's friends might strike some contemporary readers as strange. This has not always been the case; there is a rich history of analogizing artworks to friends and lovers. As Wayne Booth notes of the literary arts,

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the personification [of books] was widespread, celebrated overtly in the titles of many books and essays—*Friends in Council* (Helps 1847-59), *The Friendship of Books* (Maurice 1880), *Letters to Dead Authors* (Lang 1886), *Friends on the Shelf* (Torrey 1906). Often the language of friendship was not enough: only words of love spoke strongly enough for what books inspire.³⁵

Reaching back still further, we find Ovid's characterization of the myth of Pygmalion, the

³⁵Booth, *The Company We Keep*, p. 171. Booth goes on to adopt such a metaphor—of narratives as offering a sort of friendship or companionship—as a means of grounding a program of ethical criticism.

sculptor who, having fallen in love with his own statue

lifts his hands to the work to try whether it be flesh or ivory; nor does he yet confess it to be ivory. He kisses it and thinks his kisses are returned. He speaks to it, grasps it and seems to feel his fingers sink into the limbs when he touches them; and then he fears lest he leave marks of bruises on them.³⁶

Of course, Pygmalion is meant to come off as foolish—that is, until Venus turns his statue into a real woman—and most of the nineteenth century discussion of friendships with books really concerns a kind of attenuated friendship with the *author* of the book. Works of art are not and cannot be our friends.³⁷

That said, there is nevertheless a grain of truth in such personifications of artworks: we turn to such metaphors because the relationships that we have with them can be of similar importance to us as our friendships. Stanley Cavell makes the following suggestive claim about the nature of our interaction with works of art:

Objects of art not merely interest and absorb, they move us; we are not merely involved with them, but concerned with them and care about them; we treat them in special ways, invest them with a value which normal people otherwise reserve only for other people—and with the same kind of scorn and outrage. They *mean* something to us, not just the way statements do, but the way people do.³⁸

The virtue of Cavell's way of putting it is in his focus on the *kinetic*: through our care and concern for them, and our active engagement with them, some works of art *move* us—into new perspectives, new activities, and new ways of living. A favorite novel can change the way you look at the world; a challenging film prompts conversations with friends; appreciating a painting might require you to look at a whole host of others; and a rock album might even

³⁶Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Bk. X: 243-297.

³⁷Although they can be objects of our love. cf. Levinson, *Aesthetic Pursuits*, ch. 6 and Nehamas, *Only a Promise of Happiness*, pp. 95-101. Although, in this chapter, I do not discuss what is involved in loving an artwork, I return to the topic in the next chapter in discussing the question of whether loving a work of art imposes obligations on us. Following Niko Kolodny, I understand love to consist largely in valuing a relationship. Kolodny, "Love as Valuing a Relationship".

³⁸Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, pp. 197-198.

inspire you to go out and start a band. To exhibit such a history of care and concern for a work of art is to have what I'll refer to as a significant relationship with that work.

Ultimately, I will argue that, like friendships, such relationships with artworks also provide us with relationship-dependent reasons—and that some of these reasons consist in reasons to resist the pull of aesthetic idealization. Before making this argument, it will help to begin with an example of just what a significant relationship with a work of art might look like. Let us return to Stanley Cavell. Consider Cavell's relationships with the Hollywood remarriage comedies he discusses in his book, *Pursuits of Happiness*. I am not so much interested in a substantial exegesis of his readings of these films, although there's no doubt that a full accounting of this would be an important part of understanding his relationship to the films in question. Instead I'll aim to sketch out what he has to say, autobiographically, about his relationship with these films as a means of illustrating the nature of such relationships more generally.

In this vein, we find Cavell describing the period of his first exposure to the films, in public screenings at movie theaters in the 30s and 40s.³⁹ Over time, his relationship with these films and others led him to ask certain general questions about the medium of film, and about his responses to it. In *The World Viewed* he describes these questions as leading to a series of conversations with the art critic Michael Fried; his working his way through the writings of Panofsky and Bazin; his (unsuccessful) attempt to lead a seminar in the philosophy of art on the topic of film; and, eventually, his attempt to express his thoughts on the matter—that is, on the films themselves and the issues they raised—in written form.⁴⁰ But his interest in these Hollywood comedies of remarriage persisted and changed: after doing substantial criticism on Shakespearian remarriage comedies, Cavell noticed certain generic affinities in these films. He became interested in attempting a more dedicated reading of the films, both individually and as members of a genre. This led him to conduct a seminar on the films in question at Harvard; to repeatedly screen the films for himself and assorted

³⁹Cavell, *The World Viewed*, pp. 9-10.

⁴⁰*ibid.*, Preface.

audiences; to speak about them with almost anyone who might listen;⁴¹ and, finally, to dedicate himself to substantial reading and criticism of each of the films, the results of which constitute the seven chapters of *Pursuits of Happiness*.

In referring to Cavell's *relationship* with these films, I mean to refer to the history of his interaction with them as I've characterized it above. A relationship with a work of art is constituted by such a history of interaction with that particular work. In this sense a relationship with a work of art is similar to a friendship; it is a historical pattern of actions and attitudes focused on a particular individual. As I will argue below, such relationships are also: a) marked by a kind of care and concern similar to that which is characteristic of friendships; and b) demonstrate similar commitments to direction and interpretation.

2.3.1 Caring about a Work of Art

Friends are disposed to act in the best interest of each other; this is a major component of what it is to care about one's friend. Does a relationship with a work of art manifest a similar concern? Whether Cavell's relationship might be characterized as one of acting in the "best interest" of these films leads us into strange waters: what would it be to act in the best interests of a work of art?

On the one hand, we might contribute directly to the well-being of a work of art that we care about: our concern might be manifest in our attempts to preserve the work, to contribute to its conservation, its continued performance, or its broader dissemination. But many of us do not take such a direct role in benefiting the works of art that we care about.⁴²

There is, however, another sense in which artworks might be thought to have interests: Works of art are artifacts. As such, they have particular aims or purposes. These aims and purposes depend on the intentions of the creator of the work, as constrained by artworld

⁴¹See the almost comically long list of acknowledgments in Cavell, *The World Viewed*, pp. 75-78.

⁴²Although perhaps we have reason to do so. I think that the topic of our obligations to the works of art that we value has been little explored—and that, perhaps, a comparison with the obligations of friendship and love might lead us to realize that our obligations to the works of art that we care about are more substantial than they might seem. I discuss this point in the next chapter.

conventions surrounding acceptable aims and purposes for artworks.⁴³ The “interests” of an artifact concern its ability to fulfill this aim or purpose in an appropriate fashion: a tack hammer should hammer tacks, just as a Bernini sculpture should inspire awe. To the extent that one attempts to interact with a work of art in such a way that fulfills this aim or goal, one acts in the interest of the object.

This is not to say that all artworks have the same aim or purpose, that individual artworks have only single aims or purposes, or that the aims or purposes of an artwork are always easily or clearly stated; indeed, it is often the work of interpretation to *discover* the aims and purposes of an artwork. Caring about a work of art within the context of one’s relationship to it will involve understanding it and appreciating it on its own terms: it will, in an important sense, involve a commitment to interpreting the artwork, trying to understand its aims or purposes, and ultimately being directed by it in engaging with it. As I suggest below, these commitments are remarkably similar to those found within friendship.

2.3.2 Direction and Interpretation

To make the above claim about direction and interpretation a bit more concrete, let’s return to Cavell. Cavell’s relationship demonstrates a commitment to being directed by the films. He claims that in engaging with the Hollywood remarriage comedies, we “must let the films themselves teach us how to look at them and how to think about them.”⁴⁴ In his case, this commitment to direction is made manifest in the aforementioned series of viewings, readings, conversations, seminars, and other pursuits to which he turned himself in trying to learn how to look at and think about these films. Connect this back to our relationships with works of art more generally: think about the times that you’ve talked to everyone you could about a favorite film; how one painting opened your eyes to a whole host of others;

⁴³The view alluded to here is similar to Nick Zangwill’s “aesthetic functionalism” in Zangwill, *Aesthetic Creation*, ch.5. However, I disagree with Zangwill that having an aesthetic function is a necessary condition for being an artwork; some anti-aesthetic artworks plausibly have no aesthetic function whatsoever. cf. Binkley, “Piece”.

⁴⁴Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, p. 25.

or about the times that you've been so enamored with a piece of music that you've learned to play it—or written a piece of your own. In a significant relationship with a work of art, one allows the work to guide one, both in the direct experience and engagement with the work, but also on a path through the world that one couldn't have planned or expected prior to entering into the relationship. This might involve the development of new interests, activities, and beliefs which are causally sourced in one's relationship with the work of art.⁴⁵

Cavell's relationship also demonstrates a commitment to interpretation: not just interpretation of the films—the evidence of which is manifest in *Pursuits of Happiness*—but also to interpretation of aspects of his life that go beyond the film itself. Insofar as he is open to letting the films teach him to think about certain topics in new ways, and to learn what they have to say about relationships, conversation, and the medium of film, Cavell might come to revise his view of these phenomena—and, indirectly, his conceptualization of his *own* participation in such relationships—in light of what he has learned from the films.⁴⁶ Again, I don't think we need to look far to see that this sort of commitment to interpretation is characteristic of many of our significant relationships with works of art. It is a commonplace that many artworks change the way that we look at the world—and, by extension, at ourselves. To take a paradigmatic example, consider the way that we often look to figures and plots within narrative fiction as a means of understanding and patterning our own lives.⁴⁷ Wayne Booth dramatizes such effects:

In living with Austen's favored characters for many hours and many days, I learn to long for what those characters long for (or, as in the case of Emma Wodehouse, what the character *should* long for, if she knew all along what she learns only towards the end). I learn how to long *in that way* for that special kind of

⁴⁵In a similar vein, one might also look to Alexander Nehamas's discussion of his relationship with Manet's *Olympia* in Nehamas, *Only a Promise of Happiness*, ch. 4, as well as T.J. Clark's characterization of his relationship with Poussin's *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake* in Clark, *The Sight of Death*. For an example drawn from literature, see Wayne Booth's account of his relationship with Joyce's *Ulysses* in Booth, *The Company We Keep*, pp. 273–277.

⁴⁶This is admittedly speculative, but given the significance Cavell affords these films in his philosophical work and in his life, I don't think it's too far of a reach.

⁴⁷For more detailed discussion of this point, see Rorty, "A Literary Postscript", pp. 307–309.

happiness....If I have enjoyed *Emma* as it asks to be enjoyed, I can never forget how marvelous it is to find “perfect happiness” in a “union” of true minds and hearts—and that means, in this work, how marvelous it is for a *flawed* woman to fall into the care and keeping of an *un-flawed* male.⁴⁸

A major concern of Booth's is that Austen's novels might lead us to interpret women as in some sense flawed, or as the weaker sex; such a concern is only possible against the background thought that a relationship with Austen's novels might have serious effects on the way that we interpret ourselves and others.⁴⁹

As is the case in friendship, this openness to direction and interpretation comes with some risk to the self. Who Cavell *is*, is shaped in part by the relationships he has developed with these films and the directions in which these relationships have taken him. This is generally true of many of our relationships with works of art: In engaging with these artworks we substantially commit ourselves to being directed by them and to continual interpretation both of them and of ourselves. We take our relationships as giving us good reason to engage in such patterns of direction and interpretation. This may indeed lead to large-scale changes in our practical identities; as Alexander Nehamas puts the point, my relationships with works of art may pose questions and challenges that “literally determine the course of my life, directing me for their answers to other people, other objects, other habits and ways of being.”⁵⁰

While this account of what it is to have a significant relationship with a work of art is partial at best, it is nevertheless enough to provide us with the grounds for making a case against aesthetic idealization. It is to this that I now turn.

⁴⁸Booth, *The Company We Keep*, p. 427.

⁴⁹In fact, Booth thinks that Austen can evade the charge of sexism: he claims that her authorial tone is enough to undermine a straightforward reading of *Emma* as expressing sexist attitudes. *ibid.*, pp. 432–435.

⁵⁰Nehamas, *Only a Promise of Happiness*, p. 85.

2.4 The Case Against Aesthetic Idealization

The Humean claims that we should each aim to aesthetically idealize, trading our existing appreciative relationships with artworks for appreciative relationships with artworks that are artistically best. The rationale for this claim is that doing so would lead us into relationships with artworks with the capacity to yield the most valuable possible experiences. As individuals antecedently interested in maximizing the quality of our experiences, this gives us a reason to aesthetically idealize.⁵¹ But is aesthetic idealization always the most reasonable course of action?

In the case of trading one's current friends for a different set of individuals whose friendship would yield more valuable experiences, I've argued that we often have compelling reason not to trade up. This is due to either a) the set of obligations one has to one's current friends; or b) the contribution that one's current friendships have made—and continue to make—to one's practical identity.

I've argued above that relationships with artworks share important similarities with friendships. Below, I argue that these similarities ultimately provide reason to resist the pull of aesthetic idealization; just as there may be relationship-dependent reasons to maintain one's existing friendships, so too are there relationship-dependent reasons to maintain one's existing appreciative relationships with works of art.

2.4.1 Artworks, Obligations, and Community

In friendships, friends nearly always incur obligations to each other: One commits oneself to shared ends with one's friend, thereby raising one's friend's expectations about one's future behavior. This generates a set of moral obligations not to violate these expectations. As I've

⁵¹This is, of course, provided that we are *capable* of deriving such experiences from the artworks in question; there is always the concern that, in virtue of our deficiencies in sensitivity, practice, and other qualities that the ideal critics possess, we wouldn't be able to fully appreciate artistically "better" artworks. But I leave this concern aside, and assume that in most cases, through attempts to develop such sensitivity and practice, we'd be able to come to fully experience what these artworks have to offer.

argued above, abandoning one's friend for a slightly more entertaining individual would in most cases involve failing to live up to this obligation.

I do not intend to argue here that, in our existing appreciative relationships, we have similar obligations directly to artworks. I pursue the issue at length in the next chapter, in which I consider the question whether we might have genuine duties to artworks themselves. I argue that such duties do exist, and that they are grounded in our *love* for particular artworks; if my argument there is successful, then it would present a *direct* means of resisting the pull of aesthetic idealization, given that one consequence of such idealization would be violating one's obligations to the artworks with which one has established significant relationships.

Even putting this possibility aside, there is another way in which one's relationship with a work of art might lead one into a set of obligations—not to the artwork, but to other persons. Appreciative relationships with artworks are seldom private matters. In interpreting and appreciating a work of art, we often share it with others, and it matters to us whether other individuals find the same things that we do in the work. As Ted Cohen puts it:

It is somehow important to me that others respond to Aaron Neville's amazing version of "Will the Circle be Unbroken?" And I need others to gasp at the Bach-like character of Paul Desmond's saxophone. And I need others to shudder when Paul Celan says that Death is *ein Meister aus Deutschland*.⁵²

Often this impulse to share leads us directly into a very literal communities. Wagner lovers, Trekkies, and punk culture are three of the more well known examples, but not every community is so large or so established. Consider again my friend with whom I've come to develop an interest in the films of Almodóvar: our individual relationships with the films and our friendship have become entangled, to the extent that our shared appreciation of the films is partly constitutive of our friendship. It is an end that we share.

To the extent that our relationships with artworks put us into contact with a community

⁵²Cohen, "High and Low Thinking About High and Low Art", p. 153.

of fellow appreciators, it is a short step towards the claim that we might generate expectations within the context of these communities which are obligation-grounding. Usually, our fellow appreciators expect us to be a willing conversant, to participate in a joint attempt to understand and appreciate the work, and perhaps to contribute to its preservation or dissemination.

The important question to ask is whether any of these obligations concern the continuation of our existing appreciative relationships with artworks. Is there an expectation, for example, within a community of Wagnerians that each of the individuals remain devoted to the Ring cycle, and will return year after year to see it performed? I think that it's undeniable that, if such an expectation exists, it is much weaker than the expectations that friends have concerning the continuation of their friendship. However, to the extent that we might view shared appreciation of an artwork as a shared end with other individuals—and to the extent that these individuals rely on us in continuing to pursue this end—it would seem that we have at least some responsibility to these individuals not to abandon this shared end without some compelling reason to do so.

Even if we might resist the language of obligation here, there is nevertheless a broader point worth making about the role that our relationships with works of art play in putting us in touch with a community of other persons who have similar relationships with the same artworks: It seems to me that we might come to value our membership within such communities in their own right. Being a member of the punk community, for example, is something which might be a valuable aspect of one's identity, or might involve a set of interpersonal relationships that one values. Consider Jesse Prinz's discussion of punk:

Punk is a form of life. This fact is central to punk, and impossible to miss. By wearing certain clothing, people indicate that they are punk. This is akin to wearing regalia that indicate membership in a social group, such as a club, an orthodox religion, or a tribe. Punk rockers often form closely knit communities. They revolve around "scenes," which consist of local bands, clubs, and personalities. These

communities are also exclusionary. The off-putting character of punk aesthetics serves as a filter, attracting those who feel marginalized and deterring those who wish to be conventional. Punks sometimes enforce membership restrictions dogmatically. They cast aspersions on other groups, like hippies, and they dictate musical preferences and arbitrate authenticity.⁵³

What's important is that membership in the punk community—and other such communities—is generally predicated upon one's maintaining an appreciative relationship with the artworks around which the community clusters. In undergoing the process of aesthetic idealization, by changing our appreciative relationships we might lose our ticket to membership in the community. This would be a loss of something of value; and this might provide us with a reason—if not an obligation—not to trade up.

This may not be the weightiest reason not to aesthetically idealize; after all, the promise of richer and more fulfilling experiences might outweigh one's commitment to shared appreciation with a community of appreciators. However, there are further—and I think weightier—reasons to resist the pull of aesthetic idealization.

2.4.2 Artworks and the Self

Our appreciative relationships with artworks can have a major impact on our practical identities. As in friendships, in an appreciative relationship with an artwork we commit to a pattern of direction and interpretation that can have a major role to play in both the constitution and the understanding of the self.

Aesthetic idealization, insofar as it involves large-scale changes in our appreciative relationships, involves risks to the self similar to those I discussed in the case of upgrading one's friends. There is in the first case a threat to the volitional unity of an individual: in abandoning one's existing appreciative relationships, one also gives up on a number of practical identities connected with those relationships and with the activities and interests which they

⁵³Prinz, "The Aesthetics of Punk Rock", p. 590.

gave rise to and ultimately supported. To give up on my long-running relationship with, for example, *Star Wars* or *Moby Dick* would be to cut myself off from part of my practical identity. Practical identities change over time, of course, but insofar as aesthetic idealization would likely involve giving up on a large portion of those artworks with which I have existing appreciative relationships, this would constitute a major change in identity. I might worry that, following aesthetic idealization, I would no longer be the same person. Even given the prospect of self-improvement, I might still feel unease at the prospect of alienation from my past self or even fragmentation of the self.

A related concern—and a normative one—concerns the possibility that, if I were to idealize aesthetically, I would end up as a much less distinctive individual. Suppose that we *were* all ultimately successful in the process of aesthetic idealization. The result would be a world in which each individual shares the same aesthetic preferences; we would all prefer those works of art which yield the most valuable experiences. Alexander Nehamas argues that this would be a repugnant outcome:

Imagine, if you can, a world where everyone likes, or loves, the same things, where every disagreement about beauty can be resolved. That would be a desolate, desperate world. Such a world, even if Shakespeare, Titian, and Bach were to be a part of it...would be no better (but also no worse) than a world where everyone tuned in to *Baywatch* or turned on Wayne Newton at the same time. What is truly frightful is not *what* everyone likes but simply the fact that *everyone* likes it.⁵⁴

What Nehamas's thought experiment invites us to consider is the value of being distinctive—not just with respect to one's artistic preferences, but also with respect to one's character. Like friendships, our relationships with artworks function as mechanisms for developing, understanding, and expressing something distinctive about ourselves. Such distinctiveness might be valuable in itself, aesthetically.⁵⁵ Were we to aesthetically idealize with respect to

⁵⁴Nehamas, *Only a Promise of Happiness*, pp. 83-84.

⁵⁵cf. Jesse Prinz's engaging discussion of how punk culture encourages the cultivation of such distinctiveness in Prinz, "The Aesthetics of Punk Rock", pp. 587-591.

our appreciative relationships, our artistic preferences would become identical to those of every other individual who had aesthetically idealized—and so we would lose this means of differentiating ourselves from each other.

This worry about aesthetic idealization is similar to the worry that, in upgrading friends, I might worry about the sort of person that I would become as a result. Here, the thought is that in virtue of aesthetic idealization, even if I might become a person with much more fulfilling experiences with respect to works of art, I would also become a much less interesting individual.⁵⁶ Retaining my existing appreciative relationships with artworks might seem to present a more attractive option—especially if I value distinctiveness and individuality to a greater extent than I value pleasure.

These considerations about our existing appreciative relationships provide us with reasons to resist the pull of aesthetic idealization. Of course, as is the case with upgrading our friends, there is nevertheless a very real possibility that, all things considered, our reasons to trade up to relationships with better works of art would be weightier than our reasons to stick with the works of art with which we have existing appreciative relationships. Whether or not we ought to trade up in individual cases will likely depend on how central certain appreciative relationships are to our practical identity, how antecedently distinctive our taste is, and how closely we are connected with communities of fellow appreciators. Even so, what the above examples show is that our choices with respect to art are subject to considerations that go beyond those which are solely concerned with maximizing the quality of our experiences. As I argue below, this presents a serious challenge to central Humean assumptions about our engagement with the arts.

⁵⁶Levinson is to some extent sensitive to this worry, which he refers to as the “paradox of aesthetic perfectionism” in Levinson, “Artistic Worth and Personal Taste”. There, Levinson attempts to show that we might nevertheless retain some means of remaining distinctive even after we have become aesthetically ideal. For a convincing argument to the contrary, see Riggle, “Levinson on the Aesthetic Ideal”.

2.4.3 Objections Considered

There are two objections to the above argument to consider: First, it might be objected that I've attributed too much to our relationships with works of art. Many of our interactions with works of art are less formal and less sustained than the sort I've appealed to above. Consider a few of the following examples: We often go to see movies and care very little about *what* we see so long as we are seeing something entertaining. Trashy novels keep us busy for a few days at the beach, but rarely make lasting impressions on us. We hang prints and paintings—even acknowledged masterpieces—in waiting rooms and lobbies and barely look at them. While we do have what might be called “relationships” with these objects, it would be absurd to characterize them in the same terms as we characterize our relationships with our close friends. These works of art aren't central to our lives; we often hardly give them a second thought.

By way of reply, first, a concession: I think that what this objection gets right is that our interactions with art—like our interactions with many things in life, including other people—often don't rise beyond the level of superficial (and perhaps instrumental) concern. But this in itself doesn't rule out the possibility that we could have more significant relationships with some works of art. Consider an analogy: many of my interpersonal relationships are purely professional. It doesn't generally matter to me who my librarian, my dentist, or my mechanic is. I don't pay much attention to each of them as individuals, or to the nature of our relationship, so long as they are doing their job and we manage to get along together well enough. Even though many of our interpersonal relationships are similar, this doesn't mean that we can *never* have more significant friendships. The same is true with respect to relationships with works of art.

The second objection is more serious. Suppose that the Humean responds to my argument with the following claim: There are all sorts of reasons to adopt—or refrain from adopting—appreciative relationships with artworks. However, only a subset of these rea-

sons are reasons of the right kind, i.e. those centrally connected to capacities of artworks to afford intrinsically valuable experiences. Consider the analogous case of belief: as *believers*, we ought to aim to track the truth, even though there may be pragmatic reasons not to do so. Similarly, the Humean objection goes, as *art appreciators* we ought to aim to make our artistic preferences track those artworks which yield the most intrinsically valuable experiences. Aesthetic idealization therefore still serves as the ideal for each of us *qua* art appreciator. The reasons I've identified to resist aesthetic idealization are at best reasons that have nothing to do with the activity of appreciating art.

In responding to the Humean, I think that we should challenge the contention that artistic appreciation ought ultimately to be sensitive only to the experiences that artworks offer. I think that an argument for such a challenge can be made using resources internal to the Humean position: Remember that, for the Humean, the ideal of artistic appreciation is the ideal critic. Is it the case that ideal critics are only sensitive in their appreciative preferences to the quality of experiences that an artwork would offer to *any* similarly ideal spectator?

Although I cannot make the case fully here, I believe that there is good reason to believe that even at the highest levels of actual criticism, appreciative preferences are responsive to much more than this. Matthew Kieran has argued that "criticism of the highest order is shot through with art critical evaluations that are partly a function of personal experience and attitudes. The features that are focused on, the ways those features are understood, and evaluations of the work often depend on personal assumptions and attitudes."⁵⁷ Many critics often confess as much. Consider the French poet and novelist Anatole France's claims about his approach to doing literary criticism:

As I understand it, and as you allow me to practice it, criticism is...a sort of romance designed for those who have sagacious and curious minds, and every romance is, rightly taken, an autobiography. The good critic is he who relates the adventures

⁵⁷Kieran, "Why Ideal Critics are Not Ideal", p. 287.

of his own soul among masterpieces.⁵⁸

Taking Kieran and France seriously involves viewing criticism even at the ideal level as a kind of testimony about appreciative relationships with artworks which are sensitive to biographical and personal features of the critic just as much as they are sensitive to qualities of the artworks themselves.⁵⁹

If this is true, and if ideal critics serve as a benchmark for the kinds of practices and activities characteristic of artistic appreciation, then it would be hard to maintain that such appreciation ought to be sensitive only to those qualities which the Humean has identified as being central to artistic appreciation—namely, the capacities of artworks to yield intrinsically valuable experiences. It is still open to the Humean to respond that even actual critics are not ideal with respect to their activity of artistic appreciation, but doing so would come at great cost to the Humean. Namely, if actual critics are not ideal, then their joint verdicts would no longer serve as a reliable guide in settling disputes about artistic value.⁶⁰ This, I suspect, would be too steep a price to pay for the Humean.

2.5 Conclusion: Beyond Humeanism

The major shortcoming of the Humean approach seems to me to be its rather one-dimensional picture of what a relationship with a work of art might consist in, and what our interests might be in developing such relationships. Significant relationships with works of art are not *only* a matter of experiencing a work and appreciating the value of this experience; like friendships, such relationships may furthermore consist in a history of actions, responses,

⁵⁸France, *On Life and Letters*, vol. 1, p. vii.

⁵⁹I return to this theme in the final chapter of the dissertation, in which I examine the nature of art criticism more fully, and argue for an account of criticism that accommodates personal and autobiographic criticism as genuine. There, I argue that even such personal criticism can be understood as a kind of reasoning about valuable modes of engaging with artworks—reasoning that would be “objective” insofar as it applies to other individuals capable of engaging with the artworks in the same way.

⁶⁰It is worth noting that Hume himself concedes that *actual* critics may not be ideal in this sense; he allows that variations in age, constitution, and morals may influence the verdicts of even ideal critics. The price Hume pays is the serious possibility that critics cannot serve as a standard of taste, i.e. a means of conclusively settling disputes about artistic value. Hume, “Of The Standard Of Taste”, §29.

commitments and direction that can make a significant difference to one's individual character. They are mechanisms of individuality, which often allow us to differentiate ourselves from other individuals. Insofar as such cultivation of an individual character is valuable in itself, and insofar as relationships with works of art, like significant personal relationships, play a valuable role in such a project, one can see both why the prospect of aesthetic idealization might seem so troubling *and* why we have a countervailing reason not to abandon our existing relationships even if the works of art with which we have established relationships are suboptimal with respect to their artistic value. In discussing the issue of aesthetic idealization, I've sketched the beginnings of an account of what it is to have a significant relationship with a work of art.

To date, consideration of such relationships is largely missing from the philosophy of art. Indeed, much contemporary philosophy of art systematically downplays the importance of these relationships, focusing almost exclusively on questions concerning the impartial evaluation of works of art. The primary question motivating these discussions is whether or not we can specify any objective, impartial, and rational method of coming to make judgments concerning artistic value independent of any particular historical relationships one might have with particular works of art. The Humean approach is the most influential attempt to provide such a method. This method is meant to apply *universally* to all works of art. As evaluators of art we are meant to be *impartial*; our own histories with works of art are downplayed as mere sentimental connections that, should we attempt to judge a work properly, we would have to ignore as a potential source of bias.

These questions are important; but in focusing on them the philosophy of art has left an important dimension of our artistic lives under-theorized. I take what I've said above to be the beginning of an attempt to remedy this omission; in the next two chapters, I expand on this theme.

In the next chapter, I focus on a question I raised above: can we have genuine obligations to artworks *themselves*—rather than obligations that derive from our obligations to

other persons? I argue that we *can* have such obligations, provided that we stand in a particular kind of relationship to the artwork—one of *loving* the artwork. If my argument in the next chapter is successful, this would demonstrate that the practical significance of our relationships with artworks extends into the normative domain of obligations. What's more, the existence of such obligations would provide a further reason to resist the pull of aesthetic idealization; doing so might involve violating our duties to the artworks we love.

In the final chapter, I develop an account of the nature of art criticism according to which the primary function of critical communication is *practical*: its aim is to help its audience develop and structure their relationships with artworks. My account of criticism therefore differs from the prevailing philosophical account, according to which the function of criticism is to provide *evidence* for beliefs about the artistic value of artworks. This model is therefore well-suited to the Humean focus on the impartial evaluation of artworks. My aim in challenging this model is to do justice first to the idea that critics often engage in criticism that is personal and autobiographical, and which therefore speaks to the nature of their own relationships with artworks; and second to the idea that critics often tailor their criticism to an audience, in light of both an audience's existing relationships with art as well as their capacity for developing and structuring new relationships with artworks.

Chapter 3

Obligations to Artworks as Duties of Love

Abstract

It is uncontroversial that our engagement with artworks is constrained by obligations; most commonly, these consist in obligations to other persons, such as artists, audiences, and owners of artworks. A more controversial claim is that we have genuine obligations to artworks themselves. I defend a qualified version of this claim: we *do* sometimes have genuine obligations to artworks themselves. However, I argue that such obligations do not derive from the supposed moral rights of artworks – for no such rights exist. Rather, I argue that these obligations are instances of *duties of love*: obligations that one incurs in virtue of loving some object, be it a person or, in this case, an artwork.

3.1 Introduction

There are all sorts of things that one is permitted to do with a work of art. Suppose that you're in Tate Modern, viewing one of Mark Rothko's late paintings, *Black on Maroon*. There are a number of more or less standard activities that you're invited to engage in: You might sit with the huge canvas for some time, immerse yourself in its colors, or talk about it (quietly)

with your friend. There are some less standard things that you might do too. Inspired by Thomas Struth's photographs of museum crowds, you might take a picture of the painting and the audience gathered around it.¹ You might rap about it, like Jay-Z did, slant-rhyming 'Rothko' with 'brothel.'² Or, like the iconoclastic critic Robert Hughes, you might fail to be impressed, wondering whether what you see in front of you is an artistic achievement significant enough "to sustain the orphic prating of relentlessly sublime performance, of continuous production of awe, which serves to accredit Rothko's work in museums and the marketplace."³

On the other hand, there are a number of things that you are obligated *not to do*. Consider the case of Vladimir Umanets, who in October of 2012 approached the very same Rothko painting and signed his name in the bottom right corner with a black paint marker. Umanets, himself an artist and a co-founder of the Dadaist "Yellowism" movement—if a couple puerile artists and an incoherent manifesto constitute a movement—claimed to have been inspired by earlier instances of appropriation of other artist's works by the likes of Duchamp and Rauschenberg. It has been claimed, with some justification, that "much of the story of twentieth-century art can be told as a series of acts of vandalism."⁴ The difference, of course, is that Duchamp never really drew a mustache on the actual *Mona Lisa*, and Rauschenberg asked permission before erasing De Kooning's drawing. Umanets, on the other hand, clearly violated an obligation—not to deface the Rothko—and his sentencing to two years in jail by a London court reflects the severity accorded to the violation.⁵

I am interested in the nature of such obligations which constrain the ways that we en-

¹Struth has, in fact, made a photograph of two individuals sitting in the Rothko Chapel in Houston.

²Jay-Z is, incidentally, quite an admirer of Rothko. References to the artist occur in at least three of Jay-Z's songs, including one instance where a visitor to Jay-Z's apartment runs into a Rothko canvas hanging in the bathroom. Jay-Z sums it up beautifully: "My house like a museum so I see 'em when I'm peeing."

³Hughes, *Nothing If Not Critical*, p. 242.

⁴Lerner, "Damage Control".

⁵This is not to deny that transgression of such obligations might constitute an artwork; indeed, many more "legitimate" artworks have consisted in obligations of this kind being openly flouted. Consider the British artists Jake and Dinos Chapman's defacement of several of Goya's prints which are, ironically enough, now on display in 2013 at the Tate Britain, sister institution to the Tate Modern.

gage with works of art.⁶ What is the source of these obligations, and what explains their normative authority? The most common way to account for such obligations is as instances of more or less direct obligations to *other persons*. On this view, one's engagement with a work of art might be constrained by one's obligations to an artist, an audience, the owner of the artwork, fellow art lovers, and so on. The work of art itself serves as a nexus of these rights and responsibilities, although the work of art *itself* is not something towards which one has any genuine obligations.

To illustrate this point, consider the controversy over the removal of Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* from the Foley Federal Plaza in Lower Manhattan in 1989. The sculpture, installed in 1981, consisted of a sheet of COR-TEN steel, 120 feet long, standing on its edge in the middle of the plaza. The General Services Administration, which commissioned the work, made the decision to remove the sculpture due to its tremendous unpopularity with the civil servants and members of the public working in the plaza. Serra argued that removal of the piece from the plaza would constitute destruction of the site-specific artwork, and filed suit against the GSA to block the removal of the work. Serra's lawsuit pitted his rights as an artist that his work not be destroyed against the rights of the GSA, which owned the work. Although the work was ultimately removed from the plaza and scrapped, the controversy over the trial eventually led to the passing of the Visual Artists Rights Act (VARA) in 1991—a federal statute which affirms artists's rights to protect the proper attribution and integrity of their artworks.

In the above legal case, the only obligations in question were those of the GSA to respect the rights of another *person*: the artist, Richard Serra. That such artists' rights exist is a matter of broad agreement, although there is a great deal of controversy as to their scope and power.⁷ Similar debates concern the extent to which cultures have a right to objects of cultural property: Is the British Museum under an obligation to return the Parthenon

⁶I use the term 'engagement' very broadly: I take it to encompass a wide range of possible actions, attitudes, and emotions which might constitute our interaction with a work of art.

⁷Consider, for example, legal debates over the scope and duration of copyright.

sculptures to Greece? For good reason, these questions have garnered much attention; such questions aim to determine the extent to which any individual's engagement with a work of art is constrained by obligations to other persons. A less often considered question—and the one I focus on below—is the following: Might one have any genuine obligations to the work of art *itself* independent of one's obligations to other persons?

I argue that the answer to this question is a qualified yes, although the rationale I offer for this claim differs from that of most. Most discussions of this issue have revolved around the possibility of affording moral rights to artworks, such that artworks themselves have independent moral standing.⁸ I think that there is reason to be doubtful that artworks deserve such standing. However, I think that there is still reason to believe that, in some contexts, one might nevertheless have obligations to an artwork independent of one's obligations to other persons. I propose that these obligations issue from one's standing in a particular kind of relationship to these works of art: in the same way that some recent philosophers have argued that there are duties of love,⁹ I argue that one's love for a work of art involves the appreciation of corresponding obligations to that work. While it might be strained to speak of artworks as possessing moral rights, it is nevertheless quite reasonable to take ourselves to have genuine obligations to those works of art that we love.

In what follows, I first examine the arguments for a rights-based approach to grounding obligations to artworks and show how it is ultimately lacking. Following this, I make a case for an alternative approach to grounding obligations to artworks as relationship-dependent obligations. I conclude by considering the practical and theoretical consequences of accepting the existence of such obligations.

⁸cf. Tormey, "Aesthetic Rights"; Goldblatt, "Do Works of Art Have Rights?"; Hein, "Aesthetics Rights"; Sparshott, "Why Artworks Have No Right to Have Rights"; and Karlen and Moore, *Moral Rights of Art*.

⁹See in particular Wallace, "Duties of Love". I use the terms 'duty' and 'obligation' interchangeably in this paper. In other words, a 'duty' of love is equivalent to an 'obligation' of love. I don't deny that there might be important conceptual space between the two notions, but as far as I can tell the differences are irrelevant for the purposes of this paper.

3.2 Do Artworks Have Rights?

To agree that some individual has a *right* to some object is to commit oneself to the corresponding claim that other individuals have a set of corresponding obligations not to interfere with or prevent that individual's enjoyment of their rights. A familiar example is the right to freedom of expression: to affirm such a right is also to affirm a corresponding claim that individuals have an obligation not to interfere with that individual's right by silencing them, censoring them, or otherwise interfering with their ability to express themselves. Thus Mill's famous edict that "if all mankind minus one were of one opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person than he, if he had the power, would be in silencing mankind."¹⁰

The scope of such rights is usually restricted to a particular domain; individuals have claims against other individuals within that domain to respect their rights within that domain. Legal rights concern the obligations that we have to other individuals within the domain of a system of laws. Moral rights, on the other hand, concern the duties that one owes to other individuals in virtue of their moral standing.¹¹ The two domains can come apart, especially if the laws of a particular legal system are unjust; arguments for granting legal rights to some class of individuals often rely on the claim that such individuals possess moral rights which the law does not adequately reflect.

There are interesting legal questions about the possible advantages of ascribing *legal* rights to works of art.¹² There might be reasons to designate artworks as the bearers of legal rights independent of the question whether or not they have any moral rights; these reasons might have to do with the fact that such an ascription would consolidate the rights of a number of different parties—artists, art lovers, future generations, cultures—under the heading of one legal entity.

¹⁰Mill, *On Liberty*, p. 20.

¹¹cf. Thomson, *The Realm of Rights*, pp. 1-4.

¹²Some of these are considered in Sparshott, "Why Artworks Have No Right to Have Rights", p. 6.

We can put these considerations aside for now, though: the claim that I am interested is the suggestion that works of art are the bearers of *moral* rights which generate corresponding obligations—both moral and, ideally, legal—on the part of the individuals who interact with those artworks. If it could be shown that artworks have rights in this sense, it would immediately follow that, in virtue of this fact about artworks, all moral agents would have corresponding moral obligations to respect those rights. Thus we find Alan Tormey, an early defender of the rights of artworks, claiming that “art works have, in virtue of their status as artworks, certain determinable entitlements to be dealt with, or not to be dealt with, in particular ways.”¹³ He is making a claim about the entitlements that artworks have to certain kinds of treatment by *all* rational agents.

3.2.1 What Rights Could Artworks Have?

Before addressing the plausibility of Tormey’s claim, it is worth asking: What might such rights consist of? What determinate rights might works of art be thought to have? The general consensus clusters around three broad categories of rights: first, rights not to be mishandled, mutilated, destroyed, or otherwise harmed; second, rights to be performed or interpreted in an appropriate manner; and third, broader rights to be respected or appreciated in a manner befitting a work of art.¹⁴ To make the stakes clearer, I address each of these classes of rights in turn with an eye to the practical and theoretical upshot of accepting the existence of such rights.

First, consider the question of the destruction of works of art. One primary candidate for a right of a work of art is the right not to be destroyed, mutilated, or otherwise harmed.¹⁵

¹³Tormey, “Aesthetic Rights”, p. 163.

¹⁴Here I follow the division of such rights proposed in Goldblatt, “Do Works of Art Have Rights?”, p. 71.

¹⁵An obviously worry about such a right concerns the possibility that, if it were respected, the world would be *full* of art—including bad art. Given that artworks, unlike persons, don’t tend to pass away within a reasonable amount of time, we might find the world cluttered with old art—perhaps even to the extent that it interferes with the creation of new art. This possibility is well addressed in Sparshott, “Why Artworks Have No Right to Have Rights”, p. 13. This objection doesn’t seem overly deep to me; presumably the right to preservation has limits, especially insofar as it must be balanced against other rights—for example, the rights of artists to create new work.

This right would, in turn, ground an obligation for all rational agents not to engage with a work of art in such a way that might lead to its destruction, mutilation, or harm. Such an obligation would be owed not to the owner of the work of art, nor to the artist, nor to the artworld public, but rather to the work of art itself. The ascription of such rights to artworks would have at least three major implications.

First, these rights would constrain the privileges of the owners of works of art. If such rights could be shown to exist, we might revisit the case of the removal of Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* with an eye not to the obligations that the GSA has to *Serra*, but instead to *Tilted Arc* itself. Suppose that the GSA has *no* obligations to Serra, or to any other person. The claim made by the defender of the rights of artworks would be the following: In removing the artwork from the plaza, we might say that, despite its ownership, the GSA ignored its obligations to the work; these rights might be invoked to protect a work of art against wishes of its owner.

Second, such rights might also be invoked to prevent the destruction of an artwork by the artist who created it.¹⁶ Consider the case of the conceptual artist John Baldessari, who in 1970 burned every one of his early paintings created during the period of 1953 and 1966. In this case, it's hard to claim that Baldessari violated any obligations to other persons; the paintings were, after all, *his own* both as creation and as property—and he was under no obligation to any owners of the work or to the public to show them.¹⁷ That such destruction is nevertheless controversial—and perhaps prompts pangs of anger or outrage—might prompt one to say that Baldessari violated his obligations to his own artworks.

Third, these rights might guide decisions about preservation and restoration of artworks. When the sculptor David Smith died unexpectedly in 1965, his friend, the art critic Clement Greenberg, acted as the executor of Smith's estate. In this capacity, Greenberg had white paint removed from five of Smith's outdoor steel sculptures, allowing the

¹⁶cf. Young, "Destroying Works of Art", pp. 370-371.

¹⁷One might imagine that, had he not destroyed the paintings, he might have (without outrage) locked them in a vault never to be seen by any potential audience.

sculptures to deteriorate in the elements and develop a patina of rust. The case was highly controversial, and Greenberg was publicly criticized for his actions by his former student, Rosalind Krauss.¹⁸ While, admittedly, the chief issue in this case seems to be whether or not Greenberg failed to respect Smith's wishes for his work, one might additionally stress that Greenberg violated his obligations not to destroy these sculptures insofar as he exposed them to the elements.¹⁹

A second candidate class of rights for artworks consists of rights to be performed and interpreted in determinate ways. Consider, for example, a director who takes extreme liberties with the staging and performance of a play, to the extent that the play has a radically different—and extremely negative—effect on its audience than what might reasonably be expected. It would be common to say that the director has abused the work, not given it a fair interpretation, or otherwise mishandled his responsibilities as an interpreter of the work for performance. The attribution of a right to the work of art *not* to be abused in such a way might provide grounds for our censure of the director.

The third category of rights consists of rights to be respected and valued in a manner befitting to a work of art. This category of rights is more capacious than the first two; in fact, it likely subsumes and provides some justification for the other two categories. The general idea is that, like persons, works of art are unique, semi-autonomous entities worthy of respect. They would therefore have a corresponding right to be treated as such.

The existence of such rights would serve to strengthen an analogy that is often appealed to in discussions of artistic value: this is the analogy that we value works of art in much the same way that we value other persons.²⁰ It is often assumed that valuing a person involves respecting their interests and being sensitive to the obligations that these interests

¹⁸Krauss, "Changing the Work of David Smith".

¹⁹One might argue that Greenberg's aim was not to destroy the works, but rather to allow them to be temporarily exposed to the elements to acquire a patina, which would then be covered by a protective varnish. While the details of the actual case are disputed, we might imagine an alternative case in which Greenberg did in fact simply allow the sculpture to deteriorate over time until their destruction; this case would clearly violate both rights not to be destroyed as well as rights not to be otherwise harmed or defaced.

²⁰Most attribute an early statement of this analogy to Stanley Cavell, in Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, p. 189.

generate.²¹ If it is true that we have obligations to artworks, then valuing them might consist in respecting these obligations in much the same way we respect our obligations to other persons.

Ascription of such rights might ground the argument that it would be morally problematic to use works of art only as a means to valuable experiences, rather than to appreciate them in a way that respects their inherent value. Consider R.A. Sharpe's invocation of obligations to artworks to ground such an argument:

We can have obligations to art (and again this is not the same as having obligations to its creator)...I do not value my children for the experience they give me. I value them for themselves. If I were to cast them aside once they ceased to be amusing and cuddly and became adolescents with problems, then I should have acted wickedly. Works of art are like people in this respect.... If I value a work of art for the experience it gives me, then it looks all too much like a case of my using the work of art.²²

For Sharpe's argument to have any teeth, there must be genuine obligations owed to artworks.²³ The ascription of moral rights to artworks would ground such obligations.

3.2.2 Tormey on Aesthetic Pain and Artwork Rights

Success in making the case that works of art are the bearers of moral rights would not just be a surprising finding; as I've suggested above, it would also be of major theoretical and practical significance. The case for this position has been most convincingly made by Alan Tormey in an article, "Aesthetic Rights," which I have already cited above. I think that his

²¹Consider Scanlon's claim that "the idea of valuing human life and the idea of respecting one's duties and other people's rights ought to be closely related, if not the very same thing" in Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, p. 106.

²²Sharpe, "The Empiricist Theory of Artistic Value", p. 323. Sharpe fails to consider the possibility that a work's inherent value might consist, at least in part, in its capacity to yield valuable experiences—a view developed at length by Malcolm Budd in Budd, *Values of Art*, ch. 1.

²³As far as I can tell, Sharpe does not explicitly argue for this point, but instead accepts it as a commonly if not universally held position. I think Sharpe is more than a little optimistic about the prevalence of this view.

argument, while provocative, ultimately fails: works of art are not—and should not be—the possessors of any such rights. However, Tormey's argument fails in ways that will ultimately be productive for my own argument that we nevertheless *do* in certain contexts have genuine obligations to artworks.

Before examining Tormey's argument, it will help to ward off an immediate but ultimately superficial objection to the view that artworks are the bearers of rights. One might worry at the outset that the only individuals capable of possessing rights are those who can *claim* their rights. Artworks, it might be maintained, are insensate entities and thus are incapable of claiming anything against anyone. But this in itself isn't a telling objection; many individuals who are incapable of claiming their rights are nevertheless considered to be bearers of rights. These might include children, mentally disabled individuals, animals, and potentially even natural objects.

Appreciating this point takes us one step into Tormey's argument: Tormey adopts the rather common view that every right possessed by an individual corresponds to some interest or interests of that individual. Not all interests generate obligations: a corporation might have an interest in paying its workers a less than minimum wage, but this doesn't mean that it has a right to do so. *Some* interests, however, ground moral rights: these plausibly include rights to respect and freedom from harm from other rational individuals. Even individuals who are not able to appreciate or claim their rights nevertheless have such interests, which would serve to ground rights that such interests not be violated by other moral agents. This opens the door to the possibility that even non-sentient individuals might be the bearers of rights, insofar as we take their interests to generate obligations.²⁴

Tormey's suggestion is that we extend moral rights, grounded in obligation-generating interests, to artworks. In order to prove this claim, he will have to demonstrate (1) that works of art are the kinds of things that have interests; and (2) that some of these interests

²⁴This strategy of attempting to extend rights to nonsentient beings is not unique; the same argument has been employed to make the case that natural objects, like trees, have rights on the grounds that they have obligation-generating interests of their own. cf. Stone, *Should trees have standing?*

are in fact obligation-generating, to the extent that they warrant the attribution of moral rights to artworks themselves.

Tormey's argument for the first claim is largely implicit. It seems to go something like this: Works of art are artifacts. As such, they have a particular aim or purpose. The "interests" of a work concern its ability to fulfill this aim or purpose in an appropriate fashion. To the extent that one attempts to interact with a work of art in such a way that one interferes with this aim or purpose—perhaps by destroying it, modifying it, or interpreting or performing it in some ludicrous fashion—one violates these interests. This is, importantly, a general claim about the interests of artifacts: it applies just as much to hammers and nails as it does to Leonardo da Vinci's paintings and J.S. Bach's compositions.²⁵

One might grant the above claim about artifacts without committing oneself to the stronger claim that such interests are obligation-generating. Suppose that one uses a sledge hammer to nail tacks. It might be true that in doing so one violates the interests of the sledge hammer; however, one is under no obligation to the hammer not to use it in this way—even if doing so might be both foolish and ineffective. Tormey needs to make the stronger claim that the interests of artworks in particular *do* generate obligations.

In order to make this claim, Tormey appeals to the phenomenon which he labels "aesthetic pain." He asks us to consider several examples of engagement with works of art the prompt a kind of pain or avoidance behavior. These include:

1. Hearing a violinist play the Debussy Sonata for Violin and Piano with a strident tone and faulty intonation.
2. Watching an inexperienced and awkward ballerina attempt *Giselle*.
3. Seeing the *Annunciation* of Pinturichio in Spello after someone has painted a mous-

²⁵This claim might also lend itself to a picture of artefactual well-being, according to which an artefact's life goes best insofar as it is able to satisfy its interests. It's not necessarily an objection that these interests are the product of an intentional design of the artefact by its creator; such a view is close to one according to which human well-being consists in an individual's fulfilling the aims and goals for which they were designed by God.

tache on the Virgin.²⁶

We might add to the above list the experience of viewing Umanets defacing the Rothko painting in the Tate Modern. What prompts the discomfort that one might feel in observing each of these events? The general idea is this: when one experiences a case in which a work of art is misused or violated in some way, one will experience this kind of pain, which might generally be accompanied by attempts to halt the source of said pain—the abuse of the artwork.

Tormey argues that the existence of such pain provides evidence for the claim that artworks possess obligation-generating interests:

If art works are vulnerable to this variety of mistreatment (whose recognition I have argued is the source of aesthetic pain), this furnishes excellent presumptive evidence that we commonly regard them as invested with interests that are obligation-generating. And we correspondingly expect or require performers, curators, publishers, viewers, and audiences to fulfill varying obligations to the works that come into their provenance. Our aesthetic experience or, rather, one set of descriptions of that experience then suggests that we do in fact conceive of art works as endowed with obligation-generating interests, and since these are the conditions, outlined in part I, sufficient for the possession of rights, there can be no further reason to deny that art works have such rights.²⁷

His more general claim is that any instance of an obligation-generating interest being violated will be painful to someone who witnesses it, so that we can point to the existence of this pain as evidence for the existence of such an obligation-generating interest.²⁸

²⁶Tormey, “Aesthetic Rights”, p. 165.

²⁷*ibid.*, p. 172.

²⁸*ibid.*, p. 168.

3.2.3 The Case Against the Moral Rights of Artworks

A major omission in Tormey's argument is his failure to consider that the class of individuals susceptible to such aesthetic pain is much smaller than the class of all rational agents. At the outset, he says that he thinks that any "perceptive experient" will be subject to experiences of such pain. But this seems too broad; one presumably needs to know something about the artwork, its nature, and its aims or functions to be sensitive to whether or not it is being mistreated. More substantively, it seems that one must *value* the artwork in order to be sensitive to the experience of aesthetic pain.²⁹

The problem with this omission is that Tormey moves from the obligations that these "perceptive experients" take themselves to have towards artworks to the claim that artworks have rights that *all* rational agents respect these obligations. Tormey does not make this transition explicit: rather, it occurs in his equivocation in the passage quoted above on the meaning of 'we'. He shifts from using 'we' to indicate perceptive experients subject to aesthetic pain to using 'we' to indicate *all rational agents*—which is what would be required in order to ascribe rights to artworks. Not only is this move unwarranted; it also leads to the threat of an explosion of artifact rights which can seem highly counter-intuitive.

Assume that Tormey is correct that the aesthetic pain of such perceptive experients does indicate the existence of obligations that must be respected by all rational agents. Next, consider the possibility that there is an arbitrarily small set of valuers of just about *any* class of artifacts, from alarm clocks to ashtrays to airplanes. If Tormey's argument were correct, the existence of these valuers would lead to attributions of rights for nearly *every* valued class of artifacts, independent of the size of the class of valuers or the correctness of their claims. Thus, David Goldblatt (rather entertainingly) considers the possibility that contact lenses have rights:

²⁹I take valuing some *X* to consist in a) taking certain *X*-related considerations (such as those involving *X*'s interests) to constitute reasons for action and attributes; b) being emotionally vulnerable to *X* and to *X*'s interests; and c) being committed to the existence of a minimal set of reasons that *everyone* has to respect *X*. cf. Scheffler, "Valuing".

The class of those who are appreciative of the value of contact lenses and includes among others, optometrists, contact lens wearers, and their friends and mothers. There are certain ways that one ought to treat contact lenses as contact lenses, e.g., soak them regularly, and certain ways in which one ought not treat them, e.g., scratch them. Thus we have for contact lenses a set of prescriptions...violations of [which] will result in some kind of avoidance behavior for the class [of perceptive experiencers], R_i . The uncomfortable result for members of R_i , we can call, analogous to aesthetic pain, optometric pain.³⁰

This is, of course, absurd. As Goldblatt points out, this amounts to a *reductio* of Tormey's argument; it is therefore false that the existence of a class of perceptive experiencers sensitive to aesthetic pain indicates that all rational agents have obligations to works of art.

While this does not amount to a full repudiation of the possibility that works of art possess moral rights, I think that it counts as a strong presumptive case against it. There are further concerns that might tell against the attribution of rights to artworks that, for the sake of space, I cannot address here.³¹ Instead, I will turn to a different means of grounding genuine obligations to artworks.

3.3 Obligations to Artworks as Duties of Love

I take it as uncontroversial that some works of art are the objects of love. More generally, one might love the oeuvre of a particular artist, artworks of a particular historical period, or an artistic genre.³² One aspect of taking this claim seriously involves thinking through just what is involved in loving a work of art.

³⁰Goldblatt, "Do Works of Art Have Rights?", p. 72.

³¹For further discussion, see Hein, "Aesthetics Rights" and Sparshott, "Why Artworks Have No Right to Have Rights".

³²Could one love "art" itself, in all of its varieties? We certainly refer to some individuals as "art lovers." However, I think it's more plausible that we use this as a shorthand to indicate that these individuals love some particular artworks or artistic kinds. It may, in fact, be impossible to genuinely love *all* art, just as it's likely impossible for us to genuinely love *all* persons. Thanks to Alexander Nehamas for pointing this out.

Harry Frankfurt, in writing about love, has argued that central to loving some individual is a kind of volitional necessity:

Now the necessity that is characteristic of love does not constrain the movements of the will through an imperious surge of passion or compulsion by which the will is defeated and subdued. On the contrary, the constraint operates from within our own will itself. It is by our own will, and not by any external or alien force, that we are constrained. Someone who is bound by volitional necessity is unable to form a determined and effective intention—regardless of what motives and reasons he may have for doing so—to perform (or to refrain from performing) the action that is at issue. If he undertakes an attempt to perform it, he discovers that he simply cannot bring himself to carry the attempt all the way through.³³

We can appreciate this kind of necessity by considering the case proposed by Bernard Williams and discussed in Chapter 1: suppose that one's partner were drowning in a pond along with several other strangers.³⁴ If one truly loves one's partner, jumping into the pond to save *them*—rather than any of the strangers—presents itself as a matter of practical obligation. One simply *must* save one's partner; love admits no other option.

The lesson one might take from Frankfurt's observation is that there exist duties of love: obligations to some individual that one incurs in virtue of standing in a particular relationship to that individual—namely, a loving relationship. These obligations, it has been argued, cannot be analyzed solely in terms of the moral rights of the individual that one loves. Rather, it is in virtue of the fact that one loves the individual in question that one is subject to such obligations.³⁵ The content of such duties will depend upon the particulars

³³Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love*, p. 46.

³⁴Williams, "Persons, Character and Morality", pp. 17-18.

³⁵This point is argued in depth in Wallace, "Duties of Love". In Chapter 1, I argue that with respect to our obligations to other *persons* we love, many of these duties can be understood reductively in terms of our moral requirements of trust, vulnerability, reciprocity and gratitude within the context of our personal relationships. Such an approach doesn't work for artworks, given that we have no similar moral requirements towards artworks themselves—more on this below.

of the object that one loves, but plausibly many involve the recognition, appreciation, and promotion of the interests of the individual in question.³⁶

I propose that loving a work of art involves the appreciation of a similar set of duties of love. One doesn't incur genuine obligations to artworks because artworks are the bearers of moral rights which must be respected by all rational agents. Instead, we incur obligations to works of art because such obligations are integral to what it is to love these works of art.

3.3.1 Objections Considered

At this point, one might object that speaking of "loving" a work of art is largely metaphorical. One loves works of art in roughly the same way that one "loves" chocolate ice cream. One might object, as does Jerrold Levinson, by noting that there are "significant differences between our relations to persons and our relations to works of art, differences in the obligations and opportunities involved in the two cases."³⁷ Perhaps, the objection goes, loving a work of art might not entail the existence of any particular obligations to that work of art; in this respect, it might differ from loving a person. What evidence is there that loving a work of art actually involves the appreciation of such obligations?

Here we would do well to return to Tormey's discussion of aesthetic pain. I think that Tormey is quite correct about the experience of such pain: in many instances, seeing a work of art mistreated, abused, or even destroyed might be intensely painful. It might prompt one to intervene on behalf of the artwork in order to protect its interests. Where I think Tormey goes wrong is in arguing that the experience of such pain is indicative of an obligation on the part of *all* rational individuals. This is clearly too broad. A more plausible interpretation of the phenomenon of aesthetic pain is this: just as one might experience pain at the sight of

³⁶One might object at this point that such an understanding isn't true to the phenomenology of love: I don't save my mother from drowning because I am *required* to do so; rather, I do so because she is my mother and I love her. Harry Frankfurt develops this thought in Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love*, pp. 36-37. My response would be that, while this may be true, part of what it *is* to love an individual is to take oneself to have particular obligations. Thus in acting on these obligations, one is ultimately acting out of love—rather than on the basis of some independent obligation.

³⁷Levinson, "Artistic Worth and Personal Taste", p. 230.

a loved one in harm's way, so too might one experience aesthetic pain given the experience of a beloved work of art being subjected to mistreatment, damage, or disrespect.

A further—and I think more pressing—objection is that there is an asymmetry between the kinds of commitments we have to the persons that we love and our commitments to the objects that we love. In particular, in the case of loving a person, it seems that it would be wrong of us to abandon our loved ones, or to fail to appreciate our duties to them. They would be justified in holding us responsible for failing to live up to our duties. Here, I am thinking of cases where one fails to fully appreciate one's obligations towards an individual that one *actually* loves: if, for example, I fail to take seriously my partner's interests because I've become overly devoted to my project of writing a novel, my partner would be justified in holding me accountable.³⁸ In cases where one *ceases* to love a person with whom one shares a special relationship, there may be further moral reasons to continue the relationship in question: reasons of trust, vulnerability, reciprocity, and gratitude.

In the case of loving a work of art, it might seem by contrast perfectly permissible to fail to live up to one's commitments: what wrong have I committed in paying less attention to a Thomas Kinkade painting if I've (quite reasonably) come to love other artworks as well? Certainly the *artwork* itself isn't going to hold one responsible—nor, we might add, would anyone be justified in doing so on the artwork's behalf. If this is the case, to what extent should we treat our obligations to the works of art that we love as *genuine* obligations?³⁹

I think that, while this asymmetry is genuine, it does not entail that we have no genuine obligations to artworks. Rather, what it demonstrates is that the source of these obligations lies in a particular commitment made to oneself: one is obligated to an artwork only to the extent that one reflectively endorses one's love for the work as both appropriate and binding. For example, an author might commit herself to finishing her novel; a Wagnerian

³⁸As Alexander Nehamas has pointed out to me, this may be a risk associated with love: insofar as loving any individual comes with such obligations attached, loving *too many* individuals may place us in a position where we are unable to meet all of our obligations to those individuals.

³⁹Samuel Scheffler argues for an analogous claim with respect to our obligations to personal projects in Scheffler, "Projects, Relationships, and Reasons", p. 258.

might affirm the centrality of Wagner in his life; and a young punk might promise himself that he'll never sell out, and that he'll remain committed to the music he loves now. In such cases, one has made a commitment to *oneself* which grounds an obligation to remain committed to the artwork. All other things being equal, violating the obligation by, say, giving up on punk, would make it appropriate to feel a set of reactive attitudes like anger and blame towards oneself. If we find ourselves falling out of love with an artwork, and if we have made a commitment to ourselves, then perhaps we ought to find *new* ways of loving the work.⁴⁰

Of course, one might object that such obligations are not genuine and have no normative force insofar as one could always release oneself from one's commitment, thereby removing one's obligation. The young punk might come to consider his allegiance to the genre as rash and misguided, and in doing so he might give up his resistance to selling out. One could argue that this shows that one was never *actually* obligated by one's commitment to oneself.

However, the fact that one might deliberately release oneself from a commitment does not establish that the commitment doesn't ground a genuine obligation. Consider a parallel case: suppose that you've promised to read the draft of my paper. Perhaps I learn that you would only be able to do so at great inconvenience—and I therefore tell you that you shouldn't feel obligated to read my paper at all. In doing so, I've released you from the promise because I take it that there are good reasons why it shouldn't be kept. If you then don't read my draft, you won't have acted wrongly. However, in the absence of such a release, if you fail to read my draft, then you will have broken your promise and acted wrongly. No one would object to the thought that the obligation that you incur in making a promise to me is genuine, even if I can release you from it.

We can introduce a similar distinction with respect to one's commitments to oneself: there seems to be a genuine difference between reconsidering one's commitment and acting

⁴⁰As a parallel, consider the promise often made in marriage vows: a promise to love and to cherish. Fulfilling this promise often requires partner to rekindle their love for each other, and to find new ways of loving each other over time.

against it. Connie Rosati makes this especially clear:

From an agent's perspective there is all the difference in the world between changing her mind and acting against her own reflective judgment. Indeed, she may well recognize at the moment of action that she is acting against a considered decision, or compromising her values, or behaving self-destructively. In these cases, she may well think, looking forward, "I'm going to regret this in the morning," or she may acknowledge looking back that she has let herself down.⁴¹

Given the possibility of drawing such a distinction—between reconsidering our commitment to ourselves and acting against it—I think that it is reasonable to conclude that commitments to oneself *do* have normative force. To act against it without engaging in substantive deliberation about whether or not to release oneself from the commitment would be to let oneself down, and would open oneself up to feelings of regret, anger, and other reactive attitudes. To this extent, they are genuine obligations, which can, however, be reconsidered unilaterally.

A final objection to this approach would be to claim that I have not demonstrated that *artworks themselves* generate obligations. Rather, I have only argued that one incurs obligations to artworks by way of a commitment to a person—namely, oneself. The upshot, according to the objection, is that artworks don't really generate obligations at all. Unfortunately, I think that this objection is ultimately correct about the *source* of our obligations to artworks. Ultimately, the source of such obligations does lie in our own love for the works, and in the commitments that we form in reflecting on said love. However, even if this is ultimately the source of these obligations, the *focus* of such obligations is not on us, nor is it on our fellow art lovers, on the artist, or on any other people: rather, we feel obligated to the work itself, so that we would—as Frankfurt puts it—not be able to entertain the idea of acting contrary to the *artwork's* interests.⁴²

⁴¹Rosati, "The Importance of Self-Promises", p. 135.

⁴²Nico Kolodny draws a similar distinction between the source and the focus of reasons of love in Kolodny, "Love as Valuing a Relationship", p. 156.

3.3.2 What Specific Duties Do We Have to Artworks We Love?

A fuller account of our obligations to artworks would provide a more substantive account of just what such obligations might consist in, and how they differ from our obligations to other persons that we love. My focus in this chapter has been to determine whether such obligations exist at all, and I do not plan to provide an exhaustive account of the content of these obligations here. However, I believe that I can offer some brief indication of how one might go about providing such an account: I take it as uncontroversial that love for any particular individual—an artwork, a person, or anything else—involves a highly particularized attention to the kind of individual that it is. The features that make artworks lovable as such will most likely, but not always, be those that are centrally connected to the artistic features of the work. I love Walker Evans's photographs for their uncompromising moral vision, and I love the guitar music of John Fahey for its combination of dissonance with ragtime syncopation. Central to my appreciation of these qualities of these works is the further understanding that the works themselves are designed to reward such appreciation. It is, as I've discussed it above in the context of Tormey's argument, *in their interest* to be engaged with in this way—that is, to be loved. I suggest that the content of our obligations to artworks will largely consist in two sorts of obligations: first, we possess duties not to interfere with the interests of the artworks we love. We should not destroy them, deface them, or otherwise prevent them from realizing their ends of being loved and appreciated. These duties would be for the most part identical to those which Tormey aims to ground in the moral rights of artworks. Second, we have what Kant would refer to as imperfect duties to help those works of art that we love. These duties are less stringent, and we can fulfill them in myriad ways: by caring about the work ourselves; by helping to popularize the work through conversation, sharing, or even criticism; by contributing to the preservation and restoration of the work, and so on. The specific implementation of these duties will largely depend on both one's circumstances and on the kind of artwork that one loves, but

this is as it should be; love, as concern for an individual, is just as distinct in its manifestations as beloved individuals are distinct from each other.

3.4 Conclusion

Above, I suggested that ascribing moral rights to works of art would have major practical and theoretical consequences. If it is true that all rational agents have a moral obligation to refrain from destroying works of art, then one has grounds to criticize—and even punish—those individuals who violate the rights of artworks. Thus one might object to the destruction of *Tilted Arc* by the GSA, the degradation of David Smith's sculptures by Clement Greenberg, or the use of artworks as a mere means to pleasure as immoral, simply in virtue of the violation of the rights of the artworks in question.

My proposal is considerably more modest: I do not think that all individuals have obligations to works of art in virtue of the rights of artworks. I have instead argued that the only individuals who possess genuine obligations to works of art are those individuals who antecedently love those artworks.

What is the significance of this finding? While the consequences are not as sweeping as those associated with ascribing rights to artworks, I believe that there are nevertheless two major points to take away: First, this approach opens up a new direction of inquiry within the philosophy of art: how else might loving a work of art be similar to—or different from—loving a person, a project, or an ideal? These questions have seldom been asked, and have to my knowledge never been satisfactorily answered.

Second, there does seem to me to be a significant practical consequence to the recognition of these obligations. Insofar as love is itself valuable, it *does* seem that all rational agents have a responsibility to respect instantiations of loving relationships. To this extent, agents have reason not to go out of their way to disrupt, destroy, mutilate, or otherwise abuse those works of art that are the objects of love on the part of some individual or set of

individuals. This may indeed be a genuine right worth protecting: the right to love those individuals that we do, as best as we can, without fear that our efforts will be intentionally and needlessly frustrated by others.

Chapter 4

Art Criticism as Practical Reasoning

Abstract

Most recent discussions of reasons in art criticism focus on reasons that justify beliefs about the value of artworks. Reviving a long-neglected suggestion from Paul Ziff, I argue that we should focus instead on art-critical reasons that justify actions—namely, particular ways of engaging with artworks. I argue that a focus on practical rather than epistemic reasons yields an understanding of criticism that better fits with our intuitions about the value of reading art criticism, and which makes room for a nuanced distinction between criticism that aims at universality and criticism that is resolutely personal.

4.1 Introduction

Consider, for starters, Clement Greenberg's review of Piet Mondrian's late painting, *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, written on the occasion of the acquisition of the piece in 1943 by the Museum of Modern Art:

Something of the harmony of the original white square of canvas should be restored in the finished painting. But harmony a thousand times more intense, because it is the

result of the successful resolution of a difficult struggle. The simplest way almost of accounting for a great work of art is to say that it is a thing possessing simultaneously the maximum of diversity and the maximum of unity possible to that diversity. For lack of the first the new painting by Mondrian called *New York Boogie Woogie* ...is, for all its sudden originality, something a little less than a masterpiece. The checkered lines of orange squares produce a staccato rhythm—signifying jazz—too easily contained by the square pattern and white ground of the picture. At hardly any point does the rhythm threaten to break out of and unbalance this pattern enough to justify the latter's final triumph. There is resolution, but of an easy struggle.¹

As Greenberg's review continues, he characterizes *Broadway Boogie Woogie* as a "gamble well worth undertaking", even though he ultimately finds it to be less successful than Mondrian's earlier paintings. Greenberg's admiration for Mondrian's earlier work is clear in Greenberg's well-known essay, "Modernist Painting", in which he takes Mondrian to be an exemplar of the internal critique to which all modernism aspires. Greenberg praises in particular Mondrian's ability to demonstrate the essential *flatness* of the pictorial medium via pictorial means: "the crisscrossing black lines and colored rectangles of a Mondrian painting seem hardly enough to make a picture out of, yet they impose the picture's framing shape as a regulating norm with a new force and completeness by echoing that shape so closely."² By comparison, Greenberg characterizes *Broadway Boogie Woogie* as a failed attempt to push this formal investigation in new directions—one which lacks the purity and the seriousness of Mondrian's paintings of the 1920s and 1930s, insofar as it aspires to mere representation of the rhythm of the city.

I've introduced Greenberg's review as an example of the activity of art criticism itself—and, in particular, of the nature of critical reasoning and argument. Greenberg's review includes, in miniature, nearly every major aspect of art-critical activity, including what I

¹Greenberg, "Review of Mondrian's New York Boogie Woogie and Other New Acquisitions at the Museum of Modern Art", p. 153.

²Greenberg, "Modernist Painting", p. 90.

take to be three of its central constituents: description, interpretation, and evaluation.³ In this chapter, I aim to make clear the relationship between each of these aspects of criticism, and the role that each plays in critical communication and argument. But before turning to this topic, let's take a moment to look more closely at each of these aspects of criticism as embodied in Greenberg's review.

First, description: Description is the characterization of the various elements of an artwork. I take description to include both characterization of the intrinsic features of the work as well as description of it in terms of context, origin, or other extrinsic features. Greenberg describes *Broadway Boogie Woogie* in terms of its checkered lines organized in a square pattern on a white background. He also characterizes the way that these elements fit together in the overall composition of the painting: he points to its staccato rhythm, its balanced pattern, and its unity—albeit not a unity of maximally diverse elements. Greenberg's discussion is largely formal, although he also attributes to the work certain non-formal qualities—such as its “sudden originality.” More broadly, description might also include historical contextualization or classification of an artwork; to describe Mondrian's paintings as part of De Stijl would be to describe the paintings in terms of their historical context.

Interpretation is the characterization of the meaning of the work as it is expressed or made manifest in the work itself. In any given case it may be difficult to say exactly where the critic's activity of interpretation begins and that of description ends—although, as Jonathan Gilmore has noted, we can separate the two notionally: the activity of interpretation presupposes a fixed description, at least for the purposes of offering some specific interpretation or other.⁴ Greenberg offers some interpretive remarks about what the painting is

³Although there is little agreement in the philosophical literature about what James Grant calls the “constitutive aim” or aims of criticism—the aim or purpose of a piece of writing in virtue of which it is an instance of art criticism—there is near consensus that, whatever its aims might be, the activity of criticism includes at least these three aspects. Grant, *The Critical Imagination*, p. 5. Monroe Beardsley takes them to be exhaustively constitutive of art criticism in Beardsley, *Aesthetics*, pp. 7-10, whereas more recent discussions of criticism, such as Carroll, *On Criticism* and Gilmore, “Criticism” go beyond these three to include further activities such as classification, contextualization, elucidation, and analysis.

⁴ibid. cf. also Carroll, *On Criticism*, pp. 121-123 and Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention*, ch. 1. Alexander Nehamas rejects a distinction between description and interpretation beyond the pragmatic or “notional” one in Nehamas, *Only a Promise of Happiness*, pp. 120-130.

supposed to represent—jazz, the bustle of the city. We also see Greenberg going beyond the representational content of the work to relate Mondrian's painting to the larger aims of modernist painting: like all such painting in the tradition, as Greenberg understands it, Mondrian's work is on some level about the investigation of the essential, limiting elements of the medium of painting—of flatness, of the rectangular picture plane, and so on.

Finally, there is Greenberg's evaluation of *Broadway Boogie Woogie*. Greenberg's remarks both include an overall verdict—that the work is “a little less than a masterpiece”—as well as more substantive attributions of qualities that are themselves evaluatively valenced: sudden originality, unity, rhythm, etc.⁵ What's more, Greenberg gives us an explicit principle linking the presence of particular substantive aesthetic qualities to his overall verdict. If the painting were to have succeeded in reconciling the maximum diversity possible and presenting it in a maximally unified manner—one that echoes the harmony of the original white square of canvas—then Greenberg likely would have judged the painting to be a success.

Much more could be said about each of these activities individually, but here I am interested in the way that each aspect comes together in the activity of critical communication. In particular, I am interested in a common view about the function of description and interpretation, which together we can refer to as characterization. On this model of criticism, which I'll call the *theoretical model*, characterizations function as reasons for beliefs about the value of the work; in other words, the aim of characterization is to provide reasons that ground evaluative judgments. According to Noël Carroll, who holds such a view, the activities of characterization, including description and interpretation, “are characteristically undertaken precisely for the purpose of providing the grounds for the critic's evaluation of the artwork in question.”⁶ The provision of such evaluative judgments is taken to be the essential or defining feature of art criticism.

Below, I examine this common view of criticism in greater detail before arguing that it is

⁵For more on the distinction between verdictive and substantive aesthetic judgments, see Zangwill, “The Beautiful, The Dainty and the Dumpy”, p. 317.

⁶Carroll, *On Criticism*, p. 14.

substantially mistaken about the function of characterization in a great deal of art criticism. To anticipate, I will argue for what I call the *practical model* of criticism, according to which such characterizations primarily serve to provide reasons for action rather than reasons supporting evaluative judgments. In characterizing an artwork, a critic provides worthwhile ways of structuring one's engagement with a work of art—rather than steps in a logical argument which takes as its conclusion an evaluative judgment about the work. Art criticism is in large part an exercise in practical rather than theoretical reasoning.

4.2 The Theoretical Model: Characterizations as Reasons for Evaluative Judgments

In “Critical Communication”, Arnold Isenberg presents a clear taxonomy of the major elements of what I've called the theoretical model of criticism:

A good starting point is a theory of criticism, widely held in spite of its deficiencies, which divides the critical process into three parts. There is the value judgment or *verdict* (V): “This picture or poem is good - .” There is a particular statement or *reason* (R): “- because it has such-and-such a quality -.” And there is a general statement or *norm* (N): “and any work which has that quality is *pro tanto* good.”⁷

On this model, when a critic cites a feature of the artwork in this way, she does so to provide a reason R to believe that the verdict V that the artwork is good or bad. To refer to this feature of an artwork as a reason in this way is to suggest that it plays a role in a critical argument: it links the specification of some feature of the work with an ascription of some overall judgment of value. The role of the characterization, on this model, is to provide a piece of *theoretical* reasoning: it is a fact that makes reasonable a belief about the overall value of the work. Greenberg's review of *Broadway Boogie Woogie* seems to possess each

⁷Isenberg, “Critical Communication”, p. 330.

element that Isenberg discusses: there is an overall verdict that the painting is less than a masterpiece; a general norm that great paintings must manage to reconcile maximum unity with maximum diversity; and finally, a set of descriptive and interpretive characterizations of the painting that might seem to function as reasons in favor of the overall verdictive judgment.

Isenberg's paper has generally been understood as offering a challenge to this model of art criticism. He argues that, according to the model discussed above, arguments from the presence of some particular quality R to an overall evaluative verdict V would only be valid if there were some general principle or norm N linking the presence of R in all artworks to overall judgments of value. Isenberg puts the dilemma for the defender of the common view in these terms: he claims that "as long as we have no alternative interpretation of the import and function of R, we must assume either that R is perfectly arbitrary or that it presupposes and depends on some general claim."⁸ The problem is that there don't seem to be any plausible candidates for such principles: to take a simple example, Greenberg's favored quality of flatness might support an ascription of value to a Mondrian painting, but it would be a liability in a Judd sculpture. A general rule licensing the inference of overall value on the basis of an attribution of flatness would be silly; the same goes for any putative quality that might serve to ground critical principles. In the absence of any such principles, all critical arguments would be invalid, and appeals to reasons would seem to be "perfectly arbitrary."⁹

Discussions of reasons in art criticism since Isenberg have been dominated by attempts to respond to Isenberg's challenge: Some philosophers have attempted to produce critical

⁸Isenberg, "Critical Communication", p. 335.

⁹As James Shelley has argued in Shelley, "Critical Compatibilism", Isenberg actually only makes the more modest claim that critical communication makes no appeal to general principles. However, I think it's plausible that he makes such a claim because he fully appreciates the difficulty—if not impossibility—of providing general principles. This, I suggest, follows from his appreciation of what Dancy refers to as *holism* about reasons: the claim that a feature that is a reason in one context may be no reason at all, or an opposite reason, in another. (Dancy, *Ethics Without Principles*, p. 74) Although Isenberg does not explicitly argue, as Dancy does, that holism is incompatible with *generalism*—the claim that art criticism depends upon the operation of critical principles—this is how Isenberg has largely been interpreted in the literature.

principles which *would* allow for a valid inference from the presence of some feature to an overall verdict. Monroe Beardsley is perhaps the best-known defender of the claim that there are such critical principles that apply to *all* artworks, whereas more recently, Noël Carroll has defended the view that there exist more limited critical principles of evaluation relativized to particular categories of art.¹⁰ Other philosophers, such as Frank Sibley, have attempted to show that no such principles are necessary; instead, one might opt for a form of particularism, according to which critical justification linking features of works and beliefs about overall value does not depend upon any appeal to general critical principles.¹¹

What is common to both of these strategies for responding to Isenberg's challenge is that they have retained the assumption that the function of characterization in art criticism is to provide support for beliefs about overall value. Isenberg himself rejects this assumption, and claims that characterization plays quite a different role in critical communication. However, as I discuss in the next section, this alternative account of characterization's role in the practice of criticism will come at a high cost: it severs the link between art criticism and genuine reasoning.

4.3 Isenberg's Alternative: Criticism and Perception

Isenberg's alternative suggestion is that the practice of characterizing features of an artwork does not function to support ascriptions of overall value to an artwork; rather, it functions as a means of facilitating perception. The goal of characterization in criticism is to get one's audience to *see* the artwork in a particular way; as Isenberg puts it, "it is a function of criticism to bring about communication at the level of the senses, that is, to induce a sameness of vision, of experienced content."¹²

Isenberg illustrates his position by reference to the example of Ludwig Goldschieder's

¹⁰Beardsley, *Aesthetics*, p. 10; Carroll, *On Criticism*.

¹¹Sibley, "General Criteria and Reasons in Aesthetics"; For an argument to the extent that Sibley is in fact a particularist, see Bergqvist, "Why Sibley is Not a Generalist After All".

¹²Isenberg, "Critical Communication", p. 336.

characterization of El Greco's *The Burial of Count Orgaz* as having a "wavelike contour." According to Isenberg, the point of Goldschieder's characterization—his reference to its "wavelike contour"—has little to do with supporting an evaluative judgment. Rather, in offering this description, Goldschieder:

is thinking of another quality, no idea of which is transmitted to us by his language, which he *sees* and which by his use of language he gets us *to see*....[The critic] gives us directions for perceiving, and does this by means of the idea he imparts to us, which narrows down the field of possible visual orientations and guides us in the discrimination of details, the organization of parts, the grouping of discrete objects into patterns.¹³

According to Isenberg, such critical communication is successful when it brings about a community of vision—that is, when critic and audience share the same perceptual experience, as brought about by the critic's attempts to evocatively describe the artwork in question.

The problem with Isenberg's explanation of the function of characterization, at least by the lights of many analytic aestheticians, is that it severs the link between critical communication and rational discourse: if critics simply guide us in perception, then what they do *not* do is give us a reason which supports an ascription of overall value to an artwork. Instead, they simply tell us something about how *they* see the work, and try—by whatever means necessary—to get us to see it in the same way. As Beardsley argues, if, by pointing out some property of an artwork, a critic aims to do no more than guide our perception, "we must reject the critic's claim to have a rational justification of his judgments, and conclude that the ostensible reasons are not reasons at all."¹⁴ Similarly, Frank Sibley claims that "an activity the successful outcome of which is seeing or hearing cannot, I think, be called reasoning."¹⁵

Recently, Robert Hopkins has attempted to defend Isenberg's account of criticism against this charge. Hopkins argues that there is a way of reconstructing Isenberg's account of crit-

¹³Isenberg, "Critical Communication", p. 336.

¹⁴Beardsley, *Aesthetics*, p. 470.

¹⁵Sibley, "Aesthetic and Non-aesthetic", p. 40.

icism according to which it *is* a form of reasoning, albeit a peculiar form of reasoning that involves “arguing for a perception.”¹⁶ Hopkins himself notes that the possibility of such a form of argument might seem counterintuitive:

The heart of critical discussion is the activity of pointing out features of the object to one’s audience...But pointing out is not reasoning; it does not take the listener from what she accepts to a conclusion she doubts. Rather, it is to direct the attention of one’s companion so that her experience reveals one of the object’s features to her...The deeper issue is how to reconcile the rationality of critical discourse with its leading to perception. How can there be an argument with a perception as its conclusion?¹⁷

As Hopkins understands it, an adequate response to this challenge would need to reconcile two claims: The first claim is that the goal of criticism is to lead one’s interlocutor to accept some conclusion or other by way of the provision of reasons—considerations which in some way or another support the conclusion in question. The second claim is that the result of successful critical communication is a perception; critics aim to bring about a particular perception, by way of directing attention or encouraging other ways of looking.

Hopkins identifies two major difficulties in trying to reconcile these two claims: The first is what he refers to as the “self-sufficiency” of perceptions: in normal cases, perceptions generally require no epistemic support. One should simply *see* the balance of a painting in its wavelike contour—one does not have to be convinced any further. If this is true of perception generally, then there would be no work left to do on the part of reasoning or argument.¹⁸ While critical characterization may lead you to this perception, it isn’t required to support your perceptual belief. The second difficulty is that genuine reasoning rationally compels acceptance of its conclusion on the basis of the reasons provided—assuming, of course, that they are good reasons. However, critical communication seems to lack this force; it isn’t a given that, in describing the painting in a particular way, the critic can compel

¹⁶Hopkins, “Critical Reasoning and Critical Perception”, p. 139.

¹⁷*ibid.*, p. 138.

¹⁸*ibid.*, p. 140.

their audience to have the same perception that they do. An audience's perception depends on more than the critic's characterization of the object in question. It also depends on the perceptual receptivity of the audience itself and their perceptual acquaintance with the object that is the target of the critic's characterization—as Hopkins puts it, perception requires “the world to play its role” in a way that mere belief does not.¹⁹ By this, he means that while beliefs can be arrived at merely through a process of reasoning, in order to have a perception one must have more than just reasoning—one must, furthermore, be in perceptual contact with the object of perception itself.

Hopkins thinks that these difficulties can be overcome, provided that we take the right view of the nature of perception:

We need to reconfigure the notion of perception that is in play. It is not an atomistic, momentary experience, with relatively little internal structure. Rather, it is a complex, one that can perhaps only be built up over time, and which itself contains the reasoning that supports it.²⁰

Hopkins's claim is that perception itself is a kind of extended and nested activity in which particular perceptions—say, seeing the delicateness of figure in a Botticelli—support and constitute more complex perceptions—such as seeing the prissiness of the Botticelli. The role of the critic, on Hopkins's view, is to provide the “premises” from which follow more complex perceptions: “Trying to persuade you that the Botticelli is prissy, I point to the extreme delicacy of the represented figures. I am trying not merely to get you to see the delicacy en route to appreciating the prissiness: seeing the former is part of the total experience of the painting I want to bring about in you.”²¹ Hopkins makes the further claim that these complex perceptions have a kind of conceptual content—a content that cannot be captured by any non-demonstrative belief—and argues that it is the point of art criticism to

¹⁹Hopkins, “Critical Reasoning and Critical Perception”, p. 142.

²⁰*ibid.*, p. 148.

²¹*ibid.*, pp. 149-150.

get audiences to accept as a “conclusion” the conceptual contents of a complex perception, i.e. that the Botticelli is prissy.

The major problem for Hopkins is whether or not one should characterize the process of developing one’s audience’s perception of an object as one of “reasoning.” After all, as Hopkins himself notes, it could simply be the case that the critic merely *causes* her audience to have a particular perceptual experience of the artwork—one with a particular conceptual content—without engaging in any sort of rational persuasion.²² Perhaps one might also get one’s audience to see the artwork in a particular way by hitting them on the head, or giving them a special pair of glasses. Are these cases of rational persuasion? Presumably not. The difficulty for Hopkins lies in trying to argue that criticism on his model differs substantively from these sorts of activities.²³

Whether or not Hopkins is able to respond to this concern, I’d like to put aside his attempt to salvage Isenberg’s approach in favor of an alternative approach to understanding the activity of criticism—one which retains the link between critical communication and rational discourse, while also doing justice to Isenberg’s insight that criticism is often tied to bringing about a perceptual experience. Where this account differs is that it rejects both claims that Hopkins aims to reconcile: namely, the ideas that criticism’s aim is to a) rationally persuade individuals to accept some belief by b) getting them to *see* an object in a particular way or to have some *specific* perceptual experience that grounds said belief about the object. Instead, according to what I call the *practical* model of criticism, the aim of criticism is to provide individuals with reasons to *look at*—and, more generally, to engage with—an artwork in some particular way. In this respect, art criticism involves genuine reasoning—albeit reasoning that is practical rather than theoretical. I develop this view below.

²²Hopkins, “Critical Reasoning and Critical Perception”, p. 152.

²³Hopkins does sketch a line of response to this worry: he claims that what differentiates critical persuasion from hitting someone over the head is that each of the “premise” perceptions that supports the final complex perception is open to dispute in the same way that one might dispute the premises of a deductive argument. *ibid.*, p. 152. Hopkins claims that this is indicative of the fact that the premise perceptions support or justify the complex perception in the same way that the premises of a deductive argument support its conclusion. I am not sure that this response is conclusive, but I won’t pursue the point further here.

4.4 The Practical Model: Characterizations as Reasons for Action

There is an alternative way of understanding the activity of characterization as one that involves the provision of genuine reasons—albeit not reasons directed towards supporting an evaluative belief. This alternative is the *practical* model of criticism: in characterizing a work of art critics provide us with reasons *for action*: in particular, pointing out these features serves as a way of providing considerations which count in favor of particular acts of looking, contemplating, listening, reflecting, or otherwise engaging with the artwork. For example, on this view to point to the “wavelike contour” of the El Greco is to claim that this feature of the painting counts in favor of a particular way of looking, by following the contour with one’s eyes as one engages with the painting. It’s likely that, in looking this way, a particular kind of intrinsically valuable perceptual experience would follow—and this may be *why* the critic insists that we look in this way. But on this view the critic’s argument doesn’t *establish* this perception for us; rather, we need to complete the act of looking ourselves. Paul Ziff develops a view similar to this in his long-neglected essay, “Reasons and Art Criticism.”²⁴ I believe that this sort of view, properly developed and supplemented, has the resources to provide a more compelling picture of the role of characterization in critical communication than either the theoretical model or Isenberg’s view. After introducing Ziff’s view, I address and remedy several of its problems as a means of developing my own version of the practical model of criticism.

First, consider Ziff’s analysis of the goodness of a work of art:

²⁴Ziff, “Reasons in Art Criticism”. It is striking how little attention this aspect of Ziff’s essay has received in recent years. For example, in the course of a chapter-length discussion of Ziff, George Dickie simply notes that for Ziff, “reasons have a very important *informal* role to play in criticism, but they do not appear in the formal argument whose conclusion is an evaluation of a work of art.” (Dickie, *Evaluating Art*, p. 49.) I suspect that this lack of attention has been due to the fact that many philosophers, in attempting to answer Isenberg’s challenge, have largely focused on the idea that reasons should function in the manner Dickie describes, i.e. as evidence for an inference to the belief that a work has some overall amount of value. This is not to say that all philosophers in the analytic tradition have ignored Ziff’s work on critical reasons. One of the exceptions which prove the rule is Shusterman, *Surface and Depth*, p. 45.

A person p_i , performs an action, a_i , in connection with an entity, e_i , under conditions, c_i ; George contemplates Fouquet's "Madonna" in the gallery at Antwerp; e_i , is good if and only if the performance of the relevant a_i , by p_i , under c_i , is worthwhile for its own sake. To state a reason why e_i is good is simply to state a fact about e_i , in virtue of which the performance of the relevant a_i , by p_i , under c_i , is worthwhile for its own sake.²⁵

Here, Ziff makes the claim that a work of art is good if and only if there exist non-instrumental reasons for looking at it in particular ways.²⁶ Ziff's central idea is that it is the aim of criticism to make clear exactly what these reasons are. To cite some feature of an artwork—he later uses the example of calling a Mondrian painting "flat"—is to suggest that that feature of the work counts in favor of some individual engaging with that work in a particular manner under certain circumstances. Of the Mondrian, Ziff continues:

the fact that the Mondrian is completely flat indicates that the performance of a_i , by p_i , under c_i , is worthwhile in connection with the Mondrian painting. In telling you this, I am telling you something about the act of aspection to be performed in connection with the work, for now you know at least this: you are to look at the work spatially, three-dimensionally.²⁷

The point of characterization in art criticism, then, is to tell you what it would be reasonable to *do* with the work—and not primarily what to believe about its value.²⁸

Ziff's notion of a reason is notably similar to that adopted more recently by T.M. Scanlon, who suggests that "is a reason for" is a "four-place relation, $R(p, x, c, a)$, holding between a fact p , an agent x , a set of conditions c , and an action or attitude a . This is the relation

²⁵Ziff, "Reasons in Art Criticism", p. 69.

²⁶This is in keeping with Ziff's more general claims elsewhere about goodness: that for an object to be good is for it to answer to particular interests. Ziff understands the interests associated with paintings to be interests that we have in pleasurable experiences that attend our looking at them. cf. Ziff, *Semantic Analysis*, ch. 6.

²⁷Ziff, "Reasons in Art Criticism", p. 73.

²⁸This is not to say that such beliefs are completely irrelevant or disconnected entirely from the goals of criticism; I discuss this in more detail below in section 4.4.4.

that holds just in case p is a reason for a person x in situation c to do or hold a .”²⁹ There are, however, two respects in which Ziff’s formulation differs from Scanlon’s: First, Ziff specifically limits his formulation to actions, whereas Scanlon’s formulation encompasses both reasons for actions and reasons for attitudes.³⁰ Presumably this is due to Scanlon’s desire to accommodate a much broader body of normative phenomena than Ziff; Scanlon’s notion of a reason should be able to do justice to both epistemic as well as practical reasons. Ziff is only concerned with the practical—that is, with ways of engaging with artworks. Given his claim that characterizations function to provide reasons to engage with artworks in particular ways, it is understandable that he would restrict just what it is that these reasons favor to the class of actions. The second respect in which Ziff’s formulation differs from Scanlon is that Ziff explicitly limits his account to a discussion of non-instrumental reasons for action: to call the Mondrian “flat” is to provide a non-instrumental reason for looking at the painting in a particular way. Ziff claims that to look at the painting in this way would be worthwhile for its own sake. As will become clear below, I suspect that Ziff introduces this restriction in large part because he accepts a version of experientialism about artistic value, according to which artworks are valuable as art precisely because they reward particular “acts of aspection” with intrinsically valuable experiences. But, as I argue below, this restriction is problematic; removing it is one step towards a better version of the practical model of criticism.

4.4.1 Beyond Acts of Aspection

Ziff explains the notion of aspection as follows:

To aspect a painting is to look at it in some way. Thus to contemplate a painting is to perform one act of aspection; to scan it is to perform another; to study, observe,

²⁹Scanlon, *Being Realistic about Reasons*, p. 31.

³⁰Strictly speaking, for Scanlon all reasons are reasons for attitudes; when we speak of a reason for action, on Scanlon’s account we are actually discussing a reason for forming an intention. cf. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, p. 21.

survey, inspect, examine, scrutinize, are still other acts of aspection. There are about three hundred words available here in English, but that is not enough.³¹

He goes on to suggest that different schools of art—and, indeed, different artworks themselves—may call for importantly different acts of aspection:

Venetian paintings lend themselves to an act of aspection involving attention to balanced masses; contours are of no importance, for they are scarcely to be found. The Florentine school demands attention to contours, the linear style predominates. Look for light in a Claude, for color in a Bonnard, for contoured volumes in a Signorelli.³²

On Ziff's view of critical communication, the critic's aim is to recommend particular ways of looking at the artwork—with the ultimate goal of getting the audience to see the work in such a way as to facilitate appreciation. However, this final step—bringing the audience to *see* the work in a particular way—is not guaranteed, and will depend on certain facts about the audience, including their background knowledge, their perceptual capacities, and so on.

This basic picture of criticism—as involving directed looking and perception—was widespread among Ziff's contemporaries. As we've already seen, Isenberg's account of criticism is notably similar insofar as, on his view, criticism aims to bring about "communication at the level of the senses."³³ Similarly, Frank Sibley claims that "the critic is successful if his audience began by not seeing, and ends by seeing for itself, the aesthetic character of the object."³⁴

What ultimately accounts for these perceptually-focused accounts of criticism is a background commitment to a particular theory of artistic value: the experientialist theory of artistic value. The experientialist theory of artistic value identifies artistic value with the intrinsic value of the experiences that are yielded by engaging with a work of art. More

³¹Ziff, "Reasons in Art Criticism", p. 71.

³²*ibid.*, p. 71.

³³Isenberg, "Critical Communication", p. 336.

³⁴Sibley, "Aesthetic and Non-aesthetic", p. 38.

specifically, Ziff, Isenberg, and Sibley all seem to endorse a further limitation on the theory, according to which the only intrinsically valuable experiences that are constitutive of artistic value are those that are on offer in a direct perceptual encounter with an artwork; as Sibley puts it, “people have to see the grace or unity of a work, hear the plaintiveness or frenzy in the music, notice the gaudiness of a color scheme.”³⁵ Monroe Beardsley provides another representative example of the view:

I find myself always driven back to the idea that in calling an artwork a good one—or a good poem or good choreography—we must be ascribing some form of (nonmoral) value to it, and that this must be a distinctive and special form, properly labeled “aesthetic.” Moreover it seems evident, once we take this step, that this value must consist in, or essentially include, a potentiality to afford experiences of some especially interesting and desirable sort.³⁶

The picture looks something like this: works of art are artifacts designed by artists with the primary aim or function of realizing properties, such as grace, elegance, beauty, and so on. Aesthetic properties are in turn defined in terms of their capacity for affording intrinsically valuable perceptual experiences to suitably prepared and informed spectators. An object’s possession of aesthetic properties grounds an attribution of aesthetic value to that object. So, in virtue of the successful realization of such properties, an artist might create a work possessing aesthetic value. If she is successful in doing so, then this is enough to ground a claim that the work is artistically valuable.³⁷

Given this background picture of artistic value—one that was dominant in the middle of the twentieth century—it should be no surprise that Ziff, Isenberg, and Sibley all take the task of the critic to be one of directing the audience’s perception in such a way as to facilitate perceptual appreciation of artworks.

³⁵Sibley, “Aesthetic and Non-aesthetic”, p. 38.

³⁶Beardsley, *Aesthetics*, p. lix.

³⁷This is, in a nutshell, the view of Monroe Beardsley in “Redefining Art”, reprinted in Beardsley, *The Aesthetic Point of View*, pp. 298-315; it has received more recent defense in Zangwill, *Aesthetic Creation*.

However, one might immediately suspect that this picture is perhaps a bit too neat to fully accommodate the diverse aims and goals constitutive of artistic practice and appreciation. Is it actually the case that all works of art are artistically valuable only in virtue of their successful realization of perceptual experiential value? It is not. In fact, the experientialist theory of artistic value has proven itself open to counterexamples which should be by now familiar to most contemporary philosophers of art. I consider three below.

The first is an especially influential counterexample posed by Arthur Danto: Danto asks us to imagine a gallery of perceptually indiscernible paintings—a row of square canvasses, all uniformly covered in the same shade of red—which are nevertheless different artworks. Some are minimalist paintings; others are abstract landscapes, and some are not artworks at all. Plausibly, the paintings differ in their artistic value. From this it follows that the value of the perceptual experience afforded by each of these paintings does not exhaust its value as art: artistic value is a broader notion than aesthetic value.³⁸ To put the point differently, the set of properties which ground aesthetic value is a subset of the set of properties which ground attributions of artistic value. Perceptually indiscernible copies of works of art have also been offered as counterexamples in the same vein, insofar as they offer an experience identical to the original, but are of markedly different artistic value.

A slightly different sort of counterexample looks to explicitly non-aesthetic or anti-aesthetic art of the twentieth century as a direct refutation of the claim that all works of art are designed with the aim of realizing perceptual experiential value. Consider the conceptual art of John Baldessari. In a review of a retrospective of Baldessari's work at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Roberta Smith writes:

³⁸Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, pp. 1-3. It is worth noting that Danto himself does not draw this conclusion; for Danto, the non-experiential properties of an artwork may determine its *status* as a particular artwork—this is how we can individuate each of the indiscernable paintings. Furthermore, the non-experiential properties may *indirectly* influence the experiences the work affords—which, according to Danto, is ultimately what grounds our judgments about artistic value. *ibid.*, pp. 155-160. Kendall Walton makes a similar point about how our categorization of an artwork affects our aesthetic experience of it in Walton, “Categories of Art”, as do contemporary contextualists like Jerrold Levinson. (Levinson, *Aesthetic Pursuits*, ch. 2) Many—myself included—draw the stronger conclusion that differences in the non-experiential properties of artworks could *directly* ground differences in artistic value.

Visual pleasantries — which is nothing to sneer at — has never been Mr. Baldessari's main goal. His work amuses, unsettles, questions and makes you look twice and think thrice; laugh out loud; and in general gain a sharpened awareness of the overlapping processes of art-making, art viewing and art thinking.³⁹

To insist that Baldessari's major aim in creating art is the realization of aesthetic value is, as Smith rightly points out, to fundamentally misunderstand his work. Consider his 1966 painting, "What Is Painting": the work consists of a white canvas unadorned, except for the following text:

What Is Painting

Do you sense how all the parts of a good picture are involved with each other, not just placed side by side? Art is a creation for the eye and can only be hinted at with words.

Whatever Baldessari's intentional aim was for the work, it is plausibly not the realization of aesthetic or experiential value in any traditional sense. There is little of visual interest about the painting itself; in fact, Baldessari hired a professional sign-painter to paint the letters in as neutral a style as possible. The text included in the image seems best interpreted as a mockery of the very notion that "creation for the eye" is all that artists—and painters especially—aim to realize in their works. Conceptual artists, performance artists, and appropriationists all seem to demonstrate aims and purposes that cannot be easily shoehorned into the intentional realization of perceptual experiential value, thus putting strain on the substantive claim of the experientialist theory of artistic value about the aims and goals of artists.

A final counterexample to the aesthetic theory of artistic value involves much less radical artworks than the aforementioned anti-aesthetic works. Noël Carroll has insisted that the artistic value of narrative fiction is best understood not exclusively in terms of the experiential values it realizes, but instead in terms of what it might teach us and what sort of

³⁹Smith, "John Baldessari Retrospective at Metropolitan Museum".

moral understanding it might cultivate.⁴⁰ Consider character-driven television dramas like *Breaking Bad* or *The Wire*: while the experience of viewing each can be riveting, one might think that another major aim of the works is to achieve the tangible goal of challenging its audiences and engaging their moral understanding. Accomplishing such goals can be difficult to accommodate within the domain of the intentional realization of experiential value, but plausibly they factor into our attributions of artistic value to particular works of art. Once again, the experientialist theory of artistic value comes under pressure insofar as it offers far too limited an account of the aims and goals of artists in creating and distributing works of art.

These counterexamples put pressure on the experientialist theory in two ways. The first counterexample, Danto's row of indiscernible paintings, puts pressure on the claim that the only grounds for attributions of artistic value are perceptually-accessible experiential properties. There are plausibly other non-experiential properties which might ground attributions of artistic value. The second and third counterexamples go further, challenging the claim that the primary function of all artworks is the realization of experiential value. Artworks might have many functions—as many as the aims and goals that artists might have for their works—and so it is inappropriate to conceive of artistic value in general as grounded only in the successful realization of experiential value.

The upshot is that Ziff's restriction of the role of critics to guiding our acts of aspection is too severe; it limits the relevance of critical communication to art that is primarily concerned with the realization of perceptual experiential value. However, critical communication and characterization addresses all sorts of art, and the recommendations critics make for engaging with it isn't limited to ways of looking. For example, consider criticism of the literary arts: to point out the rich internal lives of George Eliot's characters is to invite empathetic engagement with them, just as noting Dickens's vivid descriptions is to give a reason to imagine one's way into them. These are hardly acts of aspection—that is, they are not, ex-

⁴⁰Carroll, "Art, Narrative, and Moral Understanding".

cept in the thinnest metaphorical sense, ways of observing or looking—and yet engaging in such activities seems central to a proper appreciation of and engagement with these literary works. Even in the visual arts, it isn't obvious that critics limit their recommendations to acts of aspection. For example, a critic's discussion of the artistic achievement that a painting represents might lead us to learn more about its historical context; such context often enriches our overall understanding and appreciation of an artwork, but acquiring such contextual and historical information seems separate from any particular act of aspection.

These considerations should also lead us to doubt Ziff's claim that critics aim only to specify ways of engaging with works of art that would be valuable for their own sake. Such a limitation might make sense given the background assumption that artworks aim to facilitate intrinsically valuable experiences that can be obtained directly through acts of aspection. However, once we reflect on the point that artists might aim to effect social change through their works or facilitate deeper moral understanding, it makes sense that critics would direct us to engage with the works in ways that might facilitate these ends. In such cases, critics would be providing us with instrumental reasons to engage with the artwork in a particular way; for example, a critic might suggest that we should empathize with Eliot's characters *in order to* deepen our moral understanding. To object on the grounds that these are not aesthetic reasons—and therefore not part of the work's value—would simply be to beg the question in favor of the experientialist theory of artistic value; I think that it is extremely plausible that such features, even though they are not clearly aesthetic or experiential, are nevertheless part of the artistic value of such works.

The lesson for our understanding of criticism is that we should relax Ziff's restrictions on the aims of critical communication. Critics, in referencing the features of an artwork through characterization, point out those aspects of the work which count in favor of engaging with the work, and furthermore tell us *how* to do so. This may include guiding us in our perception of an artwork, but it may extend beyond this too to other forms of engagement entirely. In doing so, their primary aim is to structure our activity—that is, to

provide us with reasons for action.

4.4.2 Critical Reasoning as Practical Reasoning

Rather than taking critics to be engaged in a form of *theoretical* reasoning, I've suggested, following Ziff, that critics are instead engaged in a kind of *practical* reasoning—the aim of which is to bring about *action* rather than belief. On this understanding of criticism, critics provide us with advice about which considerations might count in favor of our engaging with an artwork in determinate ways. For example, telling me that the figures in the Botticelli are overly delicate might count in favor of paying close attention to those aspects of the painting, or comparing Botticelli's depictions to other painters in the Florentine school. Each of these reasons, as provided by a critic in critical communication, would provide the critic's audience with a better map of the practical terrain surrounding the artwork—one which would better allow the audience to make decisions about how to engage with the work, or whether to engage with it at all.⁴¹

An immediate objection to this view is that, insofar as this model of criticism doesn't involve any persuasion through rational inference, it doesn't count as an act of reasoning at all. One might ask: Is this really *reasoning* if it doesn't involve persuading an audience to accept a conclusion by means of logical inference? Contrast this with the example of the theoretical model presented by Isenberg: by pairing a particular reason R with a general norm N, we *infer* that some overall verdict V is true. Clearly *this* is reasoning, insofar as it involves reasoning by inference from the truth of two propositions—the reason and the norm—to the truth of a third, the verdict.

To respond to this objection, one needs simply to note that not all reasoning is inferen-

⁴¹I use the terminology of "mapping" as I take it to be the case that critics discover such reasons rather than inventing them. In this respect, my position bears similarities with the position developed by Joseph Raz in Raz, "Interpretation Without Retrieval", pp. 254-256. This discovery may, in part, be a discovery not just of further features of the work, but also of how the acknowledged features of a work might bear on its audience's circumstances in new ways. My view differs from Raz's in that, according to Raz, the aim of interpretation is to map out reasons to pay attention to an artwork. On my account, criticism may be about more than simply paying attention; there may be other forms of engagement for which critics aim to provide reasons.

tial. I grant that it is extremely plausible that theoretical reasoning is inferential, and involves a movement of thought leading from truth of the premises to the truth of the conclusion. However, we needn't conceive of practical reasoning as fitting the same model.

An alternative picture of practical reasoning is suggested by Jonathan Dancy. Dancy uses as an example being late for a train and deciding what to do about it. He begins by noting the features of the situation: the train is about to leave; if I don't run, I will miss it; there won't be another train for an hour; I've had a hard day at the office; and spending an extra hour in the train station isn't enticing.⁴² Dancy's point is that it would be difficult if not impossible to provide some general principle of inference that would allow us to move to the conclusion that I should run to catch the train. He suggests that a more promising tack is to reject the notion that such a process involves inference at all.

According to Dancy's alternative model, practical deliberation involves "an attempt to capture in thought the structure of the moral situation" that occurs in roughly two stages: first, we work out which features of the situation are salient to us from a deliberative perspective—either as reasons to act or not act in particular ways, as enablers or disablers, as modifiers of existing reasons, and so on. Then, on the basis of working out this practical landscape, we make a decision on how we should act.⁴³ Thus, in the train station I aim to map out all of those aspects of the practical landscape salient to me—roughly the list that he provides. I then think about how they relate to each other: which considerations are weightier, and which considerations modify others. For example, the fact that I don't want to spend an hour in the train station could count in favor of a wide range of actions, but the fact that the train hasn't left yet means that *one* action it could favor would be running to catch the train. Once I've fully grasped the features of the situation that count in favor of different actions and determined their weight and how they interact with each other, I will arrive at a conclusion about what I ought to do.

Although this process doesn't involve inference, Dancy argues that we should neverthe-

⁴²Dancy, *Ethics Without Principles*, p. 101.

⁴³*ibid.*, p. 105.

less think of it as an instance of reasoning:

We are, however, always dealing with reasons here, and drawing our conclusions or making our decisions in the light of those reasons. So there can be nothing wrong with talking of reasoning, since we are involved in the handling of reasons. What would be wrong would be to suppose that all handlings of reasons involve inference.⁴⁴

By “reason”, Dancy means roughly a consideration that counts in favor; his point is that not all instances of favoring must occur within a system of inference. Even if this is true of *theoretical* reasoning, in which one belief inferentially favors another belief, it needn’t be true of practical reasoning, in which a consideration counts in favor of an action.

Opting for this understanding of practical reasoning would allow for the possibility that, if critics do specify genuine reasons which count in favor of engaging with the artwork in a particular way, then they engage in genuine reasoning even if they do not aim to persuade us by way of logical inference. Instead, critics function as aids in the process of practical deliberation by helping us to clarify those features of the artwork that count in favor of our engaging with it in determinate ways.

4.4.3 Illustrating the Practical Model

The example with which I began this chapter—Greenberg’s review of Mondrian’s *Broadway Boogie Woogie*—is one that might seem especially well suited to what I’ve called the “theoretical model” of criticism, according to which the aim of criticism as such is to provide support for an evaluative judgment about an artwork. However, it’s significant that Greenberg’s piece is a *review*—a particular genre of criticism which, as Alexander Nehamas notes, is generally focused on supporting a verdict:

Reviews are meant to help us decide whether or not to visit an exhibition, read a book, or attend a performance. They are, in a sense, advertisements, although, since they are

⁴⁴Dancy, *Ethics Without Principles*, p. 105.

as likely as not negative, they are nowhere near as blatant as the catalogue essays that lend prestige, for a fee, to every gallery exhibition. A verdict, positive or negative, is exactly what we expect, and what we get, from them.⁴⁵

For better or worse, as Nehamas notes, most philosophical appraisals of criticism take reviewing in particular as a model for *all* criticism—thus providing support for the theoretical model of criticism.

However, once one broadens one's focus to include other varieties of criticism, it is not hard to find examples especially well suited to the practical model of criticism as I've developed it.

Consider John Berger's discussion of J.M.W. Turner's well-known oil painting, *Snowstorm*.⁴⁶ The painting, completed in 1842, depicts a steamboat adrift in a maelstrom. By Turner's own account, the painting is based on experience: Turner claimed that he was aboard such a boat in the midst of a turbulent blizzard and, rather than go below decks, he commanded the sailors to tie him to the mast. The painting is supposed to be an account of this experience, as is reflected in its full title: *Snow Storm—Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth making Signals in Shallow Water, and going by the Lead. The Author was in this Storm on the Night the Ariel left Harwich*. Although generally recognized now as a masterpiece, *Snowstorm* was initially dismissed for its chaotic depiction and for its use of paint which one contemporary dismissed as "soapsuds and whitewash."⁴⁷ Berger's writing about the painting helps us to understand *how* we should engage with it:

Turner transcended the principle of traditional landscape: the principle that a landscape is something which unfolds before you. In *The Burning of the Houses of Parliament* the scene begins to extend beyond its formal edges. It begins to work its way round the spectator in an effort to outflank and surround him. In *The Snowstorm* the tendency has become fact. If one really allows one's eye to be absorbed into the forms and

⁴⁵Nehamas, *Only a Promise of Happiness*, p. 45.

⁴⁶Berger, *About Looking*, pp. 149-155.

⁴⁷Andrew Wilton, *Turner, J. M. W.*

colours on the canvas, one begins to realize that, looking at it, one is in the centre of a maelstrom: there is no longer a near and a far. For example, the lurch into the distance is not, as one would expect, *into* the picture, but out of it towards the right-hand edge. It is a picture which precludes the outside spectator. Turner's physical courage must have been considerable. His courage as an artist before his own experience was even greater. His truthfulness to that experience was such that he destroyed the tradition to which he was so proud to belong. He stopped painting totalities. *The Snowstorm* is the total of everything which can be seen and grasped by the man tied to the mast of that ship. There is *nothing* outside it.⁴⁸

Berger describes a process of immersion in the painting, such that one is "absorbed into the forms and colours on the canvas"; this, he suggests, will lead us to the sense of being engulfed within the storm itself—part of the experience Turner likely aimed to convey. Beyond this, Berger points his readers to a compare *Snowstorm* with the work of other painters in the landscape tradition out of which Turner emerged. In doing so, Berger hopes we will see a radical difference: rather than presenting us with a closed scene that, as an outside spectator, we regard as a discrete and pleasurable totality, Turner's aim is instead to immerse us *in* the landscape itself, and to allow us to experience instead the overwhelming totality of experience that accompanies such immersion.

Practical criticism is often especially useful in approaching art that is radically different from what has come before it. Yves-Alain Bois, in an essay for *October*, aims to provide such guidance concerning Richard Serra's *Clara-Clara*, a massive sculpture of COR-TEN steel installed in the Tuileries Garden in Paris in 1983.⁴⁹ From the aerial view of an architectural plan, the sculpture would appear as two equal arcs of a circle, arranged opposite each other to form a broken 'X.' However, as Bois argues, to view the sculpture in this way would be a mistake:

⁴⁸Berger, *About Looking*, pp. 154-155.

⁴⁹Bois, "A Picturesque Stroll around 'Clara-Clara'".

Geometrically, the two arcs of a circle are two identical segments of a section of a *cone* (and not of a cylinder), which means that the curved walls of these arcs are not vertical—the first fact that the plan doesn’t tell us. Since the arcs are placed not parallel but opposite to each other (their convexity almost meeting in the middle), one logical conclusion would be to have the walls each lean in the opposite direction, each toward the inside of its own curve. But Serra’s invention—the second element not apparent from the plan—lies in having broken this symmetry by using what forms the top of one of these arcs as the base for the other—in other words, in having put one of them upside down. Thanks to this reversal, the two walls lean in the same direction (one toward the inside of its curve, the other toward the outside), and this will increase, as one can imagine, the play of parallax. In walking inside *Clara-Clara*, going toward the bottleneck that these two arcs form at their middle, the spectator constantly has the strange impression that one wall goes “faster” than the other, that the right and left sides of his body are not synchronized. Having passed through the bottleneck, which reveals to him the reason for his strange feeling—although the slant of the walls is actually rather slight—he then sees the lateral differences reversed: the symmetry of this effect is foreseeable, but not the surprise that accompanies it.⁵⁰

Bois argues that the proper way to experience Serra’s sculpture is akin to the way that one ought to approach a traditional picturesque garden: not by viewing it in terms of its overall form, but rather by *moving through it* and constantly attending to one’s changing experience of space and the visual play of parallax that is part of the process.⁵¹

In each of these two examples, we see a critic providing us with characterizations of an artwork, each of which is—they argue—a reason to engage with the artwork in a determinate way. Neither aims primarily at offering a verdict or providing theoretical support

⁵⁰Bois, “A Picturesque Stroll around ‘Clara-Clara’”, pp. 48-49.

⁵¹*ibid.*, pp. 43-46. Bois argues that the *effects* of such engagement with Serra’s sculpture would differ radically from that of engagement with a picturesque landscape garden—this, in part, is what Bois thinks is especially interesting about Serra’s work, especially insofar as these effects are similar to those which modern architects have imperfectly aimed at realizing. (*ibid.*, pp. 54-56.)

for a belief about value—indeed, in Berger’s case, such a verdict would be redundant given that Turner’s painting has been nearly unanimously praised since Ruskin’s appraisal of it as “one of the very grandest statements of sea-motion, mist and light, that has ever been put on canvas.”⁵² Although the examples are both drawn from the criticism of visual art, each features modes of engagement that go beyond acts of aspection: Berger enjoins us to relate Turner’s painting to the history of landscape out of which it emerged, while Bois’s instructs not just to look at but to *move* through Serra’s sculpture. Even given the practical aim of both of these pieces of criticism, one might suspect that there is nevertheless still a connection between such criticism and the evaluation of the works. I discuss such a connection below.

4.4.4 Reasons and Value

A final point worth noting about the practical model is its indirect connection to considerations of value. Even if critics do aim to provide their audiences with reasons for action—rather than theoretical support for evaluative beliefs—it does not follow that such reasons are completely irrelevant when it comes to one’s beliefs about value.

As it turns out, there is an indirect link between the appreciation of reasons of the sort Ziff has in mind and one’s coming to have beliefs about the value of the work: as Dancy has noted, “where there is value, there are reasons of certain sorts—reasons to protect, promote, cherish, respect, tend, approve, defend, and so on.”⁵³ Ziff makes this connection himself, insofar as he claims that an artwork is good if and only if there exists some set of reasons for engaging with it in determinate ways. This means that if a critic is *correct* about the existence of such reasons for action in the case of a particular artwork, then this is an excellent indication that the artwork has a particular kind of value.⁵⁴

⁵²Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, p. 376.

⁵³Dancy, *Ethics Without Principles*, p. 177. Notice that this formulation is meant to be neutral between the view that value is to be analyzed in terms of reasons—Scanlon’s buck-passing account being the most influential recent version of such a view—and the view, often associated with Moore, that values ground reasons.

⁵⁴I am using “value” broadly here, to include both positive and negative appraisals. Presumably, one could

However, to suggest that the only purpose of providing such a reason is to provide evidence for the value of the artwork is to miss the point of how such reasons are primarily meant to function. This was a point that Sibley appreciated; in discussing the ways the critics teach audiences to engage with artworks, he notes that, although such an activity might constitute a kind of “perceptual proof” of value, “it was neither the aim nor the outcome of the critic’s activity...to provide reasons from which his audience might reasonably conclude that his judgment was true.”⁵⁵ To suggest that the purpose of providing critical reasons is solely to support an ascription of value would be to present an etiolated and misleading conception of the function of reasons in art criticism.

The above discussion might also suggest an alternative account of the aim of critics: rather than trying to identify reasons for action, on this alternative account critics might aim to specify those features of the work in virtue of which it is valuable. Presumably, such features will also count as reasons for action; the goal of criticism, then, would be one of explaining the value of a work rather than engaging in practical reasoning.⁵⁶ There is very little distance between this construal of criticism and the one that I’ve developed, especially if one grants the practical significance of the features that one appeals to in explaining the value of an artwork. I take it that the difference is one of emphasis: on my view, critics not only identify those features of a work in virtue of which it is valuable; in addition, they make explicit the practical significance of those features to an audience that may be unclear on how to engage with an artwork or whether to do so at all. This, I suggest below, fits nicely with what I take to be a central aim of art criticism.

argue that there is no reason whatsoever to engage with a work at all, or that there are reasons to engage with it in ways commensurate to its disvalue—for example, paying attention to the differences between it and *good* art.

⁵⁵Sibley, “Aesthetic and Non-aesthetic”, pp. 38-39.

⁵⁶Sibley discusses such explanation as a central aim of criticism in *ibid.*, 37–40. It is developed further by James Shelley in Shelley, “Critical Compatibilism”, pp. 134-136.

4.5 Critical Reasoning: Theoretical or Practical?

We now have in front of us two alternative accounts of the role of characterizations in art criticism. According to the theoretical model, these function in the service of theoretical reasoning: they make reasonable a belief about the value of an artwork, by functioning as premises in an argument that inferentially supports said evaluative belief. On the alternative approach I've developed, the practical model, the function of such characterizations are primarily practical: they function as considerations counting in favor of a variety of actions and attitudes focused on features of the work itself. Is either of these accounts of art critical reasoning correct? In what follows, I first address an objection meant to show that the practical model violates a core intuition about the aims of art criticism. I then present three reasons for preferring the practical model to the theoretical model.

4.5.1 An Objection: The Aims of Art Criticism

Robert Hopkins has objected to practical model on the grounds that it violates a core intuition about the aims of art criticism:

Practical reasoning usually proceeds by spelling out how acting in a certain way will enable one to attain some goal or satisfy some desire....The comic might show me how to get pleasure from the aria just as surely as the critic does. Nonetheless, if he does so by offering me pragmatic justifications ('approach it in such and such a way, and you will find it funny'), he is hardly offering the same kind of consideration, in pursuit of the same kind of end, as the critic. The critic seems concerned, not to maximize my positive states, but to make me aware of the work's true nature. That is one reason why the activity is appropriately dubbed 'criticism:' it seeks a balanced appraisal of both strengths and weaknesses, not merely to maximize whatever positive states of the viewer might be wrung from an encounter with the work. Hence the reasons the critic

provides are not pragmatic but of another kind, the kind that, for want of any less tendentious term, we dub ‘theoretical.’⁵⁷

The objection goes as follows: in pointing out ways that an audience might profitably engage with an artwork, the critic’s focus is on the audience maximizing the value of their interaction with the artwork. This might lead to the critic suggesting that audiences engage with the artwork in ways that have little to do with appreciating the true nature of the work itself. Hopkins does not clarify what he means by the notion of a work’s “true nature”, but I take it that he means the features in virtue of which the artwork is the artwork that it is.

It’s not clear to me that this worry directly favors the theoretical account. After all, in providing reasons to believe that an artwork is valuable, it’s possible for critics to cite features that are themselves unconnected to the work’s true nature. For example, I might tell you that this painting is worth half a million on the open market. This would be a reason to believe the painting is valuable, although presumably not a reason that is connected to its artistic value. So, the theoretical model allows us to focus on reasons that are, from Hopkins’s perspective, unrelated to criticism just as much as the practical model does.

In response to Hopkins, one might simply insist that critics, if they are to practice art criticism, should limit themselves to providing reasons that are themselves centrally connected to the aim of appreciating the work in question. James Grant makes such a move in arguing that the constitutive aim of criticism is to provide readers with information about factors relevant to the appreciation of the artwork as art.⁵⁸ This limitation would apply equally to practical as well as theoretical reasoning about artworks: first, it would rule out cases where critics might focus on features of the work that are not connected to its status as an artwork. Second, it would rule out cases where critics advocate engaging with an artwork in ways incompatible with *appreciation* of the work.⁵⁹

⁵⁷Hopkins, “Critical Reasoning and Critical Perception”, pp. 145-146.

⁵⁸Grant, *The Critical Imagination*, p. 39.

⁵⁹Of course, the ability to make such a limitation specific would depend on a full account of both which features are connected to a work’s status as an artwork, as well as an account of what sorts of responses are appropriate ways of appreciating an artwork. I don’t pretend to be able to provide either of these accounts

With this objection out of the way, let's return to the initial question: what reasons are there to prefer either the theoretical model or the practical model of art critical reasoning? Perhaps one might try to answer this question by arguing for a single constitutive aim of criticism, as Grant does. Grant argues that art criticism must be centrally focused on the appreciation of an artwork, which he understands as a complex phenomenon involving having appropriate perceptual, cognitive, emotional, and practical responses.⁶⁰ While I am sympathetic to many aspects of Grant's account of criticism, it doesn't settle the issue of whether or not we should favor the theoretical model or the practical model.

Grant argues that, in order for communication to count as art criticism, it must attempt to communicate:

- (a) what parts, features, or represented elements appreciation can involve responding to; or
- (b) what responses appreciation of the work can involve; or
- (c) what appropriate reasons for these responses there are.⁶¹

Notice that this account is neutral between the theoretical model and the practical model: Grant understands appreciation as involving both cognitive responses as well as practical responses. This means that Grant's account accommodates both conceiving of art criticism as providing reasons for belief about the value of an artwork, as well as providing reasons for specific actions relating to the work.

Perhaps this is correct as an account of the constitutive aim of criticism, insofar as it allows that critics might provide different sorts of reasons depending upon their aims in particular contexts. Reviewers, for example, might primarily be in the business of providing evidence for overall judgments of value; as I've argued above, this is plausibly Greenberg's goal in his review of *Broadway Boogie Woogie*. Even so, I suspect that this is not the normal case; I think that much of the time critics aim to provide reasons for action of the sort

here—and Grant punts on the matter as well. Grant, *The Critical Imagination*, p. 37.

⁶⁰ibid., pp. 35-36.

⁶¹ibid., p. 39.

specified by the practical model. I present three main lines of argument below to defend this claim. First, I argue that the practical model fits better with our notion of the benefits of reading criticism. Second, I argue that the practical model allows us to draw a distinction between art critical reasons that are agent-relative and agent neutral. Third, I argue that the practical model is better able to account for the intuition that, often if not always, art criticism is personal.

4.5.2 On the Value of Art Criticism

The practical model is attractive in large part because it paints a more plausible picture of why critics give reasons in the first place. Most of us read criticism not because we aim to learn what's good and why—although this is something that we may do when, for example, we read reviews. Rather, as Alexander Nehamas puts the point, we “read the critics of *Hamlet*...in order to grasp what [Hamlet] has to offer to us, which requires us to understand what it says.”⁶² Learning to understand what a work has to say to us requires that we know how to engage with it. This is especially pressing in the case of art forms with which we are not familiar: consider a clueless visitor to an installation of Donald Judd's boxes in Marfa, TX. It can be *enormously* helpful to read Fried's “Art and Objecthood,” as in doing so one learns that, rather than looking solely at the individual boxes themselves, what one ought to pay attention to instead is Judd's attempt to create “the kind of wholeness that can be achieved through the repetition of identical units.”⁶³ The same could be said for Yves-Alain Bois's discussion of how to approach Serra's *Clara-Clara*. Even in the case of art forms with which we are familiar—and artworks, like *Hamlet* or Turner's *Snowstorm* which we already know to be valuable—we return to criticism again and again to find new and worthwhile ways of engaging with artworks. Engaging with criticism in this way *does* result in new beliefs about the work—but they are beliefs about which features of the work are salient to us practically as reasons to engage with the work in determinate ways. Criticism can be

⁶²Nehamas, *Only a Promise of Happiness*, p. 43.

⁶³Fried, *Art and objecthood*, p. 150.

especially valuable or insightful not just in identifying features of the work that we haven't appreciated before; it can also demonstrate for us new ways of engaging with the features of the work that we are already aware of.

4.5.3 On Agent-Relative Art Criticism

A second reason to prefer the practical model is that it allows us to draw the plausible distinction between art-critical reasons that are agent-relative and those that are agent-neutral.

An agent-neutral reason for action is a reason for *all* agents; it makes no reference to any specific circumstances or features of the agent herself. We can express this in Ziff's formulation as a fact about an artwork, in virtue of which the performance of the relevant action by *any* person under *all* conditions is worthwhile for its own sake. I think that it's very reasonable to assume that—whether or not they succeed in doing so—some critics aspire to provide reasons of this sort.⁶⁴ However, the practical model also makes possible the specification of art-critical reasons that are agent-relative: one might cite some fact about an artwork, in virtue of which the performance of the relevant action is worthwhile for *some* individuals, under *some* conditions.

This distinction makes possible a more nuanced understanding of the extent to which art criticism aims to provide reasons that are—or are not—general. Whereas it does not usually make sense to suggest that a piece of evidence would count in favor of belief for some but not others, it *does* make sense to suppose that some feature of an artwork might be a reason for some but not all individuals to pursue certain ways of engaging with the work. It is a virtue of the account of critical reasoning developed above that we can model the fact that critics often tailor their reasoning to specific audiences with specific background knowledge, capacities, and preferences. As an example, consider the following selection

⁶⁴For what it's worth, Ziff thinks that this is actually the norm in criticism: he suggests that "it would ordinarily be at best foolish to reply to 'Guernica' is well worth contemplating' by asking 'When?' or 'Where?' or even 'For whom?'" (Ziff, "Reasons in Art Criticism", p. 57).

from a review, published in *Gramophone*, comparing different recordings of Wagner's *Ring*:

The 1955 Bayreuth performances, now unlocked from the Decca archive by Testament, represent the fourth successive Festival that the same basic cast had performed the cycle together under Joseph Keilberth and supersede issues from 1952-53 under this maestro. Decca's engineers achieved an integrated sound picture of the unique orchestral layout and a voice/orchestra balance superior to previous competitors. Keilberth was an emotional guide to the drama who caught the listener up in the heat of the moment (broad, but so spontaneous, climaxes as Siegfried crosses the fire or journeys into the Rhine) rather than taking a long pay-off view of the score. Hans Hotter's bass-baritone is the Shakespearean-actor master of inflection, colour and insinuation, pulling off all kinds of nuances at the second "Das Ende!" ("the end", a frightened, off-the-voice pianissimo, staring down the wreck of his plans) or "Er vernichtete dich – und mich" ("it would destroy you – and me", the Wanderer's unheeded advice to Siegfried, just before the spear is broken). Astrid Varnay's Brünnhilde is the great conveyor of mood and demeanour through the voice – distress, anger or love all find their own distinctive colouring. Her Brünnhilde – one of the most potent rediscoveries of the recorded Wagner archaeology – is a halfway house between the grandeur of Flagstad and more feminine, psychological readings of recent times.⁶⁵

This review presumes an enormous amount about its audience's background knowledge and interests: at the very least, a comprehensive knowledge of Wagner's *Ring* cycle's structure and narrative; the ability to recognize the subtle effects of different techniques of recording music; enough knowledge of operatic singing and conducting to be able to appreciate fine distinctions in performance; and finally, some familiarity with the history of performance and recording of Wagner. Without such background conditions being met, the indicated features of the Keilberth recording simply will not count as reasons for me to engage with it in the way the critic recommends; I cannot compare the recording with other recordings,

⁶⁵Ashman, "A Ride Around the Rings".

nor could I make the fine distinctions necessary to appreciate the specific qualities of the recording.

Compare this with the following introduction to 12-tone music by the *New York Times* classical music critic, Anthony Tommasini:

For those unversed in music theory it may be worth explaining with a little more specificity what 12-tone music is and how it came about. Tonality is a means of organizing pitch in accordance with the physics of sound. A fundamental tone – say, C in a C major scale – is central; the other pitches relate to it in a hierarchy of importance based on natural overtone relationships. Whatever happens, the music keeps returning to that fundamental tonal mooring. Variety, expression and development result when a composer plays with expectations and introduces ambiguity, letting the music drift to remote pitches and chords that are not part of the basic major or minor scale. As music developed in the late 19th century, Wagner, Mahler, Debussy, Strauss and other path breakers pushed at the boundaries of that mooring and weakened the pull of the tonal center. Ten years into the 20th century the whole business was in crisis, Schoenberg argued....Yet Schoenberg revered order, form and tradition. So he took a conceptual leap. If all 12 pitches in the octave are to be used more or less equally, why not devise a system that ensured a kind of equality? Instead of the old tonal hierarchy, or his short-lived experiment in harmonic free-for-all, Schoenberg specified that the 12 pitches be put in an order, or row. Once a pitch was sounded, it was not to be repeated until the entire row had unfolded. There were countless ways around this dictum, however, because Schoenberg adapted his technique so that the row could be transposed, gone through backward or upside down, broken into smaller units that were mixed and matched, and so on.⁶⁶

Tommasini's piece is written for a general audience; it presumes little background in either musical theory or in the history of absolute music. Tommasini identifies tonality as a feature

⁶⁶Tommasini, "Unraveling The Knots Of the 12 Tones".

central to the appreciation of western music—then uses this identification, which even the casual listener should be able to understand, in order to demonstrate how we should listen to Schoenberg’s music as completely *lacking* such tonality.

As the above examples demonstrate, critics are able to tailor their criticism to their audiences by identifying features of artworks that will count in favor of acts of engagement on the part of the specific subclass of individuals in question.⁶⁷ One might object that, on my account, *all* criticism would be agent-relative, insofar as critics almost always make presumptions about their audience’s background knowledge and abilities. I would be happy to accept such a conclusion: one could draw the same distinction I have introduced between agent-relative and agent-neutral reasons for action in terms of different degrees of relativity. The difference between, say, Tommasini’s criticism and the Gramophone review would therefore consist in the degree to which the reasons in question are relativized to a particular audience.

4.5.4 On the Personal in Art Criticism

The third reason to prefer the practical model is that it better reflects the intuition that some art criticism— if not all—is personal in nature. I’ll first aim to characterize what this claim amounts to, and then argue that the practical model of the nature of art-critical reasons allows us to better understand what such criticism amounts to, how it differs from criticism that aspires to something like universality, and why it is valuable.

First, the intuition: Matthew Kieran has claimed that “criticism of the highest order is shot through with art critical evaluations that are partly a function of personal experience and attitudes. The features that are focused on, the ways those features are understood, and

⁶⁷This discussion of agent-relative criticism is, admittedly, sketchy. What is needed is a more thorough characterization of a) what particular features account for the relativity of particular art-critical reasons; and b) more substantial defense of the claim that many critics do aim to provide reasons which are agent-relative in this way. I don’t provide such elaboration here. However, all that’s necessary for my argument in this chapter is the claim that the practical model approach would allow us to fill in the picture within the existing framework of viewing art-critical reasons as reasons for action.

evaluations of the work often depend on personal assumptions and attitudes.”⁶⁸ Whether or not Kieran is correct about *all* criticism—especially given that the dominant formalist critical paradigm of the twentieth century, the New Criticism, was explicitly concerned with eliminating the personal element from literary criticism—there does seem to be a particularly resilient brand of criticism which foregrounds this aspect of criticism. Consider the ideal of criticism as expressed by French literary critic, Anatole France, in 1911:

As I understand it, and as you allow me to practice it, criticism is...a sort of romance designed for those who have sagacious and curious minds, and every romance is, rightly taken, an autobiography. The good critic is he who relates the adventures of his own soul among masterpieces.⁶⁹

This sort of criticism isn’t confined to the romantic critics of old, either; it’s alive and well today. Contemporary examples would include nearly anything written by Dave Hickey, along with T.J. Clark’s writings on Poussin’s paintings in *The Sight of Death*.

The problem with thinking about such criticism from the standpoint of the standard model, which focuses on whether or not the features described inferentially support a belief about value, is that we lose focus of the criticism’s personal aspect. All other things being equal, it would be strange to say that some fact is evidence for one person and not evidence for another. Valid forms of inferential justification do not vary from person to person.

The practical model, as I’ve argued above, allows us to introduce a distinction that captures what personal criticism amounts to. This allows us to account for Kieran’s claim that criticism may be “a function of personal experience and attitudes”: critics may point to ways of engaging with a work that would only be worthwhile given certain facts about one’s sensitivities, attitudes, and experiences. As discussed in the previous section, this relativity may apply to particular communities or audiences; critics can focus on ways of engaging with artworks that only apply to members of a particular group or class. However, critics

⁶⁸Kieran, “Why Ideal Critics are Not Ideal”, p. 287.

⁶⁹France, *On Life and Letters*, p. vii.

can also write about *their own* ways of engaging with a work in a way that is ineliminably personal.

Consider T.J. Clark's remarkable accounting of his relationship with Poussin's *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake* in *The Sight of Death*.⁷⁰ At one point, Clark records that, in viewing the painting's figure of a woman with outstretched hands, he is struck by a personal association:

Abruptly, and as it were absent-mindedly, this morning I told myself to look at the picture of *Snake* propped up on my desk and free associate. I think this happened quickly and casually enough for the first associations to be truly involuntary; but when they came they were utterly familiar, utterly unsurprising. Those infinitely caring and protective arms and hands, of the woman reaching out to the man's vulnerability, are also (one of them) raised to strike: they are my mother's hands, that is, terrifying and endlessly gentle. And then—against, all this presented itself instantly (and I believe there had never been the least trace of it in the months spent looking a year ago)—it turns out that the woman's expression is also my mother's, recalled from one specific occasion...which can stand for many.⁷¹

After being struck by this association, Clark reflects carefully on his engagement with the painting to determine whether it is a clue to something genuine about the painting itself and what it represents:

The question, to repeat, is not whether the associations are genuine, with the sight of the painting confirming their deep-rootedness, but whether the personal meanings, once recovered, turn out to enter my way of looking—whether the play of fear and desire that accrues to the central figure in my imagination ends up being not just compatible with her place in the picture as a whole...but deeply *a part of* the place, the pose,

⁷⁰Clark, *The Sight of Death*.

⁷¹*ibid.*, p. 229.

the expression. The honest answer is No...Pictures have depths as well as surfaces, yes, but they don't have to be "my" depths.⁷²

Even though Clark ultimately discounts his associations, his recounting of this process is nevertheless significant. Clark's description of his engagement with the painting is one that concerns a historical relationship that is entirely personal: no member of his audience could have the same associations with the painting that he did, nor would precisely the same question arise as to whether these particular associations constitute genuine reasons to appreciate it.

Why, ultimately, would we be interested in such personal criticism? Applying the practical model also allows us to appreciate the potential value of the form: Even if a critic presents us with reasons to engage with a work that are agent-relative, they are still *genuine reasons* for that critic: were we to share the requisite background and sensitivities, and were we, implausible as it might be, to have the same history and the same relationships, then we too would find it worthwhile to engage in the way the critic recommends. Even if we do not share these qualities, learning about the ways that others engage with artworks might serve to expand our notions of how it might be worthwhile to spend time with works of art. This might push us either in the direction of developing our knowledge, sensitivity, etc. so as to engage with artworks in similar ways. Consider how Clark's discussion of his own personal associations is instructive as a means of interrogating the personal associations that *we* might have in viewing Poussin's painting.

In this respect, reading art criticism that is personal looks quite similar to reading an individual's accounting of their friends and friendships: we read such histories not because we imagine that we can *ourselves* enter into exactly the same sort of relationship with the individual in question. Rather, we do so because we are concerned with what a relationship—be it a friendship or a relationship with an artwork—can *be*, and how such relationships can involve responding to both universally accessible values as well as values that are more indi-

⁷²Clark, *The Sight of Death*, pp. 221-222.

vidual or personally meaningful.

4.6 Conclusion

To conclude, I've argued that the practice of citing features of an artwork in art criticism can be better understood—at least in the usual case—as a form of providing reasons for *actions* rather than reasons for beliefs. I've also suggested, *contra* Ziff, that such actions should be understood to include more than “acts of aspection.” Finally, I've claimed that this way of understanding the role of reasons in art criticism may help us make sense of both the nature and value of art criticism. I do not pretend to have resolved all of the difficulties that might attend such an approach; my aim in this chapter has only been to revive a neglected approach to understanding criticism—one which, in my opinion, deserves more thorough treatment than it has been afforded by contemporary philosophers of art.

As I hope the above section makes clear, I take it that this account of criticism is also well-suited to the idea that critics aim to help us to develop valuable relationships with artworks of the sort that I've discussed in earlier chapters of the dissertation. Such relationships are first and foremost *practical*; they involve histories of engagement, interaction, and appreciation. In pointing out features of artworks that count in favor of particular modes of engagements, critics invite us to develop relationships with artworks ourselves. In criticism that is personal, even if we are cut off from entering into the exactly the same mode of engagement as the critic, we gain insight into the kind of meaning that such relationships can have—and perhaps such insight will help us to develop meaningful and personal relationships with artworks of our own.

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