

Is Aesthetic Experience Possible?
Sherri Irvin
University of Oklahoma
sirvin@ou.edu

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Abstract:

It is common for current views of aesthetic experience and appreciation to propose that these activities involve some sort of second-order grasp of one's own mental states or processes. In some accounts it appears that second-order awareness is required for aesthetic experience or appreciation at all, while in others it is implicated only in some varieties of aesthetic experience or appreciation. Psychological research over the last several decades, on the other hand, raises serious questions about the viability of second-order awareness of mental processes. In this paper I enumerate the problems that this research raises for accounts of aesthetic experience and appreciation and explore the prospects for solving these problems. I also offer the beginnings of an account of 3 related notions, aesthetic experience, (mere) aesthetic appreciation, and deep aesthetic appreciation, in light of the empirical findings.

On several current views, aesthetic appreciation or experience involves a second-order grasp of one's own mental processes. Matthew Kieran says, "When we truly appreciate a work, we appreciate its pictorial composition, the arc of the lines, the shading, the foreshadowing, *the ways in which the artistry shapes and guides our responses.*"¹ Gary Iseminger suggests that "[s]omeone is *appreciating* a state of affairs just in case she or he is *valuing for its own sake the experiencing of that state of affairs,*" and is thus in "the aesthetic state of mind."² Jerrold Levinson suggests that valuing an experience in itself, in Iseminger's sense, might be cashed out as "*tak[ing] satisfaction in such an activity for its own sake while, at some level, endorsing or approving doing so.*"³ Thus, in Levinson's version, we have the experiencing of a state of affairs, the taking of satisfaction in this experiencing, and the endorsing of one's satisfaction.

Levinson ultimately holds that higher-order valuing of one's own experience is only one variety of aesthetic experience, though. He says, "*Aesthetic experience is experience involving aesthetic perception of some object, grounded in aesthetic attention to the object, and in which there is a positive hedonic, affective or evaluative*

¹ Matthew Kieran (2005), *Revealing Art*, Routledge, p. 213. Emphasis added.

² Gary Iseminger (2005), "The Aesthetic State of Mind," in M. Kieran, ed., *Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art* (Blackwell), p. 99. Emphasis in original.

³ Jerrold Levinson (unpublished), "Toward a Non-Minimalist Conception of Aesthetic Experience," p. 11. Italics in original.

response to the perception itself or the content of that perception."⁴ Since a positive response to the *content* of the perception is sufficient, second-order awareness is not required for all forms of aesthetic experience. Noël Carroll, like Levinson, incorporates second-order awareness into his account of aesthetic experience, but without making it a requirement: "attention with understanding ... to the ways in which [the work's formal and aesthetic properties] engage our sensibilities and imagination" is one variety of aesthetic experience, but simply attending to those formal and aesthetic properties themselves, without any second-order awareness, is another.⁵

As we have seen, some of these accounts appear to require second-order awareness of one's mental states or processes, while others suggest that second-order awareness is involved in some, but not all, varieties of aesthetic experience or appreciation. But what if it turns out that we don't have introspective access to the processes by which our aesthetic responses are produced? What if we are, in fact, very poor judges of how the artistry of a work "shapes and guides our responses"? There is good reason to think that we are, in fact, poor judges of such things. In a famous 1977 paper, Nisbett and Wilson surveyed a wide variety of results suggesting that we are ignorant of major swaths of what happens in our minds and why, though we are very happy to make confident claims about these matters.⁶ We are unaware of crucial factors that enable us to solve problems, that cause us to prefer one item to another, and that significantly influence our major life decisions. As Nisbett and Wilson sum things up, "Subjective reports about higher mental processes are sometimes correct, but even the instances of correct report are not due to direct introspective awareness. Instead, they are due to the incidentally correct employment of a priori causal theories" (233). That is, though we believe that we are consulting our introspective memories when we explain why we judged, decided or acted as we did, we are in fact constructing post hoc rationalizations based on externally observable facts in combination with general causal theories of judgment, decision and action.

Nisbett and Wilson's paper triggered a wide variety of subsequent studies with troubling implications for the domains of aesthetic experience and judgment.⁷ I will describe what I take to be the problems revealed by these studies and consider the implications of these problems for our understanding of aesthetic experience and appreciation.

The bad news, and a little good news

⁴ Levinson (unpublished), p. 14. Italics in original.

⁵ Noël Carroll (2002) "Aesthetic Experience Revisited," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 42: 145-168, at 167.

⁶ Richard Nisbett and Timothy Wilson (1977), "Telling More than We Can Know: Verbal Reports of Mental Processes," *Psychological Review* 84: 231-259.

⁷ I am indebted to Dominic McIver Lopes's forthcoming paper "Feckless Reason," in which he discusses a number of the studies I consider here.

Here are the problems, as I see them. We'll call the first problem *irrelevance*: subjects' aesthetic or quasi-aesthetic preferences are strongly affected by conditions that are aesthetically irrelevant. So, for instance, James Cutting (2003) was able to alter his subjects' preferences among Impressionist paintings simply by manipulating how frequently various paintings appeared in their environments.⁸ Even more strikingly, when Nisbett and Wilson (1977) asked subjects in a discount store to rate the quality of four pairs of stockings that were in fact identical, spatial position had a major effect on rankings: 12% of subjects preferred the stockings on the left, 17% those second from the left, 31% those second from the right, and 40% those on the right. Similar effects were seen for nightgowns. Position, obviously, is irrelevant as a reason to prefer one pair of stockings or one nightgown to another. Finally, a recent study by Ayumi Yamada suggests that a reversal of preference can be achieved by asking subjects different questions about the stimuli. Subjects were asked to compare an abstract and a representational painting. When asked to verbalize their reasons for *liking* the paintings, they preferred the representational painting. When asked to verbalize their reasons for *disliking* the paintings, they preferred the abstract painting.⁹ Which question one is asked, however, is irrelevant as a reason for preferring one to the other.

The second problem is *coarse-grainedness*. Aspects of a work that seem aesthetically relevant fail to have the effects on people's judgments that we might expect. Nisbett and Wilson (1977) gave subjects a selection from John Updike's novel *Rabbit, Run*. Some subjects read the entire selection, while others read versions that had various significant passages deleted. However, subjects in all conditions rated the selection as having the same degree of emotional impact. This suggests that the subjects' response to the work was undesirably coarse grained: it was not responsive to the finer details in the way that artists presumably hope when they carefully craft and refine their works.¹⁰

⁸ James Cutting (2003), "Gustave Caillebotte, French Impressionism, and Mere Exposure," *Psychonomic Bulletin and Review* 10: 319-343. Subjects tended to prefer paintings to which they were exposed more frequently. However, it is possible that this is due not to a mere exposure effect, but to the multiple exposures' providing subjects with more opportunity to grasp the genuinely valuable features of the paintings. Matthew Kieran, Aaron Meskin and Margaret Moore test this hypothesis in "Mere Exposure to Bad Art" (unpublished), finding that exposure increased subjects' liking only for good quality and not for poor quality paintings. We must thus use caution in seeing Cutting's study as providing evidence for an irrelevance problem.

⁹ Ayumi Yamada (2009), "Appreciating art verbally: Verbalization can make a work of art be both undeservedly loved and unjustly maligned," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 45: 1140-1143.

¹⁰ Nisbett and Wilson's interest was simply in the fact that people have a poor understanding of which aspects of the work contribute to their responses; they were not aiming to show that aesthetic responses are undesirably coarse grained. It is possible that the measure they used was itself too coarse grained to capture all of

The third problem is *ignorance*. Subjects tend to be ignorant of whether a particular element of the work has affected their judgment or not. Subjects in the *Rabbit, Run* study believed, incorrectly, that the passages that were deleted in some conditions influenced, or would have influenced, their judgments of the emotional impact of the work. Subjects in another study by Nisbett and Wilson mistakenly believed that their judgments of a documentary had been altered by a loud and distracting noise outside the theater, but they were incorrect: in fact, their ratings were just the same as those offered by subjects who saw the documentary without the distracting noise. Subjects in the stocking study were unaware that the position of the stockings had affected their judgments; indeed, they were incredulous at the suggestion that it might have.¹¹ In some studies, the ignorance extends even more deeply: as Nisbett and Wilson (1977) report, subjects who experience a manipulation that changes their evaluation of a state of affairs often fail to recognize not only what has been responsible for the change, but even *that the change has happened at all*: that is, they incorrectly recall having held their current evaluation all along.¹² Subjects are also ignorant of the factors that influence their ability to solve problems: in a classic 1931 experiment by Maier, subjects had to find multiple solutions to a problem, and one of the more difficult solutions involved swinging a cord. Very few subjects found this solution until an experimenter “casually put one of the cords in motion”; but nearly everyone found it within 45 seconds after receiving the cue. However, two thirds of subjects were completely unaware that the cue had played any role in the ability to solve the problem.¹³ Moreover, even on direct questioning subjects are sometimes adamant that they were not influenced by a factor that, statistically, clearly had a strong effect on most.¹⁴

The fourth problem is *confabulation*. People are unaware that they lack good introspective access to the factors that influence their judgments, and as a result they are happy to provide “explanations” of their choices that are sheer confabulations. In the stocking study, subjects attributed their ratings to differences in the “knit, weave, sheerness, elasticity, or workmanship of the stockings,” though

the nuances of subjects’ responses. I strongly suspect that a fine-grained measure would yield similar results, but I am not aware of any studies in which the hypothesis has been directly tested.

¹¹ “[W]hen asked directly about a possible effect of the position of the article, virtually all subjects denied it, usually with a worried glance at the interviewer suggesting that they felt either that they had misunderstood the question or were dealing with a madman.” (Nisbett and Wilson 1977, p. 244)

¹² Nisbett and Wilson 1977, pp. 235-7, discussing work by Bem and McConnell (1970) and Goethals and Reckman (1973).

¹³ Nisbett and Wilson 1977, p. 241.

¹⁴ This is particularly true of the well-known bystander research by Latané and Darley (1970), who demonstrated that people are much less likely to offer help when they believe that many others are also in a position to do so. See Nisbett and Wilson 1977, p. 241, for discussion.

the stockings were in fact identical in these respects. Nisbett and Wilson (1977) report a wide variety of instances in which people give spurious explanations for their choices.¹⁵ It appears that subjects rely heavily on theories about what sorts of factors are relevant to judgment in fabricating such “explanations.”

The fifth problem is *explanation-induced instability*. When subjects try to report on the mental processes that have influenced their judgments, this tends to change *what* they report preferring: a subject who is asked to explain her choice is more likely to say that she likes a comical poster than a poster of an Impressionist painting, but subjects not asked to explain their choices tend to make the opposite choice.¹⁶ Another piece of data comes from a study that is a bit more complicated to explain. Subjects were asked to report their preference between two faces, X and Y. Some subjects who reported preferring X would later be asked to explain why they (allegedly) preferred Y. For the subject even to notice that she was being asked to explain a preference that she did not in fact hold was quite rare; and her explanation would often invoke features of Y that are not also possessed by X, showing that she was not reporting on an introspective process that generated the initial preference rating.¹⁷ Moreover – and this is the data point that is most clearly relevant to the present problem – after being asked to “explain” her “preference” for Y, the subject typically *would* express a preference for Y if subsequently asked to compare X and Y again.¹⁸ The study by Yamada (2009) described above suggests that subjects simply rely on the factors that are easiest to verbalize: subjects have an easier time articulating both positive and negative reasons in relation to figurative paintings than in relation to abstract paintings.

The sixth problem is *explanation-induced deterioration*. The changes in preference that are stimulated by a request for explanation tend to decrease the quality of the judgment from two perspectives. The first perspective is the expert perspective: a subject who is asked to explain the reason for her choice is less likely to agree with expert judgments about which item is of higher quality.¹⁹ Subjects who are not asked to explain, on the other hand, tend to make judgments that are well aligned with those of experts. The second perspective is that of subjective satisfaction: subjects who are asked to explain their preferences are less likely to be satisfied by

¹⁵ See especially p. 241 for spurious explanations of problem-solving.

¹⁶ Timothy D. Wilson et al. (1993), “Introspecting About Reasons Can Reduce Post-Choice Satisfaction,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 19: 331-339.

¹⁷ Petter Johansson et al. (2005), “Failure to Detect Mismatches Between Intention and Outcome in a Simple Decision Task,” *Science* 310: 116-119.

¹⁸ Lars Hall and Petter Johansson (2008) “Using Choice Blindness to Study Decision Making and Introspection,” in *Cognition: A Smorgasbord*, ed. P. Gärdenfors and A. Wallin, pp. 267-283.

¹⁹ Wilson and Schooler made this finding in studies about preferences for strawberry jam and for college courses. Timothy D. Wilson and Jonathan W. Schooler (1991), “Thinking too much: Introspection can reduce the quality of preferences and decisions,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 60: 181-192.

the choices they subsequently make, presumably because for a significant fraction of them, the process of explaining their preferences causes them to make a choice different from, and less satisfying than, the one they would otherwise have made. Subjects in the poster study described above were less happy when they went home with the comical poster, as measured by a number of subjective and behavioral measures including whether they had hung the poster, how much they reported liking it, and at what price they would be willing to sell it.²⁰

Now, there are a couple of shreds of good news in the midst of all of these problems. The first is *correct explanation*. People do sometimes – in fact, frequently – offer correct explanations of their choices. The experiments I’ve described, in which people were moved to offer “explanations” that clearly couldn’t be true, were designed to exploit discrepancies between subjects’ choice processes and the explanations they were likely to offer of their choices. In ordinary circumstances people aren’t asked to perform absurd tasks like offering a relative ranking of the quality of pairs of stockings that are in fact identical. In a real-world choice situation, surely things like knit, weave, sheerness and elasticity really would affect subjects’ rankings, and they would not be forced to invent a story about these effects.

However, the comfort we should take from this shred of good news is somewhat limited. First, it appears to be false, at least much of the time, that correct explanations are produced through introspection rather than through theorizing; however, this doesn’t stop subjects from believing that they are offering introspective reports. So confabulation remains something of an issue. Second, if things like position effects are so strong in the absurd choice situation, they are probably also present, though less pronounced, in ordinary choice situations. If this is so, then irrelevance and ignorance remain in play: subjects’ responses are driven in part by aesthetically irrelevant factors of which they are unaware, either through introspection or through theorizing about the basis of their choices.

The second shred of good news, call it *differential susceptibility*, is that there seems to be a group of people, in particular experts in a given domain, who are able to explain the reasons behind their choices without altering their preferences, and thus without diminishing the quality of their choices. Indeed, the results of some of the studies, which typically identify statistical trends rather than facts about particular individuals, are consistent with the possibility that there is a subgroup of people, trained experts or not, who are better at filtering out aesthetically irrelevant information and/or recognizing what has truly affected their choices and what has not. In fact, given the results of the studies it is possible that there is a subgroup of people with significant introspective access to their choices, though such people are in the minority. A third of the subjects in Maier’s problem-solving study involving the swinging cord reported, correctly, that the experimenter’s bumping the rope had

²⁰ Wilson et al. 1993.

helped them to solve the problem, though the rest did not.²¹ Perhaps some people naturally have greater introspective awareness of their mental processes, and/or greater capacities to develop such awareness. Indeed, a 2010 article in *Science* suggests that there are individual differences in introspective awareness of mental processes that are correlated with differences in brain structure.²²

So, to sum up, here are the problems and bits of good news.

The bad news:

- 1) Irrelevance: our aesthetic responses are determined in part by aesthetically irrelevant conditions.
- 2) Coarse-grainedness: our aesthetic responses are excessively coarse-grained, failing to take into account aesthetically relevant aspects of the work.
- 3) Ignorance: we don't know what causes our aesthetic responses.
- 4) Confabulation: we don't know that we don't know what causes our aesthetic responses, and we offer "explanations" that are in fact confabulations.
- 5) Explanation-induced instability: when we try to offer explanations, this tends to change our preferences.
- 6) Explanation-induced deterioration: these changes seem to reduce the quality of our preferences: they decrease our agreement with expert assessments and also make us less likely to be satisfied with our choices.

The good news:

- 1) Correct explanation: people are often able to explain their choices correctly, though mostly through theorizing rather than introspection. This good news has limited ability to mitigate the bad news above.
- 2) Differential susceptibility: there may be subgroups of people who are less susceptible to some of the problems described above and who have greater introspective access to their mental processes.

Of course, there would be plenty of room to dig further into the empirical evidence and explore the nuances of the phenomena in question. I'll do a bit of that later on. But first, I'm going to focus on how we should respond, assuming that the empirical

²¹ As Nisbett and Wilson (1977) note on p. 241, however, it is far from clear that these correct reports were generated through introspective awareness: there is good reason to think they were simply guesses based on external theories of problem-solving.

²² Specifically, introspective awareness is correlated with gray matter volume and white-matter microstructure in the anterior prefrontal cortex. Stephen M. Fleming et al. (2010), "Relating Introspective Accuracy to Individual Differences in Brain Structure," *Science* 329: 1541-1543. Introspection was operationalized rather simply here. Subjects were asked to perform a difficult task, and then to rate how confident they were in the correctness of their answer. Subjects high in introspection were those who were significantly more confident about their correct answers than about their incorrect answers.

situation is more or less as I've described it above.

Why these problems are problems for aesthetics

How, precisely, do these problems translate into problems for accounts of aesthetic appreciation and experience? One way of understanding things is that we do appreciate artworks (and other things), but we tend to do it rather poorly: we are often insufficiently responsive to the nature of the object. This is what the problems of irrelevance and coarse-grainedness seem to indicate: we react aesthetically to conditions that are aesthetically irrelevant, and our responses are unaffected by conditions that ought to affect them. This doesn't, in itself, seem like a very serious problem for accounts of aesthetic appreciation: it just seems realistic to notice that there are some things that people tend to do rather poorly.

There may be some views of aesthetic appreciation on which anyone afflicted by irrelevance, and possibly also coarse-grainedness, could not be appreciating a work aesthetically: these are accounts that require that the artwork be correctly or appropriately apprehended. One way of understanding what is happening in cases of irrelevance is that the object is being perceived through a fog of irrelevant conditions that cause the viewer to misapprehend its features. Identical stockings, seen through the haze of the position effect, seem to differ in weave, elasticity, and sheerness. Coarse-grainedness, on the other hand, need not involve *false* beliefs about the object: it is not false to describe several different shades as "red," or several different emotional timbres as "sad." But it does seem to manifest a failure to apprehend the object in a way that is appropriate for aesthetic purposes.

Given these considerations, Carroll's account may imply that subjects who are susceptible to irrelevance, at least, are not having aesthetic experiences at all, even in instances where second-order awareness is not in play. Carroll's account requires "*attention with understanding* to the work's formal and aesthetic properties and[/or] their interaction with each other and[/or] to the ways in which they engage our sensibilities and imagination." It appears that subjects who are in the grip of irrelevance are attending without understanding. Those in the grip of coarse-grainedness have a troublingly limited degree of understanding, though perhaps not enough to disqualify them completely. Appreciation, or the aesthetic state of mind, seems to be compromised by these problems on Iseminger's account, as well. He says that "the aesthetic state of mind ... is the state of mind in which, while tracking [formal and expressive] features (among others...), one finds this tracking valuable for its own sake."²³ But subjects in the grip of coarse-grainedness and, especially, irrelevance are not in fact tracking these features, though they may falsely believe that they are. Similarly, on Levinson's view that "[a]esthetic experience is experience involving aesthetic perception of some object, grounded in aesthetic attention to the object," it may be unclear whether irrelevance and coarse-grainedness are consistent with aesthetic experience at all, since they seem to indicate that aesthetic attention to the object is seriously compromised or absent.

²³ Iseminger 2005, p. 103.

Kieran's account does not appear to treat irrelevance and coarse-grainedness as disqualifying subjects from aesthetic appreciation. However the fact that we are ignorant of the processes that cause our aesthetic responses, seems to be disqualifying on this account. Ignorance seems to rule out the possibility that we could appreciate "the ways in which the artistry shapes and guides our responses," as Kieran requires. It also may be seen to call into question the extent to which we could be valuing our experiencing of a state of affairs, as Iseminger requires: for it is unclear just what the connection is between the state of affairs and our experiencing.

The fact that we tend to confabulate when we attempt to explain our responses may not add much, other than embarrassment, to the difficulties described above. Explanation-induced instability and deterioration do add something, though, insofar as they suggest that the problems will not be easy to solve, and the attempt to solve them may in fact be harmful. An obvious way to address irrelevance, coarse-grainedness and ignorance is to try to pay closer attention to what is, in fact, going on in our minds. But explanation-induced instability and deterioration suggest that when we try to produce detailed reports of what is going on in our minds, this alters the course of the mental processes we are attempting to observe and causes deterioration in the outcomes, leading us to be less satisfied with our own choices.

Of course, this doesn't mean the difficulties of explanation-induced instability and deterioration can't be overcome; perhaps it is possible, with time and experience, to learn how to observe one's own mental processes more accurately, and without altering their outcomes (or, at least, without altering their outcomes in a way that seems to degrade their quality).

What aesthetic experience and appreciation might be

Before considering further implications of problems with second-order awareness, I'd like to make some methodological stipulations. The first is that on any acceptable account, it must turn out that aesthetic experience and appreciation are possible. The answer to the question posed in my title, then, is yes. When we describe aesthetic experience and aesthetic appreciation, we are describing important aspects of human consciousness, and if a given account has the implication that they don't exist, we should conclude that it has picked out the wrong thing.

I stipulate, further, that aesthetic experience and appreciation should not turn out to be rare, exalted states that can be enjoyed only by art experts or the preternaturally gifted. In my view it should turn out that ordinary people have aesthetic experiences on a fairly regular basis: these might include admiring a garden in full bloom, having one's breath taken away by the beauty of one's sleeping child, and listening with enjoyment to music on the radio. Likewise, it should turn out that ordinary people are capable of appreciating many kinds of artworks, ranging from popular music to paintings in museums. There may be some works that are so complex or difficult that only a few people can appreciate them, but such works are the exception. My reasons for making this stipulation are partly empirical and partly ideological.

Empirically, it seems to me that most people have experiences of popular music (to give just one example) that should be counted as aesthetic: they attend to and take pleasure in the form and content of the music as they listen, sing along and dance.²⁴ Ideologically, it strikes me as elitist to insist that when people engaged in these activities lack a sophisticated capacity to describe the elements of the entity they are responding to, or to explain or justify the components of their own responses, they cannot be said to be appreciating the music aesthetically.

This does not mean we can't distinguish everyday responses from instances of more sophisticated aesthetic engagement with artworks. Indeed, there are two distinctions I think it will be helpful to make at this point. The first is between aesthetic experience and aesthetic appreciation. I have largely discussed these together thus far, in part because theorists often explicitly treat them together, or seem to be speaking of the same thing when they use these expressions. As I see things, aesthetic appreciation is focused on its object: it is appreciation *of* that object, and as such the object must be largely correctly apprehended. I regard it as desirable, however, to have a more permissive account of aesthetic experience, such that one can have an aesthetic experience caused by an object that is seriously misunderstood, or even imagined (as in the case of hallucinations).²⁵ An aesthetic *experience* of an artwork will turn out to be sufficient for aesthetic *appreciation* of that artwork, as long as the experience has involved a sufficiently accurate grasp of the artwork. An aesthetic experience that is triggered by an artwork, but in which the artwork has been seriously misunderstood, will not count as aesthetic appreciation of the work. The relation of aesthetic experience to aesthetic appreciation can be construed in a similar way for non-artworks.

A second distinction is between mere appreciation of an artwork and deep appreciation. Deep appreciation, which comes in degrees, is appreciation that demonstrates a grasp of such things as the artistic technique employed in the work, the work's art historical relations to other artworks, the nature of the artist's achievement in making the work, and the way in which the artwork evokes particular cognitive, perceptual and emotional responses. Deep appreciation typically involves the ability to offer detailed descriptions of the artwork and the achievement it manifests. Deep appreciation, then, requires significant background knowledge and preparedness which may be absent in ordinary appreciation.

²⁴ There is an excellent discussion of dancing as an aesthetic response to music in Richard Shusterman (1991), "Form and Funk: The Aesthetic Challenge of Popular Art," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 31: 203-213.

²⁵ Perhaps such aesthetic experiences must involve an object cognized in such-and-such a way, where the aesthetic response one has is not inappropriate to an object thus cognized, though the object has been cognized incorrectly. I take some inspiration for this possibility from Noël Carroll (1993), "On Being Moved by Nature: Between Religion and Natural History," in *Landscape, Natural Beauty and the Arts*, eds. Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell (Cambridge University Press), pp. 244-66.

To say, as I have said, that most people are capable of appreciating artworks is not to say that most people have experiences of deep appreciation most of the time. Indeed, it may turn out that some people, or many people, have never had experiences of deep appreciation. While I hold that it would be both false and elitist to deny that aesthetic appreciation is a commonplace of human experience, it does not strike me as elitist to acknowledge that when a person has made a special effort to develop competence with respect to a given art form, she will be able to appreciate the work more fully by virtue of her greater grasp of the work itself and the art historical relations in which it stands. This does not imply that deep appreciation is restricted to a very narrow slice of the population: people who immerse themselves in popular art forms such as hip hop or sitcoms may be deep appreciators to the extent that they achieve broad knowledge of other works in the art form, attend to what it is that makes some works particularly successful (or unsuccessful), and develop a vocabulary for speaking or thinking about the relevant aspects of the works. (Even deeper appreciation would involve further background knowledge about the emergence of these art forms, their relations to other genres, and so forth.)

Now, what should we say about the role of introspective awareness in aesthetic experience, aesthetic appreciation, and deep aesthetic appreciation, respectively? In my view, introspective awareness of the kind called into question by Nisbett and Wilson (1977) and their successors is unnecessary for aesthetic experience. As I have argued elsewhere, some awareness of one's own perception is necessary for aesthetic experience – one cannot have an aesthetic experience of perceptual information that one is unaware of taking in and processing (as when one is driving a long distance and “zones out” for a while).²⁶ However, the ability to observe one's own mental process to understand precisely *why* one feels moved by a piece of music or a natural environment, or which aspects of the object are responsible for one's feeling, should not be required. (This is not to deny that second-order awareness might be implicated in *some* forms of aesthetic experience, as Carroll and Levinson suggest.)

What about ordinary aesthetic appreciation? Is introspective awareness of one's own mental processes required for this? I think we should say, once again, that it is not. As I have mentioned, aesthetic appreciation of an artwork requires a sufficiently accurate grasp of the work. And some of the problems I identified above would threaten this: when a position effect influences one's perception of the quality of a garment, leading one to think that two (virtually) identical objects differ in specific qualities, one's grasp of (at least one of) them is significantly compromised. However, I believe that, for ordinary appreciation, it is sufficient to have a reasonable grasp of the object itself without having insight into what it is about the object that causes one to enjoy it or to evince a particular response to it. Returning

²⁶ See Sherri Irvin (2008a), “Scratching an Itch,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 66: 25–35.

to my earlier example of popular music, there may be particular aspects of the rhythm or musical structure that cause me to make certain choices in how I dance, or that cause me to feel especially uplifted, etc., in listening, but I can appreciate the music aesthetically without understanding how these effects are achieved or even which elements of the music are responsible.

When it comes to deep aesthetic appreciation, it seems to me that it is important to understand how the artwork achieves its effects. And this does involve significant insight into mental processes, one's own and those of others. Every time I have attended a talk about film given by Amy Coplan, I have learned something about how particular emotional effects are achieved through specific techniques that are so subtle I had not previously noticed them. This awareness has increased the depth of my appreciation of film, though I certainly cannot be said to be a deep appreciator.

Now, must one have *introspective* awareness of how the artwork triggers particular mental responses in order to be appreciating it deeply? Consider an analysis of an artwork that is offered from a strictly non-introspective perspective: "The artwork has features F, which are known to be disposed to produce response R. I am in fact experiencing R, and there are no other factors present in the artwork or the environment that seem to explain R, so it was likely caused by features F. Other viewers, too, report experiencing R in response to this work. I conclude that the artwork is successful at invoking response R by virtue of its inclusion of features F." One feels that a critic offering such an analysis lacks sensitivity; there is something cold, sterile and mechanistic about an act of appreciation that invokes one's own response as a mere datum in this way.

Before trying to assess whether something has really gone wrong in this sort of analysis, it is worth considering what the experimental studies really imply about our capacities for introspective awareness. For, in keeping with the first stipulation I mentioned above, we don't want a theory according to which deep appreciation turns out to be impossible. And there is also no point worrying if prominent accounts of aesthetic experience and appreciation invoke forms of second-order awareness that aren't in fact threatened by the data.

The studies typically pose a direct challenge only to introspective memory, not to real-time introspective awareness, since they ask subjects to make reports after the fact. But this is not especially comforting; it seems unlikely that subjects who failed to report the role of the hint in helping to solve the cord-swinging problem were, in fact, aware of the role of the hint when they came up with the solution, but then forgot. Similarly, it seems unlikely that subjects knew that a position effect was playing a role when they disproportionately chose the stockings on the right, but then forgot this when they were asked to explain their choices.²⁷

²⁷ This is not to deny that verbal reports of mental processes are somewhat more accurate in real time than after the fact. See Karl A. Ericsson and Herbert A. Simon (1993), *Protocol Analysis: Verbal Reports as Data* (rev. ed.), MIT Press.

What the studies, in general, seem to show is that we often lack introspective awareness of the way the mind brings together a variety of considerations to come up with a choice or evaluation of something. They do not, by showing this, show that we have no introspective awareness at all. The biggest threat, it seems, is to introspective awareness of processes, not of states. They don't suggest that I can't recognize that I am hungry, that I am sad, that I am smelling cinnamon, or that I am having an occurrent thought about bicycles. What is most troubling is that I may weave my awareness of such states into a tale about my evaluation of an object and believe that this tale actually explains the evaluation, when in fact it simply masks unconscious processing that may not have appealed to the same factors mentioned in the tale.

The studies also suggest that introspective knowledge of particular states we are in is often absent or misleading. Presumably there is some level on which the perceptual data about two identical pairs of stockings is apprehended by way of states of consciousness that are very similar to each other. The feel of these two pairs of stockings against my fingers is, surely, quite similar. The appearance of the stockings when held up to the light, too, is surely very similar.²⁸ However, it appears that subjects in the study misapprehend or misremember their own states of perceptual consciousness when it comes time to explain their evaluations of the stockings.

But the studies do not show us that it isn't possible for people to pay closer attention to their occurrent perceptual states so as to be less susceptible to such effects. Notoriously, we filter huge amounts of incoming perceptual data out of explicit consciousness, even when we are behaviorally responding to some of it. But it is possible to bring into awareness states that we have previously glossed over.²⁹ A number of Buddhist-derived mindfulness practices are devoted to bringing more of our perceptual states into explicit consciousness, often in conjunction with disabling the evaluative schemas that tend to distort our awareness. Greater perceptual mindfulness seems to have some potential to help us resist the problem of irrelevance (by facilitating our focus on the information that is in fact relevant) and also to combat coarse-grainedness (by ensuring that we are in fact bringing into consciousness the fine details of the entity we are responding to).

Assuming that our perceptual states themselves are not massively misleading as indicators of the entities being perceived – and nothing in this body of research suggests that they are – perceptual mindfulness seems to be right sort of thing to

²⁸ I will here leave aside the important possibility that subjects in the grip of a position effect unconsciously manipulated the stockings in such a way as to confirm a prior bias toward the right-hand pair, e.g., by stretching the stockings more thinly and then pronouncing on their superior sheerness. My remarks that follow will suggest that subjects should be able to learn not to engage in such manipulations.

²⁹ I discuss this further in Irvin 2008a.

allow us to appreciate artworks in the way that Carroll requires, by attending with understanding to their formal features, and to be in the aesthetic state of mind as Iseminger requires, by tracking the work's formal and aesthetic features and valuing the very experience of thus tracking them.

We could it seems, develop greater awareness of our occurrent thoughts and emotional states as well as perceptual states, and this would have the potential to inform us about the interrelations, in our own minds, of elements of perception, cognition and emotion. But will this be sufficient for views that seem to require awareness of how our mental processes function? Even if we can develop greater awareness of our occurrent perceptual, cognitive and emotional states, it appears that without access to underlying processes or the ability to run controlled experiments on ourselves, any such information we might obtain will be only correlational, not causal. And some of the accounts we have considered seem to require information about how our responses are caused. One variety of aesthetic experience, on Carroll's account, is attention with understanding "to the ways in which [the work's formal and aesthetic properties] engage our sensibilities and imagination." (Carroll 2002, p. 167) Kieran suggests that part of appreciating an artwork is appreciating "the ways in which the artistry shapes and guides our responses." (Kieran 2005, p. 213) These are clearly causal notions.

But at this point, I would like to suggest that invoking an external theory about how one's own responses, and those of others, are produced, as part of one's deep appreciation of an artwork, is not, in fact, such a troubling thing. For deep appreciation is aimed at identifying values in a work that are accessible intersubjectively, not merely to the individual appreciator. To deeply appreciate a work is not merely to be sensitive to how it affects *me*: for my own responses may be grounded in or dependent on idiosyncrasies in my own experiences or perceptual mechanisms. To the extent that this is true, a work that is very valuable to me may not be very valuable simpliciter, and identifying the mechanisms whereby the work produces my idiosyncratic responses is not germane to deep appreciation.

When we consider Carroll's and Kieran's accounts in relation to the idea of deep appreciation, then, we should take seriously their use of the plural: it is how the work "engages *our* sensibilities and imagination," "shapes and guides *our* responses," that is at issue. And an accurate theory of how responses are produced by various aspects of the artwork, abetted by observations of one's own states that are at least consistent with the theory, may be just the right sort of thing to invoke here.

We might wonder whether explanation-induced instability and deterioration will follow upon attempts to understand and explain our responses in these ways. If we attempt to bring external theories to bear in understanding our responses, will this change our preferences, and in objectionable ways? The experimental results I have discussed don't give us insight into this, since they involve subjects who attempted

to introspectively observe their mental processes without appeal to accurate theories.

It stands to reason that bringing accurate theories to bear will sometimes alter our judgments. If I become aware of the position effect, I may be in a position to attend especially carefully to the features of the object in order to avoid being influenced by the effect. This sort of judgment instability is hardly objectionable: it is a straightforward improvement. The greatest worry, perhaps, is that my immersive experience may be compromised by my attempts to observe, in real time, how particular features of the work affect me. If, in watching a scene in a movie, I am attending to the extremely slow zoom in on a character's face in relation to a theory about how this maneuver evokes emotion, this may disrupt my emotional response.

If I am relying on an accurate theory of how people's responses are produced by particular aspects of the artwork, should it matter that I myself do not experience the relevant response? Should I not simply be able to attend to the artwork and cross-reference its features with my theory in order to detect how it shapes and guides "our" responses in general? Worries about particularism suggest that one's actually having the response is important: in the absence of the response, it is always possible that the response that would typically be evoked by a given element has been disabled or reversed, within the context of this particular work, by some other factor that one's theory has not taken into account.³⁰ And, of course, if one's own aesthetic response is hindered, one is not having as strong or satisfying an aesthetic experience to the work as one otherwise would, which is undesirable in itself.

I see two possibilities to mitigate the worry that applying theoretical knowledge to a work will undermine aesthetic responses. First, it may be that theoretical knowledge about how particular aspects of a work affect our responses is disruptive when first acquired, but over time can come to coexist with responses that are restored to their initial intensity.³¹ Second, there may be more than one mode in which a work can be experienced, and it may be possible to learn to shift among these modes. It may be possible to experience a work immersively, experiencing and enjoying the effects it produces on us, and then later to experience it more analytically, with specific attention to the aspects that our theoretical knowledge tells us should be operative in producing our responses. (Perhaps the latter mode is better described as, or could take the form of, an analytical reflecting back on an earlier immersive experience.)

³⁰ As Jonathan Dancy argues in his defense of moral particularism, a feature that is good-making in one context may be neutral or even bad-making in another; and the factors that influence the feature's valence may be so complex that it is impossible to spell out what they are. Jonathan Dancy (1993), *Moral Reasons*, Blackwell.

³¹ Mark DeBellis explores in depth the relation between the nonconceptual listening of ordinary, musically untrained listeners and the conceptual listening of trained listeners to music. Mark DeBellis (1995), *Music and Conceptualization*, Cambridge.

So, to sum up: I don't think that aesthetic experience, appropriately construed, is threatened by the problems I enumerated above. This is because, on my view, an experience need not include an accurate grasp of its object to be aesthetic. I acknowledge, though, that many will not wish to allow this.³²

(Mere) aesthetic appreciation, which in my view does require a sufficiently accurate grasp of its object but does not require attention to one's own mental states or processes, is threatened by irrelevance and coarse-grainedness, in particular. However, to the extent that these problems rear their heads in unusual cases, this may not worry us exceedingly. Also, it appears that mindfulness training can mitigate these problems, helping us to grasp objects more accurately while weeding out irrelevant and distorting factors.

Deep aesthetic appreciation is threatened by all of the problems, because deep appreciation requires understanding of how our responses are produced by the work. However, introspection of one's own mental processes, which is seriously called into question by the empirical work, may not be required (and should not be required if it turns out to be impossible). Introspective access to the flow of one's occurrent perceptual, cognitive and emotional states, combined with accurate theoretical knowledge about causal relations between aspects of a work and people's responses, may be sufficient to allow us to assess the work's merits as deep appreciation requires. This may involve the cultivation of particular kinds of cognitive skills, such as the ability to shift between modes of experience of a work. As long as it is possible to acquire such skills, and I believe that it is, deep appreciation will turn out to be challenging, but altogether possible.

What, then, is the ultimate impact of the empirical findings on the contemporary views of aesthetic experience and appreciation with which I began? Take, again, Kieran's (2005, p. 213) claim, "When we truly appreciate a work, we appreciate its pictorial composition, the arc of the lines, the shading, the foreshadowing, *the ways in which the artistry shapes and guides our responses.*" Kieran's claim falls under my notion of deep appreciation. If his requirement that we appreciate "*the ways in which the artistry shapes and guides our responses*" were a requirement for introspective awareness of these matters, it would be threatened by the empirical findings. However, if it is possible to appreciate these matters by applying theoretical knowledge about mental processes to introspective awareness of our states, then Kieran's view survives the empirical challenge.

Carroll (2002, p. 167) says that "attention with understanding ... to the ways in which [the work's formal and aesthetic properties] engage our sensibilities and imagination" is one variety of aesthetic experience. I agree that this sort of attention

³² I defend a similarly promiscuous notion of aesthetic experience in Irvin 2008a and Sherri Irvin (2008b), "The Pervasiveness of the Aesthetic in Ordinary Experience," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 48: 29-44.

could figure in aesthetic experience or mere aesthetic appreciation, though I take it to be required only for deep appreciation. Carroll's condition is similar to Kieran's, and the impact of the empirical challenge is similar as well: if Carroll means, here, to require direct introspective awareness of these processes, that may turn out to be impossible for many or most of us; but if a theoretical grasp of the processes, combined with introspective awareness of our occurrent states, is sufficient, then this variety of aesthetic experience remains possible, though perhaps challenging to achieve. Because Carroll requires "attention with understanding" for this variety of aesthetic experience, I am not sure that the cocktail of theoretical knowledge of processes and introspective awareness of the flow of occurrent states would satisfy him. But perhaps "attention" to the occurrent states, combined with "understanding" of processes at a theoretical level, could do the trick.

Iseminger (2005, p. 99) suggests that "[s]omeone is *appreciating* a state of affairs just in case she or he is *valuing for its own sake the experiencing of that state of affairs....*" Insofar as experiencing a state of affairs involves having a sufficiently accurate grasp of it, Iseminger's notion will map onto my notion of aesthetic appreciation. It appears that a grasp of the flow of one's occurrent states, even without a grasp of the processes by which they are produced, may be sufficient to count as experiencing of a state of affairs; and there is no obvious barrier to valuing this flow of occurrent states. I take it, then, that Iseminger's proposal is not threatened by the empirical results.

Levinson (unpublished, p. 14) says, "*Aesthetic experience is experience involving aesthetic perception of some object, grounded in aesthetic attention to the object, and in which there is a positive hedonic, affective or evaluative response to the perception itself or the content of that perception.*"³³ If we are not too strict about what counts as "aesthetic attention to the object," this may count as aesthetic experience on my model; otherwise it will veer into aesthetic appreciation. The empirical results don't seem to give us any reason to worry that we can't be aware of the content of our perception, or of the perception itself. The only potential worry about Levinson's account, I think, is that the empirical results suggest a difficulty with knowing just what our "hedonic, affective or evaluative response" is a response to: it may be hard to be sure whether we are responding to the content of our perception, or whether something else (e.g., a position effect) is contributing to our response. Now, this does not suggest that aesthetic experience (or appreciation) is impossible; it does, however, suggest that we may not be in a good position to *know* whether we are fulfilling the conditions for aesthetic experience or appreciation. I will not attempt here to assess how troubled we should be by this potential epistemic difficulty.

In sum, I take it that these accounts can be interpreted in such a way as to make their respective varieties of aesthetic experience or appreciation possible, given the empirical results. Whether their proponents would endorse these interpretations is another question.

³³ Levinson (unpublished), p. 14. Italics in original.