

# AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE, AESTHETIC VALUE

---

JANE FORSEY

This paper offers a critical analysis of Robert Stecker's account of aesthetic experience and its relation to aesthetic and artistic values. The analysis will demonstrate that Stecker's formulation of aesthetic experience as it stands is incompatible with his arguments for non-aesthetic artistic values. Rather than multiplying the values associated with aesthetic experience, a deeper understanding of that experience will best serve to clarify problems at the core of the discipline.

During a session at an American Society for Aesthetics conference a couple of years ago, a speaker quipped, 'I don't even understand the difference between aesthetic and artistic value!' and I thought, *neither do I*. The question of what makes an experience a particularly aesthetic one cuts to the heart of the discipline at its most complex. Not only are there competing approaches to locating the aesthetic – in the properties of objects on the one hand, or the felt pleasures of our experiences on the other – there is also a great deal of disagreement about what values arise from, or are involved in, these experiences, and whether they differ according to the objects to which we give our attention. Our confident and often facile use of such notions as aesthetic experience, aesthetic value, artistic value, and so on, in fact belies a great deal of confusion about what they mean, or what we mean when we use them. That a philosopher would voice that confusion was refreshing, for we have generally taken for granted that we understand what aesthetic experience is, or what aesthetic and artistic values amount to, when in fact we often do not. And lest the heart of our endeavours prove hollow, we need to sort this confusion out.

To this end, I turned to the recent work of Robert Stecker, who, in a series of papers since 1997, has been developing an account of aesthetic experience and the relation of this experience to both aesthetic and artistic value. And while the details of his formulation of artistic value in particular have been the subject of some cogent criticism by Dominic Mclver Lopes and Julian Dodd,<sup>1</sup> his broader account of the relation of these values to our experiences has not yet been

---

I am grateful for suggestions made on an earlier draft of this paper by Beth Savickey, Lars Aagaard-Mogensen, and James Young, as well as for the incisive comments made by two anonymous reviewers for this journal.

<sup>1</sup> Dominic Mclver Lopes, 'The Myth of (Non-aesthetic) Artistic Value', *Philosophical Quarterly* 61 (2011): 518–36, and Julian Dodd, 'Artistic Value and Sentimental Value: A Reply to Robert Stecker', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 71 (2013): 282–88; 'On a Proposed Test for Artistic Value', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 54 (2014): 395–407.

assessed in any detail. Stecker believes that the notion of aesthetic value is inadequate to explain our specific encounters with works of art, and that a different value – artistic value – is needed for the purpose. But he fails to demonstrate this inadequacy, in part because it arises from unresolved problems in the way that he has characterized aesthetic experience from the beginning. I am sceptical of the need to multiply the values involved in aesthetic experience, whether it be an experience of art, nature, or everyday objects. What we need instead is greater clarity about the nature of aesthetic value itself, and its relation to aesthetic experience. This is of course an enormous task. In my attempt to make a modest contribution, I will limit myself here to a detailed analysis of Stecker's account and argue that his notion of artistic value is incompatible with aesthetic experience as he has conceived it. If his account has not been wholly successful, Stecker has still done the discipline a great service, I believe, in returning us to the foundations of aesthetic theory, and encouraging us to think through these core concepts again.

## I. AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

Stecker begins with what he terms a 'minimal conception' of aesthetic experience,<sup>2</sup> which is scant in detail but is presumably meant to leave room for elaboration. His conception, adapted from Jerrold Levinson, claims that aesthetic experience is 'object-oriented' and is 'the experience of attending in a discriminating manner to forms, qualities *or* meaningful features of things, attending to these for their own sake or for the sake of this very experience.'<sup>3</sup> Anything 'that includes this minimal conception', such as a more complex formulation, 'is also aesthetic experience.'<sup>4</sup> Yet elsewhere Stecker describes this experience as attending to 'forms, qualities *and* meanings' again for their own sake or for the sake of the experience itself.<sup>5</sup> This second description mirrors Levinson's original formulation. Let me begin with what appears to be an important difference between these two articulations. Stecker seems to be making a strong claim about the necessary and sufficient conditions for an experience to be aesthetic. In each articulation, it is necessary that we attend to objects for their own sake, but this is not sufficient. In so doing, we also must attend to three specific constituents or properties of the object – forms, qualities, meanings. There are thus two components to aesthetic experience, each

---

<sup>2</sup> Robert Stecker, 'Aesthetic Experience and Aesthetic Value', *Philosophy Compass* 1 (2006): 4; see also 'Aesthetic Autonomy and Artistic Heteronomy', in *Aesthetic and Artistic Autonomy*, ed. Owen Hulatt (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 33.

<sup>3</sup> Stecker, 'Aesthetic Experience', 4, my italics.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Stecker, 'Aesthetic Autonomy', 33, my italics.

necessary and jointly sufficient. My particular interest is in the second one: it is unclear both whether this component is from the outset a disjunctive or a conjunctive one and which Stecker intends it to be,<sup>6</sup> because they cash out in different ways.

If aesthetic experience is conjunctive – the ‘and’ – it implies that we attend to all three constituents of the minimal conception (to forms, qualities and meanings of an object) in the way that a description of dessert as strawberry, chocolate, *and* vanilla would lead us to expect all three flavours of ice cream when ordering what, as children, we called ‘Neapolitan’. But this is unrealistic for aesthetic experience: many objects have no meanings, for instance – sunsets come to mind – nor do we expect them to have, even while they have forms and qualities. And some aesthetic experiences attend only to forms and qualities (or ‘perceptual properties’),<sup>7</sup> without being thereby impoverished. Perhaps Stecker means that our aesthetic experiences will attend to all three features if all three are available, to only one or two if that is all that is possible. But then why include three features in this component of a minimal formulation? (Why describe dessert in this way if it is untrue in all, most, or any of its iterations?) It seems unwise to formulate a strong conjunction if it is not true of many of our experiences, and it would *limit* the scope of aesthetic experience to only those objects that have all three constituents.

However, if the minimal conception is meant to be disjunctive – the ‘or’ – a different set of problems appear. It suggests that we could perhaps choose which feature we attend to, as when offered chocolate, strawberry, *or* vanilla for dessert. Or it suggests that perhaps something in the object dictates the terms of our response – for example, that it is an artwork, as opposed to a sunset.<sup>8</sup> If, for instance, we attend to meaning alone in an object, this seems to overly *expand* aesthetic experience to include all experiences that focus on meaning, from

<sup>6</sup> In *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art: An Introduction* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), 46–47, 61, and again in ‘Aesthetic Experience’, 3–4, Stecker quotes Levinson’s conjunctive formulation and immediately follows it with his minimal conception as disjunctive. Yet in ‘Carroll’s Bones’, *British Journal of Aesthetics* 46 (2006): 284, and ‘Aesthetic Autonomy’, 33, Stecker instead provides a conjunctive formulation that he nevertheless notes is ‘following’ Levinson. Nowhere does he indicate that he has altered his formulation from the disjunctive to the conjunctive, nor does he indicate that he has noticed a difference between the two or a difference between Levinson’s formulation and his own.

<sup>7</sup> Stecker, *Aesthetics*, 61.

<sup>8</sup> I will leave aside the question of whether it is even coherent to suggest that we could attend to form without also attending to qualities on a disjunctive account, since my interest lies with Stecker’s emphasis on meaning in works of art, as we will see below. But it is worth noting that if Stecker does intend his formulation of aesthetic experience to be strongly disjunctive, he will have to differentiate between forms and qualities more clearly and in more detail than he has thus far.

reading a dessert menu to sitting through a calculus class – that is, to things we would normally exclude from the realm of the aesthetic. Stecker could perhaps mitigate this concern by reminding us of the first requirement, that is, that we attend to meaning – or any other singular feature – for its own sake, or for the sake of the experience itself, and exclude a number of objects and activities in this way.<sup>9</sup> Yet this move multiplies rather than diminishes the trouble: Stecker would then need to explain what attending to meaning for its own sake amounts to. That we see the object has the property of being meaningful even if we cannot discern what that meaning is? Or that we see it has meaning but distance ourselves from it, as when we opt for chocolate for its own sake, or for the sake of the pleasure of eating it, ignoring, for instance, the purported health benefits or risks we may believe it possesses? This suggests that we somehow grasp that meaning, but appreciate it for no other reason than its being a property the object possesses – that is, for no consequence, or goal, or instrumental reason, such as ordering dessert or passing a calculus test. Meaning for its own sake – more than forms or qualities for their own sakes – is a notion that resists easy explanation.

These are not idle questions for Stecker, because, as we will see, attending to the meaning of an object will be a definitive test for the presence of artistic value. Dodd, in particular, has pressed Stecker on this point, because he claims Stecker is suggesting that we merely need to know *that* an object has the property of being meaningful without knowing *why*, or even *what* that meaning amounts to.<sup>10</sup> And if Dodd is right, then experiencing an object as being meaningful, without discerning that meaning, is for Stecker enough to attend to its meaning ‘for its own sake’, which is a little like looking at an encrypted message without the key, and appreciating that it is meaning-laden without having any idea of what it says. ‘It’s meaningful but I don’t know what it means’ would be an odd way of appreciating meaning. The alternative is that we recognize and understand the meaning of a work (or a message) and then *do nothing with it*. We read its meaning and understand it, and appreciate that it is meaningful, while being quite unmoved by its significance. I am sceptical of this: when a thing means something, it means something *to us*: it resonates, it has consequences, it

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, the two situations Stecker describes of reading Shakespeare’s sonnets and encountering the same aesthetic properties (‘Aesthetic Experience’, 9). In the first case, one is reading them ‘just for the sake of the pleasures they afford’; in the second case, one is studying for an exam. The first case is an instance of aesthetic experience; the second is not.

<sup>10</sup> Julian Dodd, ‘On a Proposed Test’, 401–3; this is a longer paper, developed from an earlier exchange with Stecker. See Julian Dodd, ‘Artistic Value and Sentimental Value: A Reply to Robert Stecker’, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 71 (2013): 282–88, and Robert Stecker, ‘Testing Artistic Value: A Reply to Dodd’, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 71 (2013): 288–89.

increases our knowledge, it makes us feel something – it affects us in some way. Meaning ‘for its own sake’ suggests a kind of indifference and unaffectedness that is hard to accept. It is not that in reading a poem we make a descriptive claim and say ‘it has meaning’. No – when we read and understand a poem we are normatively involved in it. I’ll leave this aside for the moment: my point now is simply to illustrate that a disjunctive account of aesthetic experience is no less problematic than a conjunctive one, and that whichever one Stecker has in mind needs further elucidation. And lest Stecker respond that he intended no strong logical relation in his vernacular uses of ‘and’ and ‘or’, the fact remains that he has provided an account of aesthetic experience that includes two necessary separate components, the second of which has three relata, and we are surely justified in seeking clarity about the relations between these three, and how they individually or collectively contribute to making an experience aesthetic. I’ll return to this below, but let me first fill in what details Stecker does provide about his minimal conception and its attendant value.

For Stecker, the minimal conception ‘implicitly refer[s]’ to value, although it does not entail appreciation: it ‘refers to *the expectation of finding value*’.<sup>11</sup> That is, aesthetic experience grounds both positive and negative evaluations: the beautiful and pleasurable, as well as the shocking, the disgusting, or the disappointing. In either case, aesthetic experience has intrinsic value, as being valuable in itself. (Stecker claims that even a disappointing experience is ‘one found disvaluable in itself’ and so remains aesthetic).<sup>12</sup> By contrast, Stecker claims that a perceptual experience of, say, a mountain range in order to ‘see if we are driving in the right direction’<sup>13</sup> is *not* aesthetic because we are not attending to the mountains for their own sake, or for the sake of the experience itself – that necessary first component. Because aesthetic experience can be unhappy in some ways, Stecker does not tie it strongly to felt pleasure as many before him have. It is instead distinguished by a quality or kind of attention, positive or negative. Stecker then further fleshes out this picture with the introduction of aesthetic value.

## II. AESTHETIC VALUE

While aesthetic value ‘is first and foremost the value of a type of experience’ – that is, that we have an experience we value for its own sake –,<sup>14</sup> the objects *of* that experience can *also* have aesthetic value, which Stecker describes in the following

<sup>11</sup> Stecker, ‘Aesthetic Experience’, 5.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Stecker, ‘Aesthetic Autonomy’, 33.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

way. The aesthetic value of an object is autonomous in the sense that it is 'not defined by, derived from, or [...] a function of, other values'; it is *sui generis*, 'independent from other values and of the type of object experienced'.<sup>15</sup> It is, however, 'derived from an adequate and proper reception of the object'.<sup>16</sup> Aesthetic value, while autonomous of other *values*, is dependent upon, or derives from, a certain kind of *experience*: it is not a value that subsists independent of our encounters. Thus, Stecker appears to eschew aesthetic realism, in favour of a position more like Eva Schaper's (and Kant's too), where 'the values we place on the objects of our taste do not go beyond or outside what is grasped in the appraising of them'.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, Stecker states: 'It is everywhere. It has to be defined in its own right [...]. Aesthetic value can be realized in different ways in different media but it cannot be a different value in different media.'<sup>18</sup> So it follows from this that a chair, a painting, or a sunset can all have aesthetic value, provided that they are experienced in the appropriate manner (that is, for their own sake or for the sake of the experience itself).

Yet there is a curious doubling effect here. We have the notion of aesthetic experience as attending to objects for their own sake, and yielding aesthetic value (of the experience itself). But this intrinsically valuable experience also involves the expectation of the same value in the objects experienced. Aesthetic judgement appears to be the evaluation of an object as possessing aesthetic value (or as capable of delivering it),<sup>19</sup> whether it turns out to be negative or positive. What we cannot have, on this account, is an aesthetic experience that judges an object to have no aesthetic value at all, because the relevant judgement occurs within the context of an experience that is *already* attending to objects (their forms, qualities, meanings) for their own sake – that is, in the context of an already aesthetically value-laden experience. This is what I take Stecker to mean when he describes the aesthetic value of objects 'in terms of' the aesthetic value of the experience of those objects, which is 'derived from' the proper reception of them.<sup>20</sup> When we perceive a mountain range as a landmark alone, we are not attending to its forms, qualities, and/or meanings for their own sake, and, as our experience of it thus is not aesthetic, or has no aesthetic value, we will not expect (or find) the mountain range to have any either. That is, without having an

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 32, 34.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>17</sup> Eva Schaper, 'The Pleasures of Taste', in *Pleasure, Preference and Value: Studies in Philosophical Aesthetics*, ed. Eva Schaper (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 51.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Stecker, 'Artistic Value Defended', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 70 (2012): 361.

<sup>19</sup> Stecker, 'Aesthetic Experience', 5.

<sup>20</sup> Stecker, 'Aesthetic Autonomy', 33.

aesthetic experience, there can be no discernment of aesthetic value, however autonomous that value may indeed be. Once we *do* attend to the object in the appropriate manner, we can no longer determine that it is *without* any aesthetic value, for its value arises from the value we find in the experience itself (again, even if this evaluation is negative or this experience is disappointing).

Let me note that in 'Carroll's Bones', Stecker somewhat sophisticates this picture in his response to an objection by Noël Carroll, who claims that he has left out experiences of objects to which we are indifferent. Stecker writes:

if the 'percipient' is attending to the object for its own sake, and attending to the right sort of forms, qualities and meanings, it is consistent with the minimal view that this is aesthetic experience. This is so even if the percipient finds his experience neither positively or [*sic*] negatively valuable in itself. To find an experience indifferent is to evaluate it. It is to put it at the zero point on a scale of value [...]. So the minimal view is perfectly consistent with the existence of aesthetic experiences about which we are indifferent.<sup>21</sup>

We can then adjust my reading above to include that, by attending in the appropriate manner to an object, we cannot determine that it is without any aesthetic value – positive, negative, or indifferent (zero on some putative scale). Following Stecker's response to Carroll, we could say that aesthetic evaluation (and aesthetic experience) occurs in such cases, even in the face of resistant or indifferent objects, because we are approaching them properly. This is not a compelling sophistication of the minimal conception, however. For we have just seen that attending in the proper way to an object for its own sake will yield aesthetic value – of the experience, at least, if not of a positive value in the object. But in this passage Stecker now suggests not only that the object might disappoint us, but that the experience can too. It does not seem consistent at all to claim that, on the one hand, aesthetic experiences are those we find valuable in themselves, and on the other, those to which we can be indifferent (that is, those whose value is zero; zero suggests that there is *no* value in this experience, rather than its yielding a value of some kind on some scale). If, upon giving my attention to a sunset or artwork in the right kind of way, I can conclude that it was 'a waste of time' – that I was indifferent to both the object and the experience – then we do not have a conception of a kind of experience that is intrinsically valuable for itself, and it becomes harder to see what marks it out as *aesthetic* now, rather than just, say, attentive. We give our attention to many things without finding them, or the attention, to have been valuable for us. This adjustment of the minimal conception further problematizes a disjunctive account in ways I've

<sup>21</sup> Stecker, 'Carroll's Bones', 284.

already noted. For it suggests that we could then attend to the meaning of an object while simultaneously being indifferent to that meaning ('it has meaning, so what?') and this seems counter-intuitive.

There is also an equivocation in Stecker's account, which I think stems from an attempt to resist a commitment to either aesthetic realism (as I've noted) or to aesthetic subjectivism – the two competing approaches I alluded to in the introduction. Stecker states that aesthetic value has an 'underived character' while at the same time claiming that the aesthetic value of objects is 'derived from' our proper attention to them.<sup>22</sup> If aesthetic value really is autonomous and underived, it seems that an object will have that value, or can have that value, whether we discern it or not, enjoy it or not. If, however, aesthetic value is derived from our experiences, it is dependent upon them, or arises through them, or is determined by them, and thus is a product of our responses to the world around us. The former leads us in the direction of realism, the latter to a kind of subjectivism. And, while I do not expect Stecker to *also* have resolved this foundational aesthetic debate, his account suffers from the ambiguity of his position. He claims: 'We can remain neutral on the controversial topic of whether objects actually possess aesthetic properties and whether aesthetic experience always involves recognition of them.'<sup>23</sup> And then he notes that the minimal conception makes no commitment to them. But failing to commit weakens his assertion that objects, as well as experiences, do indeed have aesthetic value. And this assertion seems to underwrite his later claim that some objects *also* – or *instead* – have artistic value. Someone, at some point, is bound to demand a more robust response than the declaration of neutrality he provides.

In any case, what Stecker's minimal conception (minimally) offers is a notion of a certain kind of experience that we prize for its own sake, and a specific kind of value that is attendant upon it, in fact that seems to always arise given that the experience is of the appropriate kind. He writes: 'aesthetics is the study of a certain kind of value. This value derives from certain kinds of experience, and is identified in judgements that an object possesses this value in virtue of its capacity to deliver the experience.'<sup>24</sup> Whatever we think of this description of aesthetic experience, the question that now arises is why we need to posit a *second* kind of value arising from our aesthetic experiences of a more limited set of objects – such as those of fine art. Why do we need to multiply the values that our aesthetic experiences involve? Let me turn to Stecker's response.

<sup>22</sup> Stecker, 'Aesthetic Autonomy', 33.

<sup>23</sup> Stecker, 'Aesthetic Experience', 5.

<sup>24</sup> Stecker, *Aesthetics*, ix.

### III. ARTISTIC VALUE

Stecker provides two main reasons for the need to posit artistic value in particular, which taken separately and together will actually fail to provide the compelling case he wishes to make. The first argument refers to the emergence of anti-aesthetic art, or 'anti-art', beginning with Dada and developing through conceptual art and various avant-garde movements. Some of these works, Stecker claims, 'completely lack aesthetic interest yet are valuable as art' or 'have such modest aesthetic interest that their aesthetic value cannot account for their value as art'. It 'follows', he claims, 'that there is nonaesthetic artistic value'.<sup>25</sup>

Except that it does not follow. Certainly, many would agree that Marcel Duchamp's *In Advance of the Broken Arm* or Joseph Beuys's *Capri-Batterie* have significant value as works of art, and few would claim that they are pleasing or beautiful in some traditional sense (the former being a snow shovel suspended from the ceiling and the latter a yellow light bulb plugged into a lemon). But we cannot thereby conclude that such works therefore have little or no 'aesthetic interest'. From Stecker's account of aesthetic experience, we learn that these works can be negatively assessed, as being shocking or provocative, disgusting, ugly, or disappointing. These are also aesthetic valuations, as Stecker has claimed, that can arise from our having an aesthetic experience of works of art – an experience that we value for its own sake. In this first argument, Stecker seems to identify this new term 'aesthetic interest' with *positive* aesthetic value alone, as against his earlier claims. And a lack of positive value is an insufficient reason (a) to dismiss aesthetic value altogether or (b) to posit a new value, artistic value, in its place, to account for these works.

Further, Stecker's first reason for pursuing artistic value presupposes a disjunctive account of aesthetic experience, carrying with it the problems I have already mentioned. With Duchamp or Beuys, we seem to have an aesthetic experience that does not attend to forms or qualities as having no aesthetic interest – or attends to them, and dismisses them as uninteresting – and then looks to putative meaning alone. And Stecker even devises a test for the determination of artistic value: 'does one need to understand the work to appreciate its being valuable in that way? If so, it is an artistic value. If not, then not.'<sup>26</sup> Meaning here is sufficient to determine artistic value (given our proper attention to the object). Yet on the minimal account, even if disjunctive, attending to meaning is one particular constituent of aesthetic experience and is one part of the *aesthetic* value derived from it. Meaningfulness (that now clearly requires understanding and interpretation) is not a 'nonaesthetic' artistic value at all, but

<sup>25</sup> Stecker, 'Artistic Value Defended', 355, 356.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 357.

is built into Stecker's account of aesthetic experience and aesthetic value from the beginning. If Stecker were to more fully develop his minimal conception as strongly disjunctive, his theory of aesthetic experience would *not* be inadequate to explain our encounters with these works of art. Instead, he could claim that sometimes our aesthetic experiences attend only to the meaning of an object, and ignore (or dismiss) its forms and qualities, and, perhaps further, that those times would be uniquely coincident with our experiences of works of art rather than our experiences of sunsets or other natural phenomena. We might then need to understand a work to appreciate its value, but that value would still be aesthetic, so long as meaning is a constituent of our aesthetic experience, and one that can be singled out on a disjunctive formulation.

Stecker's second reason for positing artistic value presupposes a conjunctive formulation of aesthetic experience but fares no better. He notes that 'even among artworks that have aesthetic value, their value as art is not exhausted' by it.<sup>27</sup> Art, he claims, has other values too: art-historical value, cognitive value, ethical value, 'interpretation-related value'<sup>28</sup> – and these are also ways of responding to works *as* art. And so he states: 'the aesthetic value of works does not wholly account for these responses. Artworks must have value as art that goes beyond their aesthetic value. Hence there is nonaesthetic artistic value.'<sup>29</sup>

I say this argument relies on a conjunctive formulation because it allows that we attend equally to forms and qualities as well as meanings when we experience works of art, which the first argument seems to deny. For Stecker, artistic value is 'heteronomous – a value derived from the interaction of other, more basic values [...] including, but not confined to, aesthetic value.'<sup>30</sup> But this second argument complicates matters even further. First, it is unclear how aesthetic value, as autonomous (not 'defined by', 'derived from', or a 'function of' other values, but 'independent of' them all) can itself be part of a derived, heteronomous, artistic value. Are all of the 'more basic values' of artistic value – cognitive, moral, and so on – singly autonomous and jointly heteronomous or only this one? And how can a *sui generis* value that is *not* a function of other values *be* a function of artistic value? (In a more recent paper, Stecker further muddies the waters when he states: 'The aesthetic value of an artwork commonly contributes to a work's overall artistic value. So the aesthetic value of an artwork *is* an artistic value.'<sup>31</sup> But it is unclear how we make the move from contributing factor to identity relation, and

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 355.

<sup>28</sup> Stecker, 'Aesthetic Autonomy', 35.

<sup>29</sup> Stecker, 'Artistic Value Defended', 356.

<sup>30</sup> Stecker, 'Aesthetic Autonomy', 32, 35.

<sup>31</sup> Robert Stecker, 'Entangled Values: A Reply to Dodd', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 55 (2015): 396, my italics.

from autonomy to heteronomy if aesthetic value ‘cannot be a different value in different media.’<sup>32</sup> Stecker will need to provide some better mode of combination to clarify the ‘interaction’ of these more basic values and an explanation of whether we attend to each of them separately, or jointly to some product of their interrelation, when we talk of a more holistic artistic value.

Further, these other values – cognitive, art-historical, aesthetic, ethical – are also subject to Stecker’s test: in each of these cases, ‘one needs to understand the work to appreciate this value.’<sup>33</sup> The test, however, is not only necessary for determining artistic value, it also appears to be sufficient, as I have noted (that is, given the appropriate attention to an object, focus on its meaning alone provides us with an aesthetic experience). And, while on a disjunctive account this could perhaps be made to work, here it cannot, for it is unclear how aesthetic value can be one of the set of values that make up artistic value when it *does not* require understanding the work to discern its presence in two of its three constituents (forms and qualities). That is, if the account is conjunctive, and aesthetic value contributes to artistic value, then something other than a test for understanding will be required to determine if the work possesses it. For the test will *fail* to determine aesthetic value (in those parts that need no interpretation) even while Stecker in this case claims it contributes to the artistic value of a given work.

In 2015, Stecker acknowledged this problem: ‘it appears that one can often know or recognize the aesthetic value of a work without interpreting it.’<sup>34</sup> But his attempted resolution to the problem – by a modification of his test – is simply unhelpful. He proposes that a work has artistic value if we must ‘either experience [it] with understanding or [...] have the kind of understanding [of the work] that is derived from interpreting it.’ That is, experiencing a work with understanding is ‘experiencing informed by the kind of background knowledge sometimes needed to perceive or grasp its aesthetic properties.’<sup>35</sup> Yet what kind of ‘background knowledge’ is needed to grasp aesthetic properties or aesthetic value in the case of artworks, when none is needed to have an appropriately aesthetic experience of the aesthetic value of a sunset? This late-stage ad hoc addition of the notion of background knowledge, while faintly echoing the Kantian distinction between free and dependent beauty (fine art being the latter), does nothing to clarify the role of aesthetic value in our experience, and evaluations, of works of art, because it rests on a conception of that value that differs significantly from its original formulation.

<sup>32</sup> Stecker, ‘Artistic Value Defended’, 361.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 358.

<sup>34</sup> Stecker, ‘Entangled Values’, 397.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

Finally, we would note that because these other values – cognitive, aesthetic, ethical, and so on – are subject to the test for understanding even in modified form, they are in fact only so many iterations of a broader notion of *meaning* that an artwork possesses. The test, after all, is meant to rule out other, adventitious, values a work might have as being irrelevant to its value as art (such as its financial value, or its value in covering a hole in the wall).<sup>36</sup> But reliance on meaning leads to two further issues: first, why itemize or distinguish cognitive and ethical values, for instance, as separable when they jointly converge into a work's meaning, and therefore its artistic value? The claim that these values are each 'more basic' nets Stecker nothing, if they are each channelled into a single test for meaning which on its own determines artistic value. More importantly, as we have seen, meaning is *already* a constituent of aesthetic value on a conjunctive account, and this appears to render the proposition of another (derived, heteronomous) artistic value redundant: an aesthetic experience of a work of art will attend to its form, qualities, *and* meanings, and the work will have aesthetic value (whether positive or negative) given our proper attention to it (including our understanding of it). On a conjunctive account, meaning has already been included in aesthetic value, and does not need separate treatment – indeed cannot be subject to separate treatment for fear of neglecting the other constituents of the aesthetic experience.

Stecker's second argument thus fails. Aesthetic value is inadequate to explain our encounters with art *only* if Stecker has already abandoned his earlier formulation of it. For when he turns to a discussion of artistic value he sets it against a notion of aesthetic value that is implicitly formalist: either it is only positive, as the first argument suggests, or it refers positively or negatively only to forms and qualities and has nothing to do with meaning, as is the implication here. Instead, if meaning remains a constituent of a conjunctive account, then the need to understand a work becomes one way of – or a part of – discerning the aesthetic value it possesses, or is capable of delivering. I must conclude that Stecker's two reasons do not demonstrate the inadequacy of aesthetic value to explain our responses to works of art.

#### IV. AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE (AGAIN)

There is one final and broader question to raise in light of the concerns presented here. Stecker has described aesthetic experience as attending to objects for their own sake. And this experience is meant to cover our attention to all manner of things. He says: 'the objects of aesthetic experience are to be found virtually everywhere: in nature, artefacts, art, science, mathematics, etc.'<sup>37</sup> Whether

<sup>36</sup> Stecker, 'Artistic Value Defended', 358.

<sup>37</sup> Stecker, 'Aesthetic Autonomy', 34.

conjunctive or disjunctive, Stecker has described a singular kind of valuable human experience as being aesthetic. What remains a concern is how a singular kind of experience (of appropriate attention and so on) can give rise to *two different* sorts of values. The autonomous aesthetic value of an object is described in terms of our aesthetic experience of it, and 'is derived' – or 'arises' – from that experience. If we are having an appropriately aesthetic experience of art, 'it follows' that the work will also have aesthetic value, *not* a value of some other kind. This is just what Stecker's minimal conception demands. If he is wedded to the notion of artistic value, he will have to identify important differences in the kinds of experiences we have of art objects as opposed to other kinds of things. And his reliance on some sort of understanding and/or interpretation is insufficient to distinguish art experiences so long as meaning remains a constituent of aesthetic experience more broadly construed. If, however, Stecker does not want to name a separate experience for works of art – call it 'artistic experience' – from which a particular artistic value is 'derived', he will have to relinquish his defence of artistic value as a separable kind that nevertheless arises from the same sort of attention we give to sunsets, chairs, and all manner of things. The choice is his, but he cannot have it both ways.

I agree with Stecker, as I think many of us do, that our responses to works of art are often more complex, and involve more of our cognitive capacities (or involve them differently), than when we respond to, say, natural phenomena. But positing a separate value to account for this difference – while maintaining the experience is somehow the same – is bound to fail. Stecker has not shown that we need a notion of artistic value so much as he has indicated that we need a deeper understanding of the components that make up aesthetic value (and aesthetic experience) itself. The lesson that can be learned from an analysis of Stecker is that we still lack a complete and robust account of one kind of experience, that we can have of all possible objects, and that produces – or perhaps results in, or discerns – one kind of value: aesthetic value. Until we accomplish this, multiplying the values attendant upon our experiences serves as a needless distraction. To paraphrase Julian Dodd,<sup>38</sup> we do not yet even have a clear grasp of what experiencing or appreciating a value amounts to, and it may be here that we need to begin (again) if we are to truly articulate the notions at work at the core of our discipline.

Jane Forsey

Department of Philosophy, University of Winnipeg,  
515 Portage Avenue, Winnipeg, MB R3B 2E9, Canada  
j.forsey@uwinnipeg.ca

<sup>38</sup> Dodd, 'On a Proposed Test', 407.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

---

- Dodd, Julian. 'Artistic Value and Sentimental Value: A Reply to Robert Stecker.' *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 71 (2013): 282–88.
- '. 'On a Proposed Test for Artistic Value.' *British Journal of Aesthetics* 54 (2014): 395–407.
- Lopes, Dominic McIver. 'The Myth of (Non-aesthetic) Artistic Value.' *Philosophical Quarterly* 61 (2011): 518–36.
- Schaper, Eva. 'On the Pleasures of Taste.' In *Pleasure, Preference and Value*, edited by Eva Schaper, 39–56. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.
- Stecker, Robert. 'Aesthetic Autonomy and Artistic Heteronomy.' In *Aesthetic and Artistic Autonomy*, edited by Owen Hulatt, 31–49. London: Bloomsbury, 2013.
- '. 'Aesthetic Experience and Aesthetic Value.' *Philosophy Compass* 1 (2006): 1–10.
- '. *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art: An Introduction*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005.
- '. 'Artistic Value Defended.' *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 70 (2012): 355–62.
- '. 'Carroll's Bones.' *British Journal of Aesthetics* 46 (2006): 282–86.
- '. 'Entangled Values: A Reply to Dodd.' *British Journal of Aesthetics* 55 (2015): 393–98.
- '. 'Testing Artistic Value: A Reply to Dodd.' *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 71 (2013): 288–89.