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Aesthetics and the Private Realm

In "Scratching an Itch," I argue that it is possible to have aesthetic experiences of basic somatic phenomena such as itches.¹ The fact that these phenomena are private, I suggest, is no barrier to their being appropriate objects of aesthetic attention. In his reply, Brian Soucek raises three principal objections.² First, my argument that there can be aesthetic experiences of itches implies that there can be aesthetic experiences of brute colors, which seems an undesirable result. Second, I fall afoul of the traditional and well-founded restriction of the domain of the aesthetic to objects that are, at least in principle, publicly accessible. Third, I fail to provide sufficient motivation for my extension of the domain of the aesthetic; and in the absence of such motivation, I should be seen as changing the subject. While making some remarks in response to each of these charges, I will focus in particular on the second. Are there good reasons to think that aesthetic concepts can never apply to objects that are in principle accessible to only one person? I will argue that there are not.

Soucek claims that my strategies for showing that there can be aesthetic experiences of itches also, undesirably, vindicate the notion of aesthetic experiences of brute colors. He characterizes my strategies as involving appeal "to ways in which an itch can be contextualized, perhaps by comparing it to previous itchy (or non-itchy) states" and "to the emotional responses brute sensations like itches might provoke."³ He then suggests that brute colors, too, might be compared to other colors and might give rise to emotional responses, such as irritation. If itches can be aesthetically experienced on such grounds, then so can brute colors.

I agree with Soucek that these would be scant grounds for regarding something as an object of aesthetic experience. However, my strategies, as I understand them, don't lead to this consequence. After acknowledging that simple phenomena like brute colors on their own often are not seen as appropriate (or even possible) objects of aesthetic experience, I note, "Once we see the particular phenomena as embedded within a more complex structure of experience, however, the reluctance to apply aesthetic concepts should diminish. Though one might resist speaking of a color or simple auditory tone, perceived on its own, as aesthetic, it is clear that such simple elements contribute to the aesthetic character of the more complex structure of which they are a part. And, when we think of them as part of a complex structure, it becomes appropriate to speak of the elements themselves as having an aesthetic character: we can speak of the rightness or elegance or garishness of a particular color in the context of an image, for example."⁴ Itches, too, belong to more complex structures: at a given moment one's somatic experience comprises sensations all over the surface of one's skin, feelings generated by the movement of breathing, the feeling of the tongue in one's mouth, pressures or aches in one's joints, and so forth. Moreover, somatic experience is extended in time, so that the complex structure in question may be much vaster than if we were to restrict our consideration to a particular instant.

The idea, then, is not that a particular itch might be an object of aesthetic experience because it can be compared to other itches, past or future, or because it might cause an emotional response. Rather, I take the situation to be closely analogous to that in which a color becomes an appropriate object of aesthetic experience by appearing on the surface of a painting.

There is an obvious disanalogy between the two cases, though: a complex structure of somatic experience, unlike a painting, may have no obvious or inherent boundaries; and this might complicate the picture of how somatic phenomena can be

the object of aesthetic experience. Fortunately, we already have well developed models for appreciating unbounded objects, since natural environments share this feature. I thus consider complex somatic structures as objects of aesthetic experience according to a variety of models that are designed to allow for aesthetic experience of natural environments. These include Robert Stecker's minimal conception of aesthetic experience, Noël Carroll's content-oriented account, Allen Carlson's natural environmental model, and Carroll's arousal model of aesthetic experience of nature.⁵ As I argue, experiences of complex structures of somatic phenomena can satisfy the requirements for aesthetic experience on all of these accounts. Moreover, they can satisfy the even greater demands of two contemporary accounts of aesthetic appreciation: that of Jerrold Levinson, according to which aesthetic appreciation requires recognizing, among other things, the way in which higher-level phenomena emerge from lower-level ones; and that of Gary Iseminger, who holds that aesthetic appreciation requires accurate recognition of the object of one's experience.⁶ Structures of somatic phenomena can satisfy Levinson's and Iseminger's requirements because it is possible to turn an observant eye on one's own somatic experiences: one can correctly grasp the nature of one's somatic experiences, as Iseminger requires, and one can observe relations among different aspects and levels of phenomena within one's somatic experiences, as Levinson requires.⁷

With regard to Soucek's third charge, then, I do not see that it is accurate to suggest that I am singlehandedly expanding the domain of the aesthetic without justification. I am, rather, pointing out that on the predominant understanding of aesthetic experience manifested in a variety of leading contemporary accounts, complex structures of somatic phenomena are already a viable candidate for aesthetic experience; it is just that few have noticed this.⁸

To Soucek, however, this may appear only to indicate that contemporary accounts of aesthetic experience should be modified. This is because his most pressing concern relates to the notion of publicity: aesthetic concepts, he holds, should be applied only to objects that are, at least in principle, publicly accessible. Since itches and other somatic phenomena are in principle private, any account that allows them in must be rejected for that reason.

What, then, are the reasons for thinking that experiences of private objects should not be counted as aesthetic? Soucek invokes the 18th-century accounts of Shaftesbury and Hutcheson, who “began their arguments against moral egoism by highlighting the disinterested pleasure we often take in beauty. ‘Disinterested pleasure’ here referred to the delight that one can take in an object without needing it to be one’s own. The pleasure produced by owning, say, a piece of land derives, by definition, from considering it mine. So while the land itself may be a publicly accessible object, my ownership of it—and the pleasure it occasions—is necessarily private. Aesthetic relations to objects, on the other hand, were in principle *not* private. It is precisely insofar as they stem from public and shareable relations to objects that aesthetic pleasures—like those taken in viewing rather than owning a landscape—differ from cases of privatized entitlement. The point of these formative early attempts to describe the aesthetic was precisely to divide the public and disinterested from all that is selfish, private, or ontologically limited to me alone.”⁹

I quote from Soucek at length here, since this is the passage in his text that, I take it, is supposed to supply the justification for restricting the domain of the aesthetic to public objects. But what justification does it supply? It is surely true, as Soucek suggests, that the pleasure occasioned *by my ownership of* a piece of land is not aesthetic, just as the pleasure (or, as I write this, displeasure) one experiences on looking at the statement of one’s retirement account is not aesthetic. But this, of course, does nothing to show that I cannot take aesthetic pleasure in my experience

of the land, given that I do own it (and even if I have completely restricted others' access to it). Indeed, I might purchase it precisely in order to preserve the aesthetic features I prize (whether for my own sake, or for that of future generations) in situations where leaving it in the public domain would lead to their destruction. It seems utterly implausible that upon purchasing the land and erecting a tall fence around it, I lose the ability to experience it aesthetically.

The fact that an object is taken out of public circulation, then, does not undermine the possibility of its being an object of aesthetic regard. Perhaps, in the moment of aesthetic experience, one must not be contemplating the object *as one's own*, or coveting it, or scheming about how to win it at auction. But this does not mean that one cannot have aesthetic experiences of objects that one holds privately; nor, I take it, does it mean that one cannot form a desire to own an object so as to have convenient access to it as an object of aesthetic experience in the future. Moreover, ownership of an object is not an in-principle-private relation; objects can be collectively owned, sometimes by large groups of people. So I do not see that the aesthetic and the public (or, for that matter, the moral and the public) line up as neatly as Soucek seems to suggest.¹⁰

What, though, of objects that are "ontologically limited to me alone," like itches and other somatic phenomena? First, Buddhism teaches that it is possible to regard all phenomena, public or private, either with or without attachment and aversion. Attachment to one's own somatic experiences – clinging to them, dreading the moment at which they will cease, and so forth – is a bit like covetousness with regard to external objects: and if the latter is a bar to aesthetic experience, then, plausibly, so is the former. But it is also possible to contemplate one's own somatic phenomena without attachment, which seems very like the disinterested attitude Soucek invokes. It is true, of course, that a somatic phenomenon, unlike a natural environment or a painting, must be mine in order for me to have an experience of it.

But this does not mean that any pleasure I take in experiencing it is pleasure taken in *its being mine*, nor that my attitude toward it must be a selfish one.

It seems to me that the more pressing worry with regard to the privacy of somatic phenomena lies not in the impossibility of taking a disinterested attitude toward them or in the fact that they bear the wrong sort of relation to the moral domain, but in the difficulty of seeing how judgments of such phenomena can be objective, or subject to norms, in the way that the applicability of aesthetic concepts is often thought to require. How can it be said, of an object that is in principle accessible only to me, that it possesses certain aesthetic properties, or that certain aesthetic judgments about it are correct? And if these things cannot be said, can any experience I have of the object be an aesthetic experience?

Wittgenstein famously pointed out the impossibility of a private language: without a publicly shared practice of using words, there can be no fact of the matter about what counts as going on in the same way, and thus no standards to determine which uses are correct and incorrect. Since language is essentially normative, then, it can only be public.

This argument might be thought to suggest that norms cannot apply in the private realm. This, however, would be a mistake. Once I am a participant in a language community, even my private uses of words are subject to norms: it is possible for me to commit a malapropism when talking, or even thinking, to myself (and to recognize that I have done so). But can such norms apply to in-principle-private objects like itches? It seems to me that they can; and if they could not, the possibility of meaningful speech about many aspects of oneself and one's own experiences would be undermined.

How is objectivity with regard to private phenomena possible? Clearly, we learn how to use the word 'itch' to describe certain aspects of our experience, and it seems that uses of this word can be correct or incorrect. A child, claiming that he

has an itch, might be instructed that the sensation in question is really a pinch, a burn or a tickle. The possibility of norms in this domain depends on the assumption that, since we are all physiologically similar creatures, common stimuli produce similar sensations in us.¹¹

Although certain standard external stimuli are initially used to anchor the meaning of the word 'itch,' once one masters the word one can apply it independently of these standard stimuli. If someone, seeing my poison ivy rash, says, "That must be itchy," I can reply, "I know that poison ivy causes itching in most people, but I feel a burning sensation." The fact that no one else can feel what I'm feeling, and thus be in a position to judge whether my claim is correct, does not prevent it from being correct or incorrect. Similarly, there can be a fact of the matter about whether I just had the occurrent thought that tomorrow is Monday, even though no one else is in a position to know this fact.

The application of norms to elements of the private domain, then, is possible. But what of the kind of norms that are relevant to aesthetics? Is this enough to show that there can be objective judgments about, say, the aesthetic properties of a structure of somatic experience?

I can only sketch an answer to this question here. For an object to have an aesthetic property is, I take it, for certain relations to hold among its non-aesthetic properties.¹² To learn how to use an aesthetic term is to learn what kinds of relations must hold in order for that term to be applicable. Initially, one learns about such relations through discourse about publicly observable objects: one is told, for instance, that certain movements are graceful, and eventually one figures out what, at the non-aesthetic level, accounts for their being graceful, at which point one can identify further graceful movements on one's own. Moreover, the same aesthetic term may apply in different domains: a bodily movement in dance, a passage in a musical composition, and a region of a painting may all be graceful. I take it that, at

least in many instances, we use the same term because of structural similarities in the relations among non-aesthetic elements that account for the objects' possessing the aesthetic property in question.

If this story is roughly correct, then we have all the elements in place for an account of objective aesthetic judgments about private objects. It is possible for me to observe various non-aesthetic aspects of my somatic experience: I can detect itches, tickles, burns and pains; I can make observations about their durations; and I can identify all manner of specific qualitative aspects of them.¹³ Though no one else can feel my sensations or verify that they do possess particular qualitative aspects, these are nonetheless factual matters, and the norms I learn in the public domain can be applied to my private experiences. If I can detect various non-aesthetic aspects of my private experiences, then it seems I can also detect relations among them; and if I understand which structural aspects of a set of relations among non-aesthetic elements are responsible for the application of an aesthetic term to an object, I can also make well-founded aesthetic judgments about objects I encounter privately. Moreover, if I have a sophisticated capacity to describe my experience, I may be able give others some sense of what it was about that experience that led me to apply an aesthetic concept to it, just as I may be able to give someone a sense of which aspects of a movement in dance lead me to identify it as graceful. While my interlocutor cannot observe that my somatic experience actually has the non-aesthetic qualitative aspects I claim for it, then, she may nonetheless be able to establish that I have a good understanding of the aesthetic term; she may even have reason to believe that I am applying it appropriately given my non-aesthetic characterization of the object.

I hope that this account helps to clarify why I think that one's experiences of itches and other somatic phenomena can be truly aesthetic, rather than merely pleasant or unpleasant. I do not claim that all such experiences are aesthetic; but

experiences involving the right sort of attention to the right aspects of the phenomena are.

In a famous passage from *Walden*, Thoreau claims to have been “as much affected by the faint hum of a mosquito making its invisible and unimaginable tour through my apartment at earliest dawn ... as I could be by any trumpet that ever sang of fame. It was,” he continues, “Homer’s requiem; itself an Iliad and Odyssey in the air...”¹⁴ One can, if Thoreau’s testimony is to be trusted, have very grand aesthetic experiences of very humble objects. But, in my view, aesthetic experiences need not be so very grand. Some that are quiet and subtle may nevertheless be well worth having. All of the ingredients for such experiences are already with us, if only we attend to them in the right way.

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¹ Sherri Irvin, “Scratching an Itch,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 66 (2008): 25-35.

² Brian Soucek, “Resisting the Itch to Redefine Aesthetics,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* XX (2009): XX-XX.

³ Soucek, “Resisting the Itch,” p. XX.

⁴ Irvin, “Scratching an Itch,” pp. 29-30.

⁵ See, respectively, Robert Stecker, “Aesthetic Experience and Aesthetic Value,” *Philosophy Compass* 1 (2006): 1–10; Noël Carroll, “Aesthetic Experience Revisited,” *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 42 (2002): pp. 145–168; Allen Carlson, *Aesthetics and the Environment: The Appreciation of Nature, Art and Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2000); and Noël Carroll, “On Being Moved by Nature: Between Religion and Natural History,” in *Arguing About Art: Contemporary Philosophical Debates*, 2nd ed., ed. Alex Neill and Aaron Ridley (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 167–186.

⁶ See Jerrold Levinson, *The Pleasures of Aesthetics* (Cornell University Press, 1996), and Gary Iseminger, *The Aesthetic Function of Art* (Cornell University Press, 2004).

⁷ Soucek expresses concern about the way in which somatic experiences satisfy Iseminger's epistemic requirement, according to which one can appreciate an object only if one has an experience of a state of affairs involving that object, and one can have an experience of a state of affairs only if it actually obtains. Soucek worries that since "I cannot, it seems, be wrong in saying that I itch," Iseminger's epistemic requirement is not meaningfully satisfied by somatic experiences. (Soucek, "Resisting the Itch," p. XX) First, it seems to me that one can, in fact, be mistaken about the nature of one's somatic experience. One can learn, on attending carefully to a pain in one's thigh, that it is not static, as one had believed, but quite dynamic: it fades in and out, shifts from place to place, and sometimes disappears altogether before returning. If this account is correct, then it is possible for my experience of an itch to either pass or fail the epistemic requirement. Second, suppose that my grasp of my somatic experience is, in fact, guaranteed to be perfect. (Someone holding this view might suggest that my attention to my pain, rather than teaching me something that was true of it all along, instead changed its nature; my understanding of the pain was never in error.) If this is the case, then I have a privileged epistemic relation to the relevant state of affairs. Barring a reason to think that Iseminger's epistemic requirement is designed to pick out something other than an epistemic relation to the state of affairs in question, we should have no reservations in concluding that the requirement is satisfied.

⁸ A notable exception is Richard Shusterman. See, for instance, his "Somaesthetics: A Disciplinary Proposal," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 57 (1999): 299–313, and *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

⁹ Soucek, "Resisting the Itch," p. XX.

¹⁰ In "The Pervasiveness of the Aesthetic in Ordinary Experience," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 48 (2008): 29–44, I argue that aesthetic attention to one's private experience, far from being associated with selfishness, is likely to be morally salutary.

¹¹ For related discussion, see Barbara Montero, "Proprioception as an Aesthetic Sense," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 64 (2006): 231–242. My account diverges from Montero's in some respects.

¹² In speaking of the object's non-aesthetic properties, I include both intrinsic and relational properties. As we learn from Kendall Walton's "Categories of Art," *Philosophical Review* 79 (1970): 334–367, an object's intrinsic properties may be insufficient to determine its aesthetic properties without reference to its relation to a relevant category.

¹³ See "Scratching an Itch" (pp. 25 and 26) for further discussion.

¹⁴ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden: Or, Life in the Woods* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1893), p. 140