



Is Aesthetic Consistency Worth Having?

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SPECIAL ISSUE
RESEARCH ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT

Should we aspire to aesthetic consistency? Two kinds of aesthetic consistency are considered, following Ted Cohen's discussion of consistency in personal aesthetics: consistency of aesthetic reasons and coherence of aesthetic personality. Neither of these kinds of consistency seems like something to aspire to, possibly because we cannot do so – if we are not typically reasoning at the level of aesthetic response that is envisaged – or because consistent, coherent responsiveness does not seem like a worthwhile aesthetic goal. A third kind of consistency is defended, at the level of reflection on the desirable functions of art. We can try to be consistent about broadly ethical principles, showing our commitments as to the goods that art should provide in a life or to a society. These very broad principles do not make direct or clear aesthetic contact with individual artworks, so we cannot straightforwardly apply them as evaluative principles. But we can be consistent in trying to link the very specific achievements of works with these reflective values.

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KEYWORDS:

aesthetic consistency;
aesthetic reasons; aesthetic
personality; particularism;
Fabian Dorsch

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

John, Eileen. 'Is Aesthetic
Consistency Worth Having?'
*Estetika: The European
Journal of Aesthetics*
LX/XVI, no. 2 (2023):
pp.115–130. DOI: [https://doi.
org/10.33134/eeja.419](https://doi.org/10.33134/eeja.419)

Do people have, and should they aim to have, consistency in their aesthetic tastes? Thinking about this involves, first, setting up a few ideas about what it could mean to be aesthetically consistent. The two ideas that I focus on concern, first, the role of reasons in aesthetic liking and judgement and, second, the unity or integration of aesthetic personality. These are deep and delicate concerns, but I handle them rather schematically here in order to reach some claims about where we can and cannot look for aesthetic consistency. As I hope will be clear from the discussion below, it would be hard to get satisfying data on whether people actually are aesthetically consistent in the senses I consider. But I think we can make some progress on understanding whether aesthetic consistency should be valued and cultivated. My view is that we should not aspire to consistency at what may seem to be the most important and satisfying level – the direct activation of experience, feeling, and thought by aesthetically potent stimuli. However, if aesthetic consistency should elude us at that level, it can still be sought at a broader, more reflective level. Arguing for this casts our tastes as always trying to close a gap between that reflective level and the level that resists principle, generality, and integration.

My discussion follows up on some questions posed by Ted Cohen in a typically provocative paper on consistency in one's personal aesthetics. By personal aesthetics, Cohen wants to capture something quite broad: a person's aesthetic personality as manifested in likes, dislikes, and preferences for all kinds of things. This is a matter of intrapersonal rather than interpersonal aesthetics. Note that Cohen is not focused on a person's preferences and likings for art; I do focus more narrowly on the possibilities for art-directed aesthetic personality and taste. I think art is the domain in which a demand for aesthetic consistency seems most plausible and appealing (as opposed to calling for consistency across one's tastes overall, in umbrellas, shrubs, mugs, cars, and art). Cohen asks how a given person's likes and dislikes 'are related to one another, if at all? [...] How is [one's aesthetic personality] integrated, so that it amounts to something more – or other than – a concatenation of atomistic aesthetic expressions?'¹ He wonders whether a person's aesthetic likings can be understood as going together, perhaps allowing prediction, and, if so, whether the person can know what explains and integrates them.

Cohen's somewhat equivocal answer seems to be that we need to try to understand our aesthetic personalities in this sense – we are driven to seek integrating principles – but are unlikely to succeed in finding them. He does not resolve the question of how important or worrying it is to fail on this score. It seems the uneasy prospect is that 'I do continue to believe in a coherence in my aesthetical self, but not only can I not locate its principles, I am convinced that it is impossible to do so'.² As will become clear, I find much of Cohen's reasoning and speculation persuasive. However, I want to make room for people to have a more deliberate, intelligible role in formulating and seeking to enact some integrating principles.

I. WHAT IS AESTHETIC CONSISTENCY?

Three kinds of consistency seem relevant as ways of being consistent that might be desirable in the aesthetic context. Again, my focus is on likes, dislikes, preferences, and judgements in relation to art, though that will not always be explicitly stated (and

1 Ted Cohen, 'On Consistency in One's Personal Aesthetics', in *Aesthetics and Ethics*, ed. Jerrold Levinson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 106–7.

2 Ibid., 122.

the issues are certainly of interest beyond engagement with art). The three kinds are, to give them some broad labels, (1) consistency between aesthetic judgement and action, (2) consistency in use of aesthetic reasons, and (3) coherence and integration of aesthetic personality.

Let me be very brief in explaining what I mean by (1), linking judgement and action, so as to set it aside for the purposes of this argument. Here the idea is that we might take it to be incumbent upon people to allot time and attention to works of art in proportion to, and consistently with, their judgements of artistic value. Is it a sign of a healthy aesthetic personality that it directs itself most to what it takes to be artistically best?³ Now, I do not do this. In part this is due to my liking for good but not outstanding aesthetic objects. I very much enjoy spending time with formulaic, well-constructed but not deep, innovative, challenging, or brilliant things. So I doubt that I allot aesthetic effort consistently in this sense. (And I think I am not unusual in this regard.) But another factor that interferes with such consistency is that works that fail in some artistically crucial way can be so interesting, engaging, and worth attending to. I will not belabour this point because I have given it some attention elsewhere.⁴ Here is an anecdote to illustrate what I have in mind: going through a gallery of mostly portraits with some friends, we all paused and dwelt on the one that was obviously a problem, ridiculous even, in that it failed to do what it must have been intended to do. It was a huge, full-length portrait of a seventeenth-century aristocrat. The head was somehow too small and the figure's grand, flowing, red outfit was just too big and grand and beautifully painted. The bold colour and sumptuousness of the fabrics completely overwhelmed the human figure who, it seems clear, was supposed to be honoured in the portrait. The wrongness of it was fascinating. Maybe clothing and qualities of fabric sometimes should take centre stage. Meanwhile, across the gallery was what I found to be a really fine portrait of an elderly woman, her expressive, 'lived-in' face being the most gripping element. Perhaps I spent equal time looking at each of these, but possibly the 'wrong-headed' portrait won out. Let me grant that such ways of directing attention can raise questions about our practical rationality as aesthetic agents or perhaps more broadly about our aesthetic 'health'. While I think there can be good grounds for attending more to artistically lesser works, maybe I should worry more about whether my formulaic television-watching and fiction-reading are aesthetically rational and healthy. In any case, I will not take on those questions here, in order to focus on the other two kinds of consistency that raise more interestingly linked issues.

The second kind of consistency concerns how someone uses reasons in forming responses to different works. If a given feature serves as my reason to like one work, shouldn't it similarly serve as a reason to like a different work, assuming both works share that feature? Let us say that a reason speaks in favour of or against the goodness of the work. This concerns how a reason is understood by the person using the reason, who may well be un insightful and unreliable about artistic goods; the fact that something counts as a reason in this sense just depends on how the consideration invoked by the reason functions for that person. Cohen focuses on this issue, pressing us to consider 'the intrapersonal situation in which A likes x but does not like y when, seemingly, A's

3 See Mélissa Thériault, 'Bad Taste, Aesthetic Akrasia, and Other "Guilty" Pleasures', *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 51 (2017): 58–71; Irene Martínez Marín, 'The Aesthetic Enkratic Principle', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 63 (2023): 251–68.

4 Eileen John, 'Learning from Aesthetic Disagreement and Flawed Artworks', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 78 (2020): 279–88.

“reason” for liking *x* ought to bring him to like *y*.⁵ This looks like a kind of ground zero for aesthetic consistency. Do I respond consistently to things? Do I develop likes and dislikes on the basis of reasons that hold onto their reason-giving force intelligibly across encounters with different aesthetic stimuli? If I do not use reasons consistently in this way, perhaps I am aesthetically incoherent. Or perhaps my supposed reasons are not really reasons. Or perhaps aesthetic reasons are unusually fine-grained, so that we do not have easy or ready access to them: if we cannot necessarily identify and formulate them perspicuously, and often need to look more carefully to tell whether the same reason is applicable to two different works, a putative inconsistency may be only apparent. My fine-grained reason for liking *x* can turn on a feature that is subtly different from the feature displayed by *y*. I will return to the prospects for this kind of consistency in the next section, pressing the difficulty of counting these ‘ground-level’ pro and con responses to be reason-guided. But, for now, notice that this issue, of whether a person uses reasons consistently in aesthetic contexts, leads fairly naturally into a less ground-level issue, concerning the whole pattern of aesthetic responsiveness in a person.

The third kind of aesthetic consistency involves having a unified, coherent aesthetic personality. Do my likes, dislikes, preferences, and judgements relate to each other in some complementary, comprehensible way? Do they ‘go together’, as Cohen puts it, perhaps allowing for fairly reliable predictions about what I will like or dislike, given what I have liked and disliked so far?⁶ We tend to value the achievement of individual style by an artist, where such a style can be taken to require some distinctively recognizable, artistically coherent assembly of elements, and perhaps something similar is important to aesthetic personality. Artistic style has indeed been viewed as the expression of an artistic personality, as in Jenefer Robinson’s account, or, in the alternative offered by Robert Hopkins and Nick Riggle, as the expression of an artist’s ideals for her art. Riggle and Hopkins consider whether their ideals-based account of style can offer the unity that a personality model seems to guarantee: ‘The idea of a personality is itself the idea of a unity as the idea of a set of ideals is not.’ They defend their view by arguing that there is at least ‘pressure towards unity’ in how multiple ideals can be expressed in the concrete enactment of a style.⁷ So, is there a parallel here between the artist and the aesthetically responsive person? If developing a recognizable, unified individual style is a desirable quest for an artist, is it similarly desirable that a person develop a unified aesthetic personality, manifested in a coherent set of artistic likes and dislikes? Cohen suggests that understanding oneself as aesthetically coherent is something important, a kind of self-knowledge that we cannot help but seek: each one of us has, he posits (or speculates), both a ‘virtually transcendental need to understand why one likes’ the things one likes and a ‘desire to find coherence and congruence within one’s own aesthetic personality’.⁸ We resist experiencing our aesthetic lives as, in Cohen’s terms, simply ‘a concatenation of atomistic aesthetic expressions’.⁹ Cohen assumes that we do not want to experience ourselves as aesthetically chaotic, incoherent, or arbitrary.

5 Cohen, ‘On Consistency’, 116–17.

6 Ibid., 118–20.

7 Robert Hopkins and Nick Riggle, ‘Artistic Style as the Expression of Ideals’, *Philosophers’ Imprint* 21, no. 8 (2021): 13. Robinson says, ‘the defining quality of an individual style is that it expresses a coherent set of attitudes, qualities of mind and so on which seem to belong to the individual writer of the work’. Jenefer Robinson, ‘Style and Personality in the Literary Work’, *Philosophical Review* 94 (1985): 247.

8 Cohen, ‘On Consistency’, 113.

9 Ibid., 107.

It seems that one thing that would help to establish a less atomistic, more unified personality would be the second kind of aesthetic consistency. If I deploy reasons in a recognizably consistent way, liking or disliking different things according to how they stand with respect to a given set of aesthetic reasons, that would demonstrate unity at least around the role of those reasons. My tastes would be to some extent stable and even predictable in relation to the features appealed to by those reasons. However, this second kind of consistency does not seem sufficient for a unified, coherent aesthetic personality; it seems those reasons would also have to 'go together', to make sense as fitting into the same personality. I might stably prefer gory horror and minimalist sculpture but not yet understand how my aesthetic personality hangs together.

II. RESISTING DEMANDS FOR AESTHETIC CONSISTENCY

Though my eventual goal in this discussion is to defend an aspiration to a certain kind of aesthetic consistency, my goal in this section is to reject understanding that consistency in the terms of aesthetic reasons and personality. Let me grant that it is not easy to say what goes on in people's aesthetic lives, much less what should go on. This discussion will nonetheless make two programmatic points, drawing on arguments that marshal intuitions and aesthetic phenomena in ways that I find compelling. I will also provide a few examples to illustrate and motivate the big picture.

First, let us look more closely at the notion of an aesthetic reason. In Cohen's discussion, such reasons are supposed to operate 'at the aesthetic coalface', as it were: my reasons for liking or disliking something engage with the features of that particular thing (or, because I may be mistaken, the features that I experience and believe it to have). This seems obvious enough. Where else would my reasons find a way to bear on an aesthetic object, if not by identifying aesthetically relevant features and weighing in on them evaluatively? Because Cohen is worrying about our potential for aesthetic inconsistency, he presses the possibility of what seems like a plausible, indeed even normal scenario. I like work A and think that I like it because it is so colourful, but I do not like work B, while aware that it is equivalently colourful. He proposes, again plausibly, that I will say my reason for liking A is actually more specific. However, where will this precisification of reasons end? Can I not always think of another relevantly similar object that I would not like?¹⁰ Cohen suggests that we will be backed into the following corner:

But it is the absolute specificity of *x* that must be attended to, and what this requires, ultimately, is that one arrive at an *R* so particularized, so specific, so parochial that *R* will be true of *nothing but x*. But then it is awkward to think of *R* as a *reason*. It seems the essence of a reason, after all, to be *general*, to have at least an in-principle application to cases besides the one at hand.¹¹

Cohen's response to this line of thought, as sketched partially above, is to say that we may have to affirm the genuineness and consistent application of our aesthetic reasons as a matter of faith: 'It is indeed necessary to move toward the general if one is to understand something very important about oneself [...] and the movement is an expression of one's faith in one's own coherence, even though one might know that the sought generality is forever out of reach.'¹²

¹⁰ Ibid., 109.

¹¹ Ibid., 113 (italics in the original).

¹² Ibid.

But isn't Cohen's initial reasoning about the utterly parochial reason – a reason that would apply only to this particular thing – rather compelling as an argument against counting this as a reason at all? Putting weight on this entirely specific feature ('exactly THIS way of being colourful') to serve as a reason seems to ask it to play a role it cannot satisfactorily play. We need reasons to play a role in understanding our judgements, to show their – perhaps quite minimal – intelligibility. But to point stubbornly at this (by hypothesis) unrepeatable feature, to fail to be able to assign some *kind* of goodness to it, seems to leave us claiming understanding of our judgement ('I have a reason for liking x, and it is because x is precisely as it is'), without in fact being able to make that judgement intelligible. The reason has to offer some way of detaching us from that particular thing, providing a perspective on its features and illuminating what is good about them.

Because Cohen is not trying to give an account of aesthetic reasons, it is perhaps not fair to use his provocative remarks as a basis for argument. Let me bring in a richer, fully articulated account of aesthetic reasons that does not seem to leave us with a Cohen-style appeal to faith. Fabian Dorsch defends a form of particularist rationalism with respect to aesthetic judgement. His starting assumption is that we do in fact hold ourselves and others responsible for our aesthetic judgements. We can reasonably be asked to defend our aesthetic claims, and to do this we will normally refer both to non-aesthetic features that are 'realizers' of aesthetic qualities (the shape and thickness of a line can realize elegance, and elegance, or elegance in combination with other aesthetic qualities such as wittiness, can support a positive evaluative judgement).¹³ However, Dorsch also provides a series of careful arguments for the rarity and, in much of our practice, the lack of principles to guide reasoning from these non-aesthetic and aesthetic realizers to a judgement of artistic value.

I will not try to recapitulate Dorsch's detailed reasoning, but will just note aspects of aesthetic judgement that he highlights.¹⁴ Like Cohen, Dorsch cites the extreme specificity of aesthetic considerations, but he also emphasizes the holism of aesthetic judgement. Aesthetically relevant features make an impact in combination with other features, so there does not seem to be a way to fix the value contribution of any isolated feature. The aesthetic contribution of a given feature or holistic set of features is not an empirically measurable fact but is rather response-dependent and is expected to have normative force in the project of aesthetic reasoning. Putting these aspects of aesthetic judgement together, Dorsch concludes that we cannot rely on empirically justified aesthetic principles. We support our aesthetic judgements with a kind of specifically aesthetic reasoning, characterized as 'a special form of abduction or informed guessing', a 'non-deductive and non-principled (e.g., particularist) form of reasoning based on the recognition of the realisers of aesthetic qualities'.¹⁵ Here are two passages in which Dorsch describes this kind of reasoning:

Our different impressions pull us in different directions, and we begin to weigh them against each other. But reaching an equilibrium among them does not presuppose reliance on principles linking the merit- or defect-constituting features to the respective value.

13 Fabian Dorsch, 'Non-inferentialism about Justification: The Case of Aesthetic Judgements', *Philosophical Quarterly* 63 (2013): 660–61.

14 Fabian Dorsch, 'The Limits of Aesthetic Empiricism', in *Aesthetics and the Sciences of Mind*, ed. Gregory Currie, Matthew Kieran, Aaron Meskin, and Jon Robson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014): 77–83.

15 Dorsch, 'Limits', 95; Dorsch, 'Non-inferentialism', 682.

[...] the best method for the recognition of many aesthetic qualities, and more or less all aesthetic values, is to engage in reasoning and to discriminate between those underlying features that help to make sense of the ascription of aesthetic properties, and those that do not. [...] We recognize that the saturation of the colour patches of a painting, say, are partly responsible for its lack of aesthetic worth because we notice that they engender the garishness of the painting, and because we recognize this garishness as an aesthetic defect that outweighs all present merits.¹⁶

It does not seem possible simply to deny these claims about aesthetic reasoning. Much of what Dorsch summons up seems familiar and astutely observed. We feel pulled in different directions, we try to reach an equilibrium, we pay attention to features of the work that we experience as being responsible for its aesthetic qualities and value. The idea that some kind of informed guessing or inference to the best explanation is at work is suggestive. Is the idea that, when we judge a work, this is based on a kind of guess about how value is realized in that particular work? I will return to this idea in the final section.

Despite the reasonable appeal of Dorsch's arguments for non-principled particularism, they also have a competing tendency, echoing the way Cohen probes the status of the utterly parochial reason. The more we accommodate specific, holistic, response-dependent, non-principled aspects of aesthetic judgement, the harder it becomes to identify reasons and reasoning. Let us say I do take a given array of colour patches to make something garish, and I take the garishness to be a decisive aesthetic defect. Can I say that I have reasoned my way from the colour patches to the aesthetic judgement, if there is no general relation between such colour patches, garishness, and aesthetic value? Can I claim to have *recognized* their garishness as an aesthetic defect, remembering that, à la Cohen, I could recognize extremely similar colour patches as bold and artistically valuable features in a slightly different work? The vocabulary of recognition, noticing, and outweighing seems to assert a rational progress from experience to judgement that is difficult to secure.

Fortunately, for the limited purposes of my argument, whether there really are reasons at work in such appreciative responses can be left as a hard question. If we take Dorsch's account to be illuminating about the significant aspects of aesthetic judgement, then, even if we accept that it genuinely involves us in reasoning, it is hard to see consistency of aesthetic reasons as a substantive, tractable goal. If such reasoning works on particularist, non-principled terms, it would not appear to make sense to ask appreciators to be consistent in their use of aesthetic reasons. The reasons have to apply to a specific artistic whole, and that is all the appreciator is responsible for, rather than being responsible for assigning artistic value to different works consistently. Cohen and Dorsch might reply that I am misunderstanding the potential for consistency. If I am indeed reasoning, albeit in a particularist fashion, perhaps that unique reason-responsiveness suffices to justify faith in my aesthetic self. If I weigh whatever should be weighed in a given work, or, in a less realist mode, if I weigh things on a basis that really matters to me, perhaps that could be counted as an exemplary moment of consistent judgement. This reply may point towards something desirable in aesthetic practice – perhaps a kind of honesty to the work or authenticity to myself – but it does not strike me as a form of consistency. To sum up this point, it is hard to defend the value of aesthetic consistency as a matter of

16 Dorsch, 'Limits', 97, 96.

consistent reasoning. Maybe the considerations we are tempted to call aesthetic reasons are not reasons at all, or maybe we do use aesthetic reasons but they are especially unsuited to supporting a practice of consistent reasoning.

Now let us turn to the idea of valuing consistency as the unity and coherence of one's aesthetic personality. I motivated this above by suggesting a possible parallel with artistic style, as it seems we indeed value the achievement of individual style by an artist. However, the situation of the person responding to works of art seems crucially different from that of the artist striving to develop a style. A demand on the one who encounters an array of artworks is to be open to what is there to be experienced. If we indeed encourage achievement of distinctive artistic styles, then appreciators will encounter a diverse pool of distinctive artistic goods, and they should try to appreciate what those distinctive styles offer. Even if I am likely to end up developing a distinctive set of artistic likes and dislikes, it does not seem helpful to conceptualize this formation as the achievement of a desirable aesthetic personality. To the extent that such a personality means I have stabilized or narrowed my tastes, this would seem to make me less suited to the shifting, stretching demands of appreciation.

We can see Hume building into his conception of the ideal critic various ways of opening up rather than narrowing the critic's taste. The ideal critics compare different kinds of beauty, try to set aside their prejudices, and try to understand the respective purposes of different kinds of works.¹⁷ In Jerrold Levinson's account of the ideal critic, drawing on Hume, a tension between individual aesthetic personality and ideal aesthetic judgement is made explicit. If one's taste becomes indiscernible from that of the ideal critics, 'then what has become of one's aesthetic personality?'¹⁸ Levinson in one sense – by defending the claim of the ideal critics on us, because their taste steers us to the artistic experiences most worth having – argues for fixity and aesthetic convergence across all appreciators. But he also defends the pursuit of tremendously broad and diverse taste. Levinson's ideal critics are comprehensive, appreciating the masterworks in all art forms – visual, musical, literary, and the rest – rather than specializing in niche genres or single art forms. And Levinson thinks we underestimate the diverse capacities of actual, non-ideal appreciators: we should not assume we cannot 'make ourselves receptive to works of art, in whatever mode' but can aim to be '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'.¹⁹ Though I do not endorse the theoretical model of the ideal critic, I just want to note that one way in which such critics seem to be construed as aesthetic ideals is in their minimal aesthetic personalities. They are valued not for developing personally distinctive tastes but for being able to respond aptly to whatever kinds of artistic goods they come across. If we set that model aside, it is still not clear that a consistent aesthetic personality is something to strive for, if what that means is that we bring more of our own aesthetic demands, with more stability and aesthetic specificity, to diverse works and styles. We can grant that we will inevitably bring individual preferences and tastes to aesthetic encounters, without considering this an important kind of consistency to be nurtured and valued.

17 David Hume, 'Of the Standard of Taste', in *Of the Standard of Taste and Other Essays* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), 13–17.

18 Jerrold Levinson, 'Artistic Worth and Personal Taste', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 68 (2010): 229.

19 Ibid., 228.

Let me close this section by giving a few examples of tastes that are claimed by informed art appreciators, at least in their published writings. I want these examples to make one complex point: to illustrate the lively diversity of tastes that can coincide within a healthy aesthetic life and to suggest that it would not make sense to attribute these tastes to a unified 'aesthetic personality'. One could certainly argue about how diverse any of these sets of tastes really are – perhaps there is unity and coherence at some less superficial level. I grant that they call for more careful discussion and interpretation than I provide here. In any case, consider the following professions of liking and admiration. Lydia Davis, a writer of short stories, in 'Small but Perfectly Formed: Five Favorite Short Stories', lists works by Samuel Beckett, Grace Paley, Flannery O'Connor, Isaac Babel, and Franz Kafka.²⁰ These stories are unified in being relatively brief literary works, but in other respects – the moods, problems posed, qualities of humour, forms of plot and character – they take readers down very different paths. Writer Zadie Smith mentions or discusses all of the following favourably in the course of a book of essays and criticism: Zora Neale Hurston, Stephen Spielberg, Vladimir Nabokov, Werner Herzog, George Eliot, E. M. Forster, Katharine Hepburn, David Foster Wallace, and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.²¹ Critic Dave Hickey embraces Duke Ellington, *Perry Mason*, John Baldessari, Chet Baker, Djuna Barnes, Norman Rockwell, Gustave Flaubert, Liberace, and Hank Williams.²² If it turned out that each of these critics admired the same or similar features across their respective pools of artists and works, perhaps I would have to backtrack and admit that something like consistency of reasons, perhaps forming a unified aesthetic personality, is at work. My speculation is that this is not what we would find. It seems more plausible that these critics enjoy very different, even conflicting features in these figures and works.

Perhaps one could take lists such as the ones I have just compiled, but make them comprehensive – say, listing every artwork Zadie Smith admits to liking and disliking – and let those composite collections simply constitute aesthetic personalities. Such a personality would be a whole in its comprehensiveness, and it would have a kind of unity because everything in it indeed captures some aspect of one person's aesthetic tastes. Maybe this set would be quite interesting, if we were trying to get to know someone – I think we would feel like we had unusually personal, even intimate knowledge of the person. However, I doubt that this collection-based personality would – in many if not all cases – satisfy the desire Cohen speaks of, to grasp another's or one's own deep aesthetic coherence. I do not think the collection would indeed be likely to ground a personality in that deeper sense. That is just empirical speculation. The point I am more concerned to defend is that lacking such an aesthetic personality is fine. There are other domains of life in which it seems important to aspire to a unified, coherent personality (as a friend, as a moral agent, as an employee); it just does not seem important in one's encounters with art. The opportunities and demands of appreciation are wonderfully disparate, and the prospects for stable aesthetic reasoning look dim. In general a sensible goal would be to try to appreciate things as they come, whatever they ask of us, rather than to build and manifest a unified aesthetic personality.

Let me acknowledge some ways to object to this 'anti-personality' claim. Both Stephanie Ross and Matthew Kieran, in arguing against conceptions of the ideal critic, present our appreciative lives in terms that could be read as endorsing the reality of

20 Lydia Davis, *Essays* (London: Hamilton, 2019), 121–22.

21 Zadie Smith, *Changing My Mind* (London: Penguin, 2009).

22 Dave Hickey, *Air Guitars* (Los Angeles: Art Issues, 1997).

aesthetic personality.²³ Their arguments lead to quite different conclusions, but in their varying ways they defend the importance of one's personally formed aesthetic taste. Ross thinks there are no comprehensive ideal critics, but, due to differences in our temperaments and cultural contexts (citing Hume on blameless differences), we are each likely to develop tastes for certain genres and styles of art. It is satisfying to belong to a community of like-minded appreciators and worth seeking out those critics who share one's tastes.²⁴ Kieran, meanwhile, argues that each of us is on a distinctive experiential and emotional path that inevitably shapes our aesthetic responses. We cannot divest ourselves of personal idiosyncrasies; even the most serious art criticism is 'partly a function of personal experience and attitudes [...] the way we appreciate a work can be as revealing about ourselves as much as it is about the work'.²⁵ One could thus take Ross as understanding aesthetic personality in the terms of preferred genres and styles, and Kieran as understanding it in the terms of full-blown personality – everything that has shaped me as a person has a role, or is able to have a role, in shaping my responses to art. Each of these views merits a more complex reply; my schematic reply is that, for different reasons, it is not clear that either Ross or Kieran – so far – offers a defence of aesthetic personality that addresses Cohen's concerns.

With respect to Ross, this is in part because she is interested in relatively coarse-grained appreciative tendencies, ones that we can share with members of taste communities (fans of punk, surrealism, melodrama). Is something that I can share in this way aptly called my aesthetic personality? Maybe that is itself a personal question: for some people, having this level of self-understanding ('melodrama is my kind of thing') will be enough to satisfy the desire to understand one's preferences. Note that it would not necessarily help me understand why I prefer this melodrama to that one. However, if, as seems likely and was urged above via the critics' lists, each person is drawn to a variety of different genres and styles, perhaps liking delicate drawings plus punk music plus nineteenth-century novels, the coherence of the personality would not be settled by one's genre and style preferences. Now, perhaps I should just grant that people obviously do display these groupings and patterns in their tastes, and maybe such recognizable preferences amount to formations that can be called aesthetic personalities. I think it is still not obvious that this is an aesthetic virtue, a form of aesthetic personality that we should cultivate. Common forms of localization and stabilization of taste may be blameless, but that does not make them good.

Kieran's position is in some ways more in sympathy with my point because, while he argues for the fully personal path of aesthetic formation, he also defends the instability and disunity of it. Small changes in our imaginative and emotional reach, and encounters with new works, can trigger radical changes in aesthetic appreciation.²⁶ Kieran's larger argument broaches the overall 'disunity of the aesthetic virtues' – coming to appreciate some things can preclude appreciating others – but the claim he directly supports is that the way each of us develops 'our aesthetic character is uneven and lacks unity'.²⁷ So, on the one hand, Kieran ties aesthetic tastes to

23 Stephanie Ross, 'Comparing and Sharing Taste: Reflections on Critical Advice', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 70 (2012): 363–71; Matthew Kieran, 'Why Ideal Critics Are Not Ideal: Aesthetic Character, Motivation and Value', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 48 (2008): 278–94.

24 Ross, 'Comparing and Sharing', 365–66, 368; Hume, 'Of the Standard of Taste', 19–20.

25 Kieran, 'Why Ideal Critics Are Not Ideal', 287.

26 Ibid., 281–83.

27 Ibid., 285.

something we would often call personality: responses to art are deeply personal, as they are an ongoing manifestation of what kind of person I am becoming, of whatever is shaping my perceptions, feelings, and thoughts at any given time. On the other hand, this manifestation is unlikely to reflect a coherent personality, and it does not seem specifically aesthetic in its scope. It is certainly not a view that affirms aesthetic consistency in any straightforward sense, but it is a way of anchoring aesthetic responsiveness deeply in the person. In part, I want to leave Kieran's position in play, basically posing the question of whether it is or is not an account of aesthetic personality. But in part I want to close by pressing against what strikes me in his view as a kind of surrender to the disunified impact of personal history on one's aesthetic life. I would like to defend the prospects for yet another kind of aesthetic consistency.

III. WHERE SHOULD WE SEEK AESTHETIC CONSISTENCY?

The picture developed so far presents aesthetic tastes as aiming to be responsive to art in its diversity and specificity. The 'aesthetic coalface' of experiencing and responding to individual works does not seem to support consistency of reasoning, and it does not seem desirable, or perhaps even particularly common, that we bring a consistent, coherent aesthetic personality to our engagement with art. In Cohen's view, we nonetheless have a drive to understand ourselves as aesthetically unified, and this leads him to embrace a kind of unproveable faith in one's aesthetic self. Some alternatives have been canvassed. Dorsch suggests there is reason at work here, so perhaps we need not turn to faith. Ross suggests there are relatively tractable, accessible ways of characterizing ourselves aesthetically; is there as much mystery as Cohen suggests? Kieran, meanwhile, pushes against ideals of coherence and consistency, such that perhaps the drive to understand ourselves aesthetically is indeed misplaced and to be abandoned. What I would like to add to this picture is the idea that people do develop aesthetically significant principles that can generate a form of aesthetic consistency. These general commitments are not easily applied 'at the coalface' because they do not pick out specific features of works that will satisfy the principles. However, they do show people striving to have a coherent approach to what is valuable about art, and this striving is not merely a matter of faith in something always obscured within the particularity of aesthetic responsiveness.

My evidence for this kind of aesthetic consistency is primarily anecdotal. I am trying to make room for certain statements in which critics formulate broad critical principles or goals for what they hope to find in their encounters with art. While one can certainly find aspects of personality being expressed in these statements, I do not think they amount to expressions of an aesthetic personality. Their content is too broad and impersonal, as it were, despite often being expressed with personal passion. I think it will be obvious that they do not help much with the nitty-gritty of aesthetic reasoning; they do not do much to steer an appreciator trying to discern subtly different aesthetic potentials. To posit aesthetic consistency at the level of these principles will not directly satisfy someone seeking aesthetic consistency in Cohen's sense. But I hope there is something satisfying about making room for this accessible striving for consistency.

What are these principles like? Here are a few examples of what one might call critical mission statements. Salman Rushdie is talking in this passage about his own work, but I take the force of it to be a general aesthetic commitment, opposed to an aesthetic of purity.

The Satanic Verses celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs. It rejoices in mongrelization and fears the absolutism of the Pure. *Mélange*, hotchpotch, a bit of this and a bit of that is *how newness enters the world*.²⁸

The critic Hickey, mentioned above, frequently leaves the level of engagement with artists and specific works in order to frame something broader that he wants to protect and preserve:

Art is a mode of social discourse, a participatory republic, an accumulation of small, fragile, social occasions that provide the binding agent of fugitive communities. It is made in small places and flourishes in environments only slightly less intimate.²⁹

Virginia Woolf in 'Modern Fiction' expresses her combined dissatisfaction with many novels and her hopes for what literature can be:

If we fasten, then, one label on all these books, on which is one word materialists, we mean by it that they write of unimportant things; that they spend immense skill and immense industry making the trivial and the transitory appear the true and the enduring.³⁰

The mind receives a myriad impressions – trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. [...] if a writer [...] could write what he chose, not what he must, if he could base his work upon his own feeling and not upon convention, there would be no plot, no comedy, no tragedy, no love interest or catastrophe in the accepted style, and perhaps not a single button sewn on as the Bond Street tailors would have it.³¹

I take one last example from Wayne Booth's conception of ethical criticism, in which he consistently poses the question of what kind of friendship is on offer in a literary work. This approach takes seriously the idea that we seek companionship in our reading experiences. Booth lists a variety of 'measures' of literary friendship: the quantity of invitations made, the responsibility granted to the reader (is there author-reader reciprocity or domination?), intimacy, intensity, coherence of the world on offer, distance from the reader's world (familiarity, strangeness, 'rude challenge', and 'otherness'), and the range of activities invited.³² I take Booth's approach to be a fine mix of the principled and non-principled. He is open to using all of these measures, he is not singling any of them out as his priorities, but he turns to them as needed to capture the distinctive form of friendship a given work offers. The list does not settle the question of whether a given offer of friendship is worthwhile but it

28 Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands* (London: Granta, 1991), 394.

29 Hickey, *Air Guitars*, 154.

30 Virginia Woolf, 'Modern Fiction', in *The Common Reader I* (London: Hogarth Press, 1984), 148.

31 Ibid., 150.

32 Wayne Booth, *The Company We Keep* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 179–80.

holds commitment to seeking friendship and openness to friendships taking different forms.³³

Because these examples all come from practising writers and critics, they are likely to represent unusual, dedicated aesthetic practices. Do most people have any such principles or commitments? I do not think the test of this is whether we would put them into words, and I do not see an easy way to document their general relevance and operation. I hope it at least does not sound absurd to say that there are large principles, commitments, and goals at work in ordinary, not just professional, responses to art. I can imagine anyone, critic or otherwise, finding that some of the claims just cited – in praise of hotchpotch and newness, friendship, fugitive community, anti-materialism/anti-plot – either ring true or are ill-equipped to capture what matters to them about art. Understanding what others seek in art could bring what is implicit in my practice into view (perhaps allowing me to counter their claims with praise of, say, perfection or escape or transmission of culture). That is, I expect that many of us do have such principles at work, whether or not we bother to formulate and affirm them. In any case my claim is merely that it is at this level of principle that a suitable and desirable kind of consistency can be located.

To say that such principles constitute a kind of aesthetic consistency may seem misleading. Are they aesthetic principles or even relevant to aesthetic judgement? The examples cited above seem, for the most part, too vague about or distant from what we actually take in and respond to in art. It is not even obvious with something like Rushdie's hotchpotch, which might seem relatively directive in aesthetic terms, what would realize a hotchpotch, much less a good hotchpotch; it seems a work could be quite 'pure' in some respects and yet importantly 'impure' in others. What I would say is that, indeed, usually these are not aesthetic principles in the sense of linking experience to aesthetic qualities and to artistic judgement. They will not help you reason your way from colour patches to garishness, or from garishness to a negative artistic judgement. It seems most apt to call them broadly ethical principles. They make claims about goods that should be found in art, whether in relation to individual appreciators or small or large communities, where these are not strictly aesthetic goods. By concerning the desirable functions of art, they could be called our art-focused ethical principles. I will say a few things about why and how they nonetheless count towards aesthetic consistency.

Let me first note an objection, which is that it does not seem likely to be true that people are consistent at this level. Are we not capable of affirming purity and also impurity, fragile communities and enduring traditions, or friendship and aloofness? Perhaps the problem with aesthetic personality – that it seems to ask for consistency that should be resisted, given the diversity of art – recurs at this level. Why would it be desirable to affirm such principles? I grant that we may in fact often be inconsistent at the level of art-focused ethical principle, but I do not think that we can simply accept this kind of inconsistency. The pressure from the diversity of artworks argues against aesthetic personality but there is a different pressure at work on us in developing broad conceptions about artistic goods. These principles leave huge leeway for the

33 Booth on his roundabout appreciation of D. H. Lawrence: 'As we try to enter any novel, we all carry the burden of our special situations, our personal incapacities, and our cultural moment. Part of what it means to "learn to read well" is to get beyond our local deficiencies in order to achieve a full meeting with something that is "other," beyond, larger than, or at least different from, what we bring. Lawrence, both in his weaknesses and his powers, asks me [...] to travel a long way from home' (ibid., 439–40).

diversity of art – they are not in direct conflict with appreciative openness. However, it would be a problematic inconsistency of belief, in me, if I prioritized opposing or deeply conflicting goals for art as a whole. There is pressure from the demand on a person to make sense to themselves about what they hold to be good with respect to art, as a real, attention-claiming constituent of the world. Cohen's concern for self-understanding is compelling to me at this level. If Hickey actually valued both the participatory fragility of small art communities *and* the authority and influence of the global artworld, he would not make sense as a person at least in that respect. Ditto with Woolf and anti-materialism, and the others. What seems likely is that art has enough interesting potential that there is a lot to think about with respect to art-focused ethical principles. It is easy to imagine finding it to be a challenge to settle on the most adequate principles, and we may pass through stages of inconsistency. The claim here is that we should pass through them or should try to do so.

These principles lend consistency to one's aesthetic life in the sense that they offer reasons that can be applied consistently within engagement with art. If a work manifests a participatory republic, generates newness from impurity, offers a good kind of friendship, or avoids reducing people to their well-placed buttons, the critics above would have reason to look favourably on it. However, there is no easy, direct meshing of what the principles ask for and what any given work offers. The principles give an appreciator something to hope for and seek out, but they do not specify in experiential and artistic terms how to realize the goods they posit. They are nonetheless not aesthetically inert or irrelevant; they can be applied, given some interpretation and assessment of whatever goes on in one's encounter with an artwork. The appreciator has to work across a not-fully-closable gap between the general goods being affirmed and the particular experience and impact of a work. There will be differences between works that meet a given principle and those that do not, but the appreciator has to size these up without conclusive direction from the principle itself. Woolf confidently identifies novels and novelists who fail to meet her demands; a reader sympathetic to those authors or works could argue with her, and there would be some tractable ground for argument. Do the works in question really fail in her terms? Are those terms the ones to prioritize? Booth can claim D. H. Lawrence offers a certain kind of friendship, and I can reasonably dispute this (no, it is a different kind of friendship, or not a friendship worth having, or not friendship on offer at all). To carry on such a dispute, I would have to point to the specifics of Lawrence's works, trying to make general sense of what those specifics amount to. This would never amount to a conclusive demonstration that Booth is wrong, but the principle at stake would give me something to look for, and I could make better and worse sense in my efforts to interpret and judge in those terms.

Let me conclude by noting some ways in which this picture of aesthetic reasoning and consistency resonates with other claims. First, one could say this is an account of ideals in appreciation, taking these principles to state artistic ideals of a certain broad kind. This is similar to Riggle and Hopkins's account of artistic style, on which having artistic style is a matter of expressing one's ideals for one's art.³⁴ They turn to ideals in large part because they want to allow for distance between an artist's actual personality and the artist's style; for not quite the same reasons, I have argued against treating an aesthetic personality as an appreciative virtue. The principles whose role I have been affirming have some distance from the appreciator's personality – they are not aspects of a personality at all, but just claims about the good functions of art. Second,

34 Hopkins and Riggle, 'Artistic Style'.

as mentioned above, Dorsch suggests that we construe our particularist aesthetic reasoning 'as a special form of abduction or informed guessing, which need not be guided by principles and does not require conclusive or otherwise very strong evidence for justification'.³⁵ While Dorsch is ambitious for particularist reasoning that can take us 'from the ground up' in engagement with a work, and I am talking rather about guidance by principles 'from above', the looseness of the reasoning he has in mind, especially the notion of informed guessing, seems to capture what we need in this context. I may not be able to prove much satisfactorily about Lawrence and friendship but perhaps I can make a carefully informed – and principle-guided – guess. Finally, Dorsch also casts aesthetic criticism as 'a genuinely social endeavour', such that 'the best critics are those who aim to improve their aesthetic judgements partly in response to evidence that is not first-personal'.³⁶ This opens up more issues than I can consider here, but it seems particularly fruitful for us to learn about and compare our high-level principles with others' principles for the goods to be found in art. These points, about the possibly peculiar nature of aesthetic reasoning – in its gaps or guessing – and its sociable context, also resonate with the following provocative claim: 'aesthetic judgement is [...] not fully justified by the reasons we adduce, but, rather, [...] the authority may [...] flow in the reverse direction such that our reasons become compelling if and only if we already assent to the judgement they seem to support'.³⁷ I will not try to unpack Guy Dammann and Elisabeth Schellekens's argument here, which includes compelling discussion of how social relations affect artistic appreciation, but I cite this claim as another way to resist the idea that we do or can find 'ground up' authority for our aesthetic reasoning. My suggestion is that, to defend the project of reasoning well and consistently about art, and to support socially viable, constructive criticism and debate, we need to engage ourselves and others with the level of art-focused ethical principles.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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36 Dorsch, 'Limits', 94.

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TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

John, Eileen. 'Is Aesthetic Consistency Worth Having?' *Estetika: The European Journal of Aesthetics* LX/XVI, no. 2 (2023): pp.115–130. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33134/eeja.419>

Submitted: 20 April 2023

Accepted: 13 May 2023

Published: 14 September 2023

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Estetika: The European Journal of Aesthetics is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Helsinki University Press in cooperation with the Faculty of Arts, Charles University in Prague.