

Pleasures and Aesthetic Excellence

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The two most central questions in aesthetics are:

- (1) What makes something count as art?
- (2) What makes an artwork count as good art?

In this paper, I argue that, in many cases (i.e., for many kinds of art), the answer to both questions has to do with art's peculiar *pleasures*.

First, I argue that an important reason for which a work of art can count as good or aesthetically meritorious (i.e., worthy of aesthetic appreciation), is that it *has the capacity to produce in suitable viewers, under suitable conditions, certain kinds of pleasures*. These are pleasures that are extremely prudentially valuable.

Second, I argue that one reason for which something can count as art in the first place is that it was intended by its creator as something with the capacity to produce the sort of pleasures mentioned above. Philosophers have long thought that the creator's intention is crucial to something's being art. My claim is that, in many sorts of cases, the relevant (i.e., art-determining) intention is one to create something that might be a source of the special sorts of pleasures I set out.

As evidence of this claim, I consider the way in which great artists typically create. It is by riffing or improvising—playing around with ideas—until they stumble upon a combination of sounds, sentences, brushstrokes, or whatever it may be, that gives rise in them to certain sorts of pleasures. Great artists create great art, that is, by being especially susceptible to a particular set of highly valuable pleasures. This is one reason we revere, admire, and envy them. Here, I engage with Susan Wolf's new material on the way in which we love artists, from her 2017 Donnellan Lectures (to be worked into her 2020 Locke Lectures).

I engage also with a recent discussion between Mohan Matthen and Neil Sinhababu on aesthetic value and pleasure in *The Australasian Philosophical Review*.

I conclude by considering some interesting implications of what I've claimed for normativity more generally. A tendency to produce particular kinds of pleasures—ones that are highly prudentially valuable—turns out to be an important source of normativity in a number of quite diverse domains.