

JERROLD LEVINSON

Artistic Worth and Personal Taste

In this short article I explore two related themes, between which there is, I hope to show, a curious tension. The first is the fact of there being demonstrably better and worse artworks. The second is the undeniable importance of personal taste as regards preferences among works of art.

What should be the relationship between what one as an individual prefers in the realm of art and what is objectively artistically superior? To what degree should the former be aligned with the latter? Might there be a conflict between these two apparent values, that is, on the one hand, one's own taste in art and, on the other, what is truly better art? If there is such a conflict, in what way might it be resolved or reduced?

I. BETTER AND WORSE IN THE DOMAIN OF ART

i. For the purposes of this discussion, I am going to assume the existence of better and worse in artistic matters and the consequent real interest that we have in informing ourselves about such differences and in being guided by them in our aesthetic lives. I believe I have made a strong case for this elsewhere, through a free reading and defense of Hume's famous essay "Of the Standard of Taste."¹ I there suggested that a Humean solution to the problem of taste can only respond to skepticism about the status of ideal critics, those charged by Hume with embodying the standard of taste, by showing that there is, after all, something special about ideal critics understood in a certain way, something about their relationship to the aesthetic sphere that makes it rational for anyone with an antecedent interest in the aesthetic dimension of life to attend to the recommenda-

tions of and to strive to emulate such critics, and thus something special as well about the objects identified as truly superior through winning the convergent approbation of such critics. The primary burden of a defender of a Humean solution to the problem of taste is to show, in a noncircular and non-question-begging way, why a person who is not an ideal critic should rationally seek, so far as possible, to exchange the ensemble of artistic objects that currently elicit his or her approval and enjoyment for some other ensemble that is approved and enjoyed by the sort of person he or she is not.

What needs to be explained is why critics of a certain sort are reliable indicators of what works are artistically best, in the sense of ones capable of affording better, or ultimately preferable, aesthetic experiences. What I suggested was that that could only be done by putting the accent on the special relationship that such critics bear to works of unquestioned value, that is, masterpieces, whose identification is in turn effected, although defeasibly, by passage of the test of time. In my view, only some form of artistic-value-as-capacity theory, appropriately coupled to a set of masterworks passing the test of time, in turn used to identify ideal critics, who then serve as measuring rods of such value generally, is adequate to resolving the questions about aesthetic objectivity that Hume's approach raises. On my proposal as to how to assemble the elements of Hume's theory, there is an answer to the real problem, an answer that remains elusive on other readings of Hume's essay.

ii. I made three claims for my response to the real problem. First, it addresses the issue that Hume

was fundamentally concerned with: how to reconcile differing critical opinions about art and justify greater respect for some rather than others. Second, it assigns a role to almost all the elements highlighted in Hume's discussion of the problem, if not exactly the same role that Hume appears to assign them. Third, it offers a plausible general answer to the problem of the objectivity of judgments about goodness in art, and in such a way that the worry about why anyone should care what is truly beautiful or artistically better is dispelled or significantly allayed.

There is reason to believe, in reflecting on the nature of ideal critics understood as identified in a certain way, that works that are approved and preferred by that sort of perceiver are one's best bets, aesthetically speaking; that is, they are works most likely to provide artistic satisfaction of a high order. Here is why. Artistically good artworks will be ones that are in some measure comparable in their rewards to those masterpieces recognized universally as artistically outstanding. Artistically good artworks will thus be works favored and approved by the sort of perceiver who is capable of appreciating masterworks, who can thus gauge the extent to which the rewards of such works compare to those that acknowledged masterpieces can, under the best of conditions, afford. Such perceivers may be called ideal critics. Now, what characteristics do such perceivers notably possess? That is, what characteristics do they need in order to recognize, appreciate, and enjoy to the fullest exemplars of aesthetic excellence? Arguably, they are something like those that appear on Hume's tally, supplemented by a few others. Perceivers of that stripe are a sort of litmus test for good art, art with superior potential to afford valuable aesthetic experience. Thus, if one is interested in aesthetic experience at all, one should be interested in what such perceivers recommend to one's attention.

Now an answer of this sort assumes at least three things that have not yet been explicitly spelled out. One is an ensemble of masterworks in a given genre that are identifiable other than as those works that earn the approval or preference of ideal critics. Two is a reason for thinking that masterworks in a given genre truly are pinnacles of artistic achievement, that is, works possessing an unusual potential to afford aesthetic satisfaction. Three is a reason for thinking that the considered preferences of ideal critics are indicative of what sorts of experiences really are better, that is, ulti-

mately more worth having. But these assumptions can, I think, be defended.

iii. I now sketch an overall answer to the question of why ordinary art lovers should rationally be concerned to learn of, attend to, and, if possible, follow the recommendations of ideal critics, an answer that marshals most if not all of the elements invoked in Hume's essay.

First, the primary artistic value of a work of art, what Hume calls its beauty or excellence, is plausibly understood in terms of the capacity of the work, in virtue of its form and content, to afford appreciative experiences worth having.

Second, certain works of art, which we can call masterworks, masterpieces, or *chef d'oeuvres*, singularly stand the test of time. In other words, they are notably appreciated across temporal barriers—that is, their appeal is durable—and cultural barriers—that is, their appeal is wide—and they are appreciated on some level by almost all who engage with them—that is, their appeal is broad. It is thus a reasonable supposition that such works have a high artistic value, or potential to afford intrinsically valuable experience, that value being responsible for their so strikingly passing the test of time. Such a supposition would be an example of what is sometimes called “inference to the best explanation.”

Third, though masterworks are thus paradigms of artistic value and incontrovertible proof of its existence, masterworks cannot directly provide a standard of taste, that is, an effective criterion of and guide to artistic value generally. We cannot, say, directly compare a given work of art whose value is up for assessment with some masterwork in the same genre and judge it to be of value to the extent it resembles that masterwork or any other. Artistically good works of art are good in different ways, especially if they are innovative or revolutionary, and that is all the more true for artistically great ones.

Fourth, the masterworks, however, can serve as touchstones for identification of the sort of critic or judge who is a reliable indicator or identifier of artistic value, that is, capacity to afford intrinsically worthwhile experience in its varying degrees. A critic who is able to comprehend and appreciate masterworks in a given art form to their fullest is thus in the best position to compare the experiences and satisfactions afforded by a given work in that art form to the sort of experiences and

satisfactions that masterworks in that art form, appropriately apprehended, can provide.

Fifth, that the experience afforded by masterworks is, all told, preferred by such a critic to the experience afforded by other works of art is indicative of its really being preferable, that is, more worth having, all told. For as John Stuart Mill famously observed, in his *Utilitarianism*, the best, and possibly the only, evidence of one satisfaction or experience being better than another is the considered and decided preference for the one over the other by those fully acquainted with and appreciative of both.

Sixth, ideal critics, identified as ones capable of appreciating to the fullest masterworks in a given art form or genre, themselves identified by passage of the test of time, have certain notable characteristics, ones that underwrite and facilitate their capacity for optimal appreciation. These characteristics are more or less those offered by Hume in his profile of true judges, though that general profile could reasonably be augmented in a number of respects and, even more clearly, supplemented by more detailed desiderata defining specific profiles of ideal critics adequate to particular art forms or genres.

Seventh, and lastly, one thus has a reason to attend to the judgments of ideal critics even if one is not such oneself, since one presumably has an interest in artistic value understood as primarily capacity to afford aesthetic experience and in gaining access to the most rewarding such experiences possible.

More concisely, then, the justification for attending to the recommendations of ideal critics that can be constructed from elements in Hume's essay goes like this: ideal critics, ones who show themselves equal to and inclined toward the appreciation of the greatest works of art, the masterworks, and who possess the cognitive, sensory, emotional, and attitudinal traits that aid in such appreciation, where such masterworks are independently, if defeasibly, identified by the breadth, width, and durability of their appeal, are our best barometers of the artistic value of works of art generally. But if artistic value is centrally understood in terms of potential to afford intrinsically rewarding experience, then the fact that a given work is preferred to another work, all things considered, by a consensus of ideal critics gives a non-ideal perceiver, one content in his appreciation of the second work, which he prefers to the first, a

reason, if not a conclusive one, to pursue the first instead, putting himself if possible in a position to adequately appreciate it.

So why care what is artistically good, understood as what ideal critics prefer and recommend? The answer is that there is reason to believe that what ideal critics, so understood, approve is capable of giving a satisfaction that is *ultimately more worth having* than what one gets from what one enjoys as a nonideal appreciator. And that is because of a criterial connection to great works through which individuals are recognized as ideal critics, and the implications of the preference of those who are capable of experiencing both kinds of satisfaction, that afforded by incontestably great works of art and that afforded by works that just happen to please one in some measure in virtue of one's particular background, makeup, or history.

Ideal critics are the best suited to judging the potential of such works because their artistic tastes and appreciative habits have been honed on and formed by uncontested masterworks, whose robustly standing the test of time is good, if defeasible, evidence of their unusual aesthetic potential. Ideal critics are thus reliable indicators of artistic value in works of art generally, including those that have not yet stood the test of time.

The overall picture, then, is this. Great works are ones that stand the test of time, understood in terms of durability, breadth, and depth of appeal. Ideal critics, those with the sort of appreciative profile that makes them optimal enjoyers, appreciators, and explainers of great works, are thus best suited to estimating works of art generally, that is, assessing their aesthetic rewards against the benchmark provided by the greatest works in any genre, and so our best guides to enhancement of our own aesthetic lives where art is concerned.

iv. Before moving on to the main business of this essay, I note two doubts one might harbor as to whether ideal critics as I have characterized them are in fact apt guides to what is of worth in the artistic domain taken as a whole.

The first doubt is this. Are ideal critics, given their refined sensibilities, appreciative habits, and specialist preferences, really well placed to judge the comparative merits of mid-range, merely good artworks, ones far from the masterworks that such critics rightly hold in highest esteem?

The second doubt is this. Might not an ideal critic apt for identifying and judging of artistic quality in a given art form or genre be incapable, or less capable, of identifying and judging of such quality in other art forms or genres, ones quite removed from those in which he or she displays clear competence? And, if so, how can such an ideal critic make comparative judgments of artistic value across all art forms and genres, so as to serve the action-guiding purpose that such critics are charged with fulfilling?

To the first doubt I reply as follows. The fact that ideal critics consort by choice with works of outstanding rather than average quality and that they consequently spend more of their time examining and elucidating the former than the latter hardly suggests that they are less capable of making distinctions and discriminations in that middle area. It is as if one were to say that an astronomer, because he devotes many of his hours to studying faraway immense objects, such as stars and quasars, is thus likely to be less capable of telling which of two apples before him is the larger and by how much. But even if such critics were in fact less able to make discriminations in the artistic mid-range, that would not affect their serving as beacons toward what was artistically best, and it is only that which is relevant to the following discussion.

To the second doubt I reply as follows. Making comparisons of action-guiding force across art forms and genres does require, it is true, more than a run-of-the-mill or *restricted* ideal critic, one only able to make quality discriminations in a given genre or art form. It rather requires what one can call a *comprehensive* ideal critic. But even though the notion of such a critic is clearly an idealization, there is no reason why it should not be realized, at least to a large extent, in actual individuals. That serious involvement in and appreciation of a given mode of artistic expression invariably or even necessarily precludes comparable involvement in and appreciation of other such modes, significantly removed from the given one in form and content, seems just an unsupported shibboleth of aesthetic defeatism, one that underestimates our capacities to make ourselves receptive to works of art, in whatever mode, that we have reason to believe have something to offer us.

The image of a comprehensive ideal critic is thus not that of the insular audio or video store clerk well versed in, say, progressive rock or Latin

American cinema, regarding other music or film as without interest and beneath contempt, but rather that of someone who is at home with many forms of artistic creativity, who welcomes such diversity of the artistic imagination, and who recognizes that artistic worth can be achieved in many different ways. Such a critic, then, will in principle be able to make comparative judgments across genres and art forms, by comparing the rewards afforded by the different modes of art that he or she is capable of fully appreciating.

II. THE PARADOX OF AESTHETIC PERFECTIONISM

i. I now turn to an ostensible conflict between, on the one hand, the preservation of one's personal taste for its own sake and, on the other hand, the improvement of one's taste under the guidance of informed criticism, that which ideal critics can be assumed to provide.²

One's taste, in the sense of personal preferences in matters aesthetic, arguably not only partly *reveals* who one is or what sort of person one is, but also partly *constitutes* who one is or what sort of person one is. Let us term the totality of such aesthetic preferences an *aesthetic personality*. It seems fair to say that one's aesthetic personality is a proper part of who one is and of what defines and distinguishes one as an individual. As such, it is something that contributes to one's integrity and enters into one's identity, in the familiar loose, if not metaphysically strict, sense of the term. And the largest, arguably most important, part of an aesthetic personality would seem to consist in preferences among what is available for experience within the artistic domain.³

But now suppose, as I have tried to show, that one has an interest, a compelling personal interest, in pursuing works favored by ideal critics, especially ones who are comprehensively ideal and thus track, appreciate, and prefer the artistically better in all artistic domains, and in striving to become familiar with and capable of appreciating the works favored by such critics, so as to end up both preferring them to, and finding them more satisfying than, others of their sort. Grant, in other words, that one has an interest in modifying one's aesthetic capacities and preferences in the direction of optimality—an interest, we might say, in *perfecting* one's taste. And suppose that one wholly

succeeds in this, and so now has optimal taste in matters artistic, and thus lives a life in that respect that is as rewarding as can be.

This has a curious upshot. It seems that one will have become indiscernible from a comprehensive ideal critic, as each such ideal critic is effectively indiscernible from any other. But if so, then what has become of one's aesthetic personality, or at least that part of it which consists in one's artistic preferences, which we have assumed to be an important component in one's individuality? It will appear to have been lost. But this must surely give us pause as to whether the attainment of perfection as an appreciator of things artistic, through a progressive approach to the condition and disposition of a comprehensive ideal critic, is really that desirable after all.

And now suppose further that everyone, recognizing that it is in his or her interest to seek out and be capable of properly experiencing what is artistically superior, manages to wholly transcend his or her original artistic tastes and become an ideal appreciator. Evidently, the problem of loss of individuality would then be even more acute, because universal. If everyone truly liked and preferred what was superior as regards art, we would all have the same artistic taste, and thus the same aesthetic personalities with respect to art. Yet we all assume that part of what makes us the individuals we are is our distinctive aesthetic preferences, most notably, our preferences in the realm of art.

And yet is it not in one's rational interest, as urged in the first part of this essay, to aspire to the condition of an optimal appreciator who takes satisfaction in and prefers what is in fact artistically better? To not have one's taste aligned, as far as possible, with what is objectively and demonstratively better, where such an idea of betterness has purchase, as it arguably does in the arts, if not in the domain of sorbet flavors or wall colors, would be like having one's own distinctive set of beliefs, what one might label one's *epistemic personality*, but one that was only very imperfectly correlated with what is objectively and demonstratively true. Such an epistemic personality, however individualizing it might be, would not appear to be desirable in itself. For as we advance cognitively, and our beliefs thus conform more and more to what is true, we give up our epistemic personalities in that sense with no regrets. By contrast, as our artistic preferences align more and more with what is truly superior in that sphere, it seems that though

we gain in accessing appreciative experiences of greater value, we lose in being led to progressively relinquish or diminish our aesthetic personalities and the individualization that they importantly ensure.

So this, in short, is the paradox of *aesthetic perfectionism*: we have a strong reason to improve ourselves as aesthetic appreciators, but we have as well, it seems, a strong reason not to give up our individual aesthetic selves.

ii. Of course, it is not as if all those who perfect their tastes along the lines I sketch would then behave in lockstep as regards artistic matters. If we all perfect our tastes in this manner, that means only that we will all prefer the same works and will choose them over others in the same practical conditions of appreciation. And that is an important qualification. For even an ideal appreciator does not always have enough time, money, energy, or mental alertness to properly appreciate, say, a Shakespeare tragedy or Wagner opera, and so will not in fact always choose such offerings, even if they are ideally preferred to all other forms of theater. There are all sorts of contingencies of availability, of competing interests, of required duties—in short, myriad other aspects of our life situations—that guarantee that the actual appreciative behaviors of ideal appreciators will diverge. Thus, given five such ideal appreciators, then while A is listening, say, to Vivaldi at home, B is listening to Bjork in concert, C is contemplating Corots in the Louvre, D is in bed absorbed in Anita Brookner's latest novel, and E, who has had a hard day at the office, is allowing herself an episode or two of *Seinfeld* or *Sex and the City*. So we need have no worry that our appreciative behaviors would converge even if our tastes were perfected. Still, from the point of view of our perfected aesthetic behavioral dispositions, if not our actual appreciative activity, we will appear to have become perilously clone-like with respect to one another. And that seems enough for the paradox to take hold.

It might further be observed that although I clearly have *some* interest in moving in the direction of optimality in artistic appreciation if I am at a significant remove from it, it is not so clear that I have an interest in moving *all the way*, and for at least two reasons. One reason is that an attitude of *satisficing*, or resting with good enough options, may not always be irrational.⁴ A second

reason is that persisting attachment to and preference for artworks that one has already established an appreciative relationship with is not obviously more irrational than attachment to and preference for friends to whom one is related most often by happenstance, and who may not in the abstract be optimal in the friendship benefits they afford.⁵

These are fair points, and were I to credit them fully they would remove much of the bite of the paradox I have erected. But I do not think they should be fully credited, for the following reasons. In relation to the second point, this is because of significant differences between our relations to persons and our relations to works of art, differences in the obligations and opportunities involved in the two cases. In relation to the first point, this is because of significant differences between contexts where satisficing makes most sense, ones involving choices between concrete options in temporally constrained circumstances, and the context of ideal conditional preferences arrived at in a temporally unconstrained manner. Though there is, no doubt, more to say on both these scores, that must wait for another occasion.

iii. A first, obvious response to our paradox might be to point out that, although once enlightened by comprehensive ideal critics we may all *strive* to attain the condition of optimal appreciators, we will, as a matter of fact, always *fail* to do so, in one way or another, to one degree or another, if only for lack of time and energy to attain such a condition. Remnants of our original, individualizing tastes in a given art form are bound to remain with us, thus serving to anchor our distinctness as aesthetic agents.

Though true enough, this is not a wholly satisfying response. For it is still disconcerting to think that the universal attainment of perfection in artistic taste, even if it will clearly never occur, would have this undesirable consequence. Put otherwise, on this response to the paradox, the avoidance of the undesirable consequence is attributed simply to our inevitable failings as appreciators. But this sounds an odd note, since the overcoming of failings is ordinarily something to be welcomed.

Nor can the paradox be dispelled, I think, by insisting that one can change one's tastes for the better, attuning them more to what is artistically better, while still retaining one's original, imperfect, idiosyncratic, and so individualizing tastes. For *really* preferring aesthetically superior things

means *no longer* preferring the aesthetically inferior things that you used to prefer, and which in part made you the distinctive person you were, even if they remain things that you are still able to appreciate and even derive substantial pleasure from.

There is an analogy between the resistance to attaining appreciative perfection that I have been highlighting and the attractions of irrationality as defended by the protagonist of Dostoyevsky's novella *Notes from Underground*. As the Underground Man is at pains to emphasize, freedom and the individuality that freedom underwrites seem as important to us as any rationally calculable goods or utilities that present themselves for our consideration in deciding how to act on a given occasion. But in choosing to follow rationality, in the name of clear-sighted self-interest, one risks becoming indistinguishable from others who also follow its dictates, since, given a set of conditions, there is generally only one, or at most a small number of, most rational or optimific things to do. However, if one chooses to follow irrationality, at a stroke one's freedom and hence individuality are preserved, since there are an indefinite number of ways to be irrational, or to depart from ideal rationality, and one's own particular way of departing will invariably differ from anyone else's. Similarly, it looks as if declining to go all the way toward perfection as an appreciator of art might be justified in the name of this same value, the maintenance of one's distinct individuality in aesthetic matters.

iv. This is a good place to observe, before continuing, that there are arguably *two* senses of individuality as regards aesthetic personality, only one of which has so far been acknowledged. And that is individuality in the sense of *distinctiveness*, that by which one is or can be *differentiated* from others in respect of aesthetic choices among works of art. But a second, so far neglected, sense of 'individuality' is individuality in the sense of *authenticity*, that is, achieving or developing one's aesthetic personality, whether distinctive or not, *on one's own*, and not, say, as a ready-made profile adopted from others or from the surrounding culture. One's aesthetic personality, if authentic, is something that one has, as it were, *earned* or *crafted*. Now authenticity in aesthetic personality is indeed valuable, relating to virtues such as independence of mind, effort, and truth to self. But I would insist that distinctiveness in aesthetic

personality is valuable as well, for reasons suggested in the article, such as our not wanting to live in a world of aesthetic clones, however authentically they may all have ended up that way.

It is worth noting as well that the *moral* case is substantially disanalogous to the aesthetic case on the issue which occupies us. If everyone achieved moral perfection, and thus was always inclined to do what is morally most worthy or admirable, then that, it seems, would be perfectly fine, since moral inclinations should ideally be universally shared. Let us say that morality, very roughly, concerns itself with how we ought to act in regard to one another so to further the good while respecting one another fully as persons. As such, morality, unlike aesthetics, does not appear to be a field for expressing one's individuality. For total convergence on moral principles and resultant behaviors would not be something to be bemoaned, but rather something earnestly to be wished. The goal of morality, in short, is coordination, not differentiation. By contrast, total convergence in aesthetic preferences would seem to have the unfortunate consequence I have been underlining, namely, of apparently doing away with what distinguishes us as aesthetic agents and so diminishing our respective individualities.⁶

Now it is true that on a virtue-ethical, as opposed to a utilitarian or deontological, perspective on morality, moral action appears ineliminably to involve quasi-perceptual judgment rather than straightforward rule application, whereby specific situations are assessed as to what virtue requires, and where there may thus be different valid ways of gestalting a situation so as to arrive at a conviction of what it would be virtuous to do in it. Hence on a virtue-ethical perspective, there might thus be scope for individuality in realizing one's ethical self by acting virtuously, because of differing perceptual dispositions from one ethical agent to another. And even on a non-virtue-ethical, such as Kantian, perspective on morality, there will be situations allowing for discretionary choice among morally acceptable options—for instance, situations where a number of distinct acts are morally permissible or where there are a number of ways to realize an imperfect duty, such as that of charity or benevolence.

Nonetheless, whatever perspective on morality we favor, an asymmetry with aesthetics seems to remain, namely this: even if there are distinct valid answers to what it is right to do in a given situation

that only quasi-perceptual assessment will inform us of, or a multiplicity of valid choices in a given situation from among permissible actions or ways to fulfill imperfect duties, such diverse realizations of what morality requires in concrete cases would be *acknowledged as legitimate*, but not, I think, *valued in themselves* as manifestations of the individuality of moral agents. The point of the moral enterprise, whatever theoretical perspective on morality we favor, would be to judge matters rightly and to act rightly in accord with such judgments, not to express our differing moral personalities. Or so it seems to me.

v. Let me then return to the paradox and suggest a second response to it. Were one to succeed in entirely perfecting one's taste in art, and so in becoming an optimal appreciator, it is true that the aesthetic preferences one would then have would not distinguish one from a comprehensive ideal critic. And were everyone to attain this state, which is admittedly extremely unlikely, they would not distinguish one from anyone at all in that respect.

But we have, so far, entirely overlooked the role of one's concrete *path* toward appreciative perfection, of the specific trajectory of one's aesthetic progress. For a person who *currently* prefers, in company with all ideal critics, all and only what is artistically best and ultimately most aesthetically rewarding is still inalterably the person who *formerly* preferred this and that work of lesser value, for whatever reasons were at play in his or her personal aesthetic development. Presumably the person also remembers that he was that person, presumably with a certain fondness one naturally feels for one's former self, presumably with a certain glad acceptance, for the most part, of the contingencies and vicissitudes that made him the particular individual he is. The point is that this personal aesthetic *history* is individualizing, even under the fantastic imagined assumption of one's having so perfected one's taste that what one prefers and most values artistically is just what any optimal appreciator prefers and most values.

To make this concrete, if we let Mozart, Charlie Parker, and the Beatles stand for summits of musical worth in three different genres, then though all optimal appreciators or ideal critics in the musical sphere recognize these as summits and ultimately prefer them, in ideal appreciative conditions, to other musics in their respective categories, one such appreciator or critic, call him

Edgar, may have arrived at that state of appreciation via, say, an initial attraction to Boccherini, Tommy Dorsey, and Donovan, while another, call her Cheryl, arrived there via, say, an initial attraction to Rimsky-Korsakov, Dave Brubeck, and the Monkees. Though primary allegiance to those lesser musics has, by hypothesis, been transcended, it will not have been forgotten, and so Edgar will predictably retain something of a soft spot, or *faiblesse*, for the musics that figured in his personal journey toward aesthetic perfection and the same for Cheryl and the musics that figured in hers.

Such a *faiblesse* would in effect be a sort of trace left on a person's overall aesthetic disposition, yet not one that manifests itself in terms of the person's appreciative *preferences* or *choices*. For instance, if one was initially led to explore classical music through exposure to Liszt, a very good if perhaps not unquestionably great composer, then even after one's taste has been perfected and so, all things considered, one no longer prefers Liszt to, say, Brahms, one might yet be more inclined to defend the virtues of Liszt's music when under attack than the virtues of some similarly very good but not great composer who did not happen to figure among one's earliest affections, say, Bizet or Weber.

vi. Here is a third response to our little paradox, perhaps the one most worth putting weight on. What we have overlooked so far is that many artistic options are roughly *on a par* or possessed of a *roughly equal* artistic value.⁷ For instance, one might plausibly claim this of Mozart and Beethoven, John Coltrane and Charlie Parker, the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, while insisting that none of, say, Tartini, Ludwig Spohr, Stanley Turrentine, or the Eagles are on a par with those. It thus remains open to us to express our aesthetic personalities, and hence our individualities, even were we to become perfect appreciators, through our distinct preferences and predilections among *more or less equally valuable* musical choices. One can, along with the most musically astute judges, value equally, for example, Haydn, Schubert, and Mahler, be equally gratified by them in listening, and yet be more drawn toward, more called by, one of those three, and so disposed to spend time with that composer more readily, or more often, than with the other two.

Put otherwise, the existence of objectively better and worse in artistic matters, and the aesthetic perfectionism that that may motivate, is compatible with a pluralism of taste as between works of great value in a given genre that are more or less on a plane. One's distinctive aesthetic personality could thus find adequate expression even were one to perfect one's taste by conforming one's taste, under the guidance of ideal critics, to what is objectively better, which I have suggested it is in fact in one's interest to do. As ideal appreciators we would, by hypothesis, all value the same works of art, and to the same extent. However, such works do not arrange themselves in a strict linear series as to quality, but rather group themselves into loose equivalence classes, among which there can, happily, be a free preference. Thus, even as ideal appreciators of art, wholly attuned in our preferences to what is truly superior, we would acknowledge, say, that works in group A were better than works in group B, and so regularly prefer As to Bs, but that within group A it was legitimate to play favorites, so to speak, to let elective affinities hold sway, and thus to affirm our distinctive aesthetic personalities, however perfected.

vii. Lastly, a fourth response to our paradox, one that is in a sense the most obvious but which nevertheless serves in some measure to dampen its sting, is this. Even if we all, having perfected our artistic tastes, ended up with the same conditional aesthetic preferences, so that we made all the same artistic choices in all the same appreciative conditions, it will remain the case that we, as irreducibly distinct *appreciators*, with our own specific sensibilities, memories, and histories, will have different *responses*, on the small and large scale, to our commonly preferred works. That is to say, it will remain the case that we will have different resulting *aesthetic experiences* of the works that we, by hypothesis, jointly hold in the highest regard. If so, then our aesthetic individualities will be manifested, if not always observably, through those differing experiences, despite our wholly conformant aesthetic judgments and appreciative preferences. In other words, even if we were to become aesthetic doubles of each other in terms of our *outward* aesthetic choices among works of art, we would remain distinct from each other in terms of our *inward* aesthetic responses to those choices. And that would provide, if all else failed, so to

speak, a ground of differentiation among us as aesthetic agents.

If I have made a mountain out of a molehill with the paradox highlighted in the main part of this essay, I have also, at any rate, shown how to reduce it again to manageable proportions. In summary, at least four observations help with that. First, appreciative perfection, even if a rational goal, is one we can be pretty confident that few will attain, and so the risk of actually outstripping all one's imperfect yet individualizing artistic preferences seems small. Second, even were one to attain such perfection, one would remain the person who arrived at that optimal appreciative condition by a particular trajectory, a trajectory that leaves a mark on one's overall aesthetic disposition, even if no longer something that concretely influences one's appreciative choices. Third, even assuming the universal attainment of appreciative perfection, one's individualizing personal taste would still have a field of exercise in the concrete preference among works of the highest order that are roughly on a par with respect to artistic value. And fourth, even were we all disposed to choose the same works in the same conditions of choice, we would invariably respond to those works in distinct ways, thus underlining once again our aesthetic individualities.⁸

JERROLD LEVINSON

Department of Philosophy
University of Maryland
College Park, Maryland 20742-7615

INTERNET: august@umd.edu

1. See my "Hume's 'Standard of Taste': The Real Problem," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 60 (2002): 227–238, as well as a subsequent response to criticism, "The Real Problem Sustained: Reply to Wieand," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 61 (2003): 398–399.

2. I note that Alexander Nehamas, in *Only a Promise of Happiness: The Place of Beauty in a World of Art* (Princeton University Press, 2007), has explored the tension that I am about to address, though his perspective on the issues involved differs importantly from mine. Nehamas notes the universal aspiration involved in judgments of beauty, something central to Kant's analysis of such judgments:

"[W]henver I find something beautiful, even when I speak only to myself, my judgment goes outward: I expect that others should join me, or would join me if they only had the opportunity, and make that beautiful thing part of their own lives as well" (p. 78). But Nehamas holds the prospect of in principle complete convergence on judgments of beauty—or more broadly, artistic worth—to be a chimera, and such convergence something to be abhorred rather than regretted: "Kantianism . . . dreams of a world where aesthetic difference has been eliminated. . . . [I]deally, everyone would accept every correct judgment: in a perfect world, we would all find beauty in the very same places. . . . But that dream is a nightmare" (p. 83). And that is so because of the threat such convergence poses to our individualities, given that "character and style are an essential part of what distinguishes a person from the rest of the world" (p. 86). Where I depart from Nehamas is in regarding the tension between the two values in play, artistic worth and aesthetic individuality, as being rather more acute than he does, since I am unwilling to view the former as ultimately personal and parochial, whereas it seems that he is: "[N]o community I hope to create around something I find beautiful is ever a universal community" (p. 82).

3. It is not the whole, clearly enough, since aesthetic preferences in clothing, cars, furniture, kitchenware, hairstyle, and the like surely also figure in aesthetic personality broadly understood.

4. For an insightful discussion of conditions where this appears to be so, see Patricia Greenspan, "Resting Content: Sensible Satisficing?" *American Philosophical Quarterly* 46 (2009): 305–317.

5. This is a main theme in Nehamas, *Only a Promise of Happiness*, chap. 2.

6. Nehamas has underlined this difference between the moral and the aesthetic realms with characteristic eloquence: "The values of morality bind us to one another. They move us to expand the circle of our concern as widely as we possibly can and, for that reason, both exploit and generate similarities among us. Aesthetic values have a narrower domain. . . . While the values of morality are the emblems of our commonalities, the values of aesthetics are the badges of our particularities" (*Only a Promise of Happiness*, p. 86).

7. The idea that works of art may often be on a par in terms of artistic value, and irreducibly so, is sensitively discussed in section XIV of Malcolm Budd, "The Intersubjective Validity of Aesthetic Judgments," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 47 (2007): 333–371.

8. For helpful comments on the issues of this article, I thank colleagues, respondents, and audiences on the following occasions: American Society for Aesthetics Annual Meeting, Los Angeles, October 2007; Workshop on Values, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, September 2008; and Workshop on Taste, NYU–Abu Dhabi Institute, Abu Dhabi, January 2010. My thanks especially to Paul Boghossian, Carol Gould, Paisley Livingston, Alex Neill, Peter Railton, Nicholas Riggle, Michael Smith, David Velleman, and Susan Wolf.