



# Intra- and Interindividual Aesthetic Disagreement: A Response to Tooming

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## ABSTRACT

This paper extends the reach of the concept of aesthetic personality, as utilized by Uku Tooming in a recent article, 'Aesthetic Disagreement with Oneself as Another', published in *Estetika* (2023). Tooming invokes this concept as part of his solution to a philosophical puzzle concerning aesthetic disagreement with one's past self. I argue that equivalence (or approximate equivalence) of aesthetic personality in cases in which one disagrees with an aesthetic peer or peers on an aesthetic judgement licenses the revision of one's aesthetic judgement. This relates to both intra- and interindividual aesthetic peer disagreements. Interestingly, equivalence of aesthetic personality can, at least in certain cases, undermine the appeal of the autonomy principle, which holds that one must exercise one's own evaluative capacities in producing a legitimate aesthetic judgement, and which Tooming considers a promising ground for not budging in cases of interindividual aesthetic disagreement.

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Our aesthetic tastes and resultant judgements sometimes change. Uku Tooming once found aesthetic value in the songs of Opeth, for example, for judging 'their songs to be both intricate and majestic', yet now the same features of those songs that Tooming formerly appreciated 'have started to sound unappealing'.<sup>1</sup> Tooming elaborates: 'I can understand the reasons for valuing Opeth's songs but I do not take them to suffice to warrant the positive aesthetic verdict. In fact, I rather take them to count as aesthetic demerits and to warrant a negative verdict' (AD, p. 147).

This is a familiar phenomenon. But it also raises a philosophical puzzle. If a person undergoes such a change in aesthetic judgement, we can say there is intraindividual (or intrasubjective) aesthetic disagreement between the person at different times. If the two temporal stages of the person are aesthetic peers – that is, if one is no less aesthetically competent or knowledgeable of requisite details than the other (for example, excluding disagreements with our young selves given that we were still then developing our aesthetic competences) – then let us say the person has a reason to question or probe their current judgement, analogous to the case of regular (interindividual) disagreement between aesthetic peers. Such a reason is generated in regular cases of disagreement with an aesthetic peer or peers: after all, perhaps your aesthetic peer has found much merit in a work or genre that you have dismissed, so even if you believe yourself quite familiar with it, maybe you should give that work or genre another try and see if you judge it differently. Perhaps the case they make about work *O* is so compelling that you are persuaded to revise your aesthetic judgement on the spot, without revisiting *O* except perhaps in your mind's eye or ear. Yet, returning to the case of intraindividual aesthetic disagreement, in typical circumstances we do not take the fact that one's aesthetic judgement has changed over time to be a reason for potentially changing it back. Is this justified? If so, how?

Tooming's solution is to disambiguate between two types of persons – generic persons and aesthetic persons. Tooming's concept of the generic person is more or less the typical one of the personal identity literature. An aesthetic person amounts to a person as characterized by their 'aesthetic preferences and aesthetic ideals' (AD, p. 153) – Tooming calls this their 'aesthetic personality' and 'aesthetic identity' interchangeably. To clarify: 'Aesthetic personality is constituted by a set of dispositions to like or dislike different aesthetically relevant properties and their configurations' (AD, p. 154), or indeed to be aesthetically indifferent to them; '[a]esthetic personality is something that need not stay the same even if the person maintains her generic identity. If an agent's aesthetic preferences change [sufficiently], then their aesthetic identity also changes' (AD, p. 153). Notice that this is a qualitative, not quantitative conception of personal identity: Tooming notes that (quantitatively) distinct individuals ('parties') may 'share aesthetic personality' (AD, p. 158).

Tooming argues that revising one's current aesthetic judgement given intraindividual disagreement – for example, rejudging a song to be less beautiful than one currently judges it to be, upon having realized that in the past one also judged it to be less beautiful than one currently judges it – makes sense only when there has not been a shift in the (generic) person's aesthetic personhood. Tooming reaches this conclusion via an argument centred around the aesthetic autonomy principle, according to which aesthetic judgement should be reached by individuals exercising their own capacities of evaluation.

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1 Uku Tooming, 'Aesthetic Disagreement with Oneself as Another', *Estetika* 60 (2023): 146. Hereafter: AD.

Let's unpack this. Accordingly, my resistance to prompts to revise my aesthetic judgement concerning some work or genre in the face of my disagreeing with aesthetic peers would be warranted by the autonomy principle, as long as I came to this judgement via exercising my own capacities of evaluation. And, in the case of intraindividual disagreement, the autonomy principle likewise justifies my resistance to revising my current aesthetic judgement in the face of aesthetic disagreement with my past (generic) self, if that past self is also a distinct aesthetic self. But notice that this does not work in the case of disagreement with my past (generic) self when that past self is not also a distinct aesthetic self – there is not any autonomy between selves here for the principle to stake its claim. And, for all we know, the later self's judgement may well reflect some bias, not justifying an inconsistent cross-temporal set of aesthetic judgements. Hence Tooming's conclusion: revising one's current aesthetic judgement given disagreement with one's past self makes sense only when there has not been a shift in the (generic) person's aesthetic personhood. Presumably, if there has been a shift, it must cohere with or complement the change in aesthetic judgement for it to play a justificatory role (a change only relevant to photography might not matter to music), but let us put the exact details to the side. Tooming deals in clear-cut cases and we shall follow suit.

Take Tooming's conclusion at face value. If one's aesthetic personality has changed over time, then one is rationally licensed (though not required) to revise one's current aesthetic judgement in cases of intraindividual disagreement. This appears to have implications for the regular, interindividual case of aesthetic peer disagreement too, thus the matter deserves to be analysed further.

One's aesthetic peer, with respect to a work or genre *O*, 'is someone who knows the same aesthetically relevant facts about *O*, who is equally competent in making aesthetic judgements about *O* on the basis of discerning its aesthetically relevant features, and who is equally familiar with the aesthetic category in which *O* is to be appreciated' (AD, p. 148) – or is at least approximately equal on those counts (that is, being a peer does not entail being exactly on par, just roughly so). Aesthetic peerhood is thus a matter of aesthetic competence and background knowledge, and so is orthogonal conceptually to aesthetic personality, which is a matter of affective dispositions concerning the aesthetic domain. According to the autonomy principle – or at least Tooming's take on it – we are licensed to aesthetically disagree with our aesthetic peers, as long as we have reached our judgement through exercising our own evaluative capacities as aesthetically autonomous agents and are not constrained by reason to agree with our aesthetic peers at least concerning our aesthetic judgements. But there is a further reason to license a disagreement: you and your aesthetic peer are distinct *persons* – both in the generic sense and (presumably in typical cases of disagreement) in the aesthetic sense too. But what if your aesthetic personalities matched? This is possible even for quantitatively distinct individuals. Let's back up. The matching aesthetic personalities in a case of intraindividual disagreement – that is, between two temporal stages of the quantitatively same (generic) person also with the qualitatively same aesthetic identities – does the heavy lifting in that case: it licenses revisions of current aesthetic judgement. So it is a powerful consideration in Tooming's framework. I suspect it is more powerful than the autonomy principle, at least in this context. Thus, I assert that the autonomy principle loses some weight in cases of (interindividual) aesthetic peer disagreement in which the peers share equivalent or approximately equivalent aesthetic personalities. In other words, in cases where my aesthetic preferences are echoed by my aesthetic

peers, then were I to disagree with my peers on a work or genre, having exercised my evaluative capacities in arriving at the relevant aesthetic judgement, I would still have a reason to probe or question that judgement and would be justified in revising that judgement.

Autonomy alone amounts to a domain-independent reason for justifying one's judgement in a case of aesthetic disagreement: it is external to aesthetic matters. Equivalence (or approximate equivalence) of aesthetic personality is not a reason independent from aesthetic matters for justifying (the revision of) one's judgement in a case of aesthetic disagreement. The two can pull in opposite directions. Given the relevance of aesthetic personality (characterized by aesthetic preferences and ideals) to the domain at hand, I assert its primacy over the autonomy principle in cases of aesthetic disagreement. Note that I am making no claim against the autonomy principle per se. (The principle has its critics, as Tooming points out; however, entering into a critique of it is not my purpose here.) But rather, when principles are in tension, sometimes one must give way to the other. Notice that the autonomy principle, at least in the form that Tooming and I are considering, does not claim that aesthetic judgements must only be reached via individuals exercising their own capacities of evaluation alone. While the autonomy principle is incompatible with blind deference to aesthetic peers, it is not mutually exclusive with taking into account peer disagreement or indeed revising judgements in cases prompted by disagreement with persons with equivalent aesthetic personalities to oneself, provided that one's capacities were exercised in the process.

Agreement over aesthetic preferences and ideals at a very fine grain of resolution is not required in Tooming's framework for there to be an equivalence of aesthetic personality – minor tweaks are not enough to constitute a change in aesthetic personality; for Tooming, these must be 'significantly radical' (AD, p. 153). Thus, aesthetic peer disagreement with roughly equivalent aesthetic peers, while still something of a special case, is probably less uncommon than what might have been first thought, particularly among groups of people interacting on the basis of their shared interests in a particular subculture or specific artistic medium or genre. (This point also suggests that the aesthetic personality defence in cases of intraindividual aesthetic disagreement has its limits: we need to know what constitutes a sufficient – indeed, sufficiently radical – change to one's aesthetic preferences and ideals. For this reason, I perhaps could have safely dropped the 'or approximately equivalent' quantifier when referencing sufficiently similar aesthetic personalities – but I digress.)

To be sure, equivalence of aesthetic personality does not rationally require intra- or interindividual aesthetic agreement. Two film buffs with equivalent aesthetic preferences when it comes to the many films that both of them have aesthetically judged in the past might disagree over the next film on their to-see list, say, *Napoleon Dynamite*. Indeed, this case-in-point has entered both scholarly literature and public awareness as the *Napoleon Dynamite* effect.<sup>2</sup> There are works that elicit high variance in aesthetic judgements even within groups of individuals that judge other works similarly. And one might disagree with one's past self over an aesthetic judgement due to one overcoming a former bias and re-encountering the work or genre, for example – and overcoming such a bias, if minor enough, may not be sufficient for a change in aesthetic personality (at least on Tooming's view).

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2 Avneesh Saluja et al., 'Infinite Mixed Membership Matrix Factorization', *IEEE International Conference on Data Mining Workshops* 13 (2013): 800.

So this is where I believe we are at. Tooming has introduced the concept of aesthetic personality in order to resolve a philosophical puzzle about intraindividual aesthetic disagreement. Its fruitful application is wider, as I have argued in this commentary. Equivalence (or approximate equivalence) of aesthetic personality plays a justificatory role in cases of interindividual aesthetic peer disagreement too. And it stands to take primacy over the autonomy principle, at least in some cases. A case of persisting in one's aesthetic judgement despite disagreeing with one's aesthetic peer(s), whether intra- or interindividual, is warranted because the parties have distinct aesthetic personalities, when this is indeed the case (I do not assert that rationality requires this), and this is compatible with the autonomy principle. A case of persisting in one's aesthetic judgement despite one's disagreement with an aesthetic peer (whether intra- or interindividual) may be justifiable on the grounds of the autonomy principle, but in cases of equivalence of aesthetic personality that equivalence gives one reason to take pause – stronger reason than the autonomy principle offers in the opposite orientation, or so I have briefly argued. Revising one's aesthetic judgement in the face of such disagreement receives its licence, again via the equivalence of aesthetic personality (and this need not be in contradiction with the autonomy principle). A few pressing questions remain, of course. Two priorities are determining the appropriate scope and character of sufficient difference in aesthetic personality in order for an aesthetic disagreement (whether intra- or interindividual) to be licensed, or to say that there are distinct aesthetic personalities at hand. Finally, I have not considered cases where aesthetic peers might agree on a work or genre and yet have radically different aesthetic personalities. Whether our treatment of such cases should mirror the discussed cases of disagreement – or whether further considerations are afoot in cases of surprising aesthetic agreement – must be left for another time.

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