

Trading Up in Relationships with Art

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Abstract

Should one's individual preferences for works of art always track the artistically best? If one's current preferences are for the artistically suboptimal, should one aim to *trade up*, replacing one's current artistic loves for those which are, ultimately, better? I think that the answer is not necessarily yes. In this paper, I argue that there may be good reason to resist the notion that such aesthetic idealization is always the most reasonable course of action. My argument is analogical in structure: Just as there are reasons not to dump our current friends for individuals who possess better qualities, there are similar reasons not to abandon our current relationships with sub-optimal artworks. Appreciating this claim ultimately places limits on the hopes for the Humean approach in aesthetics as an ideal for structuring our interactions with artworks.

1 Aesthetic Idealization and Trading Up

Suppose that you and I are having a conversation about our favorite novels. A partisan of Joyce, you go to bat for *Ulysses*: you think his “allincluding most farraginous chronicle” is the best novel written in English. I disagree, opting for Melville as the master of the form. *Ulysses* isn't bad, I say, but *Moby Dick* is a better book. Disagreements like these are the bread and butter of philosophical aesthetics. They naturally raise questions about the nature of artistic value and the possibility of correctness in artistic evaluation: Is one of us correct? And if so, in virtue of what?

The most well-known means of dealing with this kind of disagreement has its roots in Hume. A familiar thought from Hume is that we might resolve our disagreement by consulting a set of ideal critics whose judgment would settle the matter for us. Such critics would be ideal in virtue of their possession of a particular set of qualities—sensitivity, practice, and so

on—that sets them apart from the average appreciator of art. Their verdicts about artistic value would, in Hume’s terminology, provide us with “a *Standard of Taste*; a rule, by which the various sentiments of men may be reconciled; at least, a decision afforded, confirming one sentiment, and condemning another.”¹ Call this strategy for responding to the problem of disagreement by adverting to an ideal critic the *Humean* approach.

Why should we believe that ideal critics are the best guide to artistic value? Here, the Humean makes what seems like a plausible assumption—namely, that the artistic value of a work of art is largely determined by the quality of the experience that it is capable of affording.² From this assumption, the Humean argues that ideal critics, in virtue of the particular qualities that they possess, are best qualified to appreciate—and ultimately to compare—the quality of the experiences that individual artworks can afford. This makes ideal critics our best bet when it comes to making accurate comparative judgments of artistic value. In a nutshell, this is the Humean rationale for accepting the judgments of ideal critics as authoritative with respect to questions of artistic value.³

For all the good that the Humean approach does in providing us with a means of resolving disputes about artistic value, it nevertheless leaves a pressing practical question unanswered: Suppose that our original disagreement over Joyce and Melville was resolved in your favor, by dint of consulting the consensus of ideal critics. I now find that my own artistic preferences do not match those of the ideal critics. By Humean lights, I prefer the artistically suboptimal. What should I do now? Should I attempt to alter my own preferences to match those of ideal critics? Or should I rather maintain my own appreciative preferences?

¹Hume, 1987, p. 230.

²cf. Budd, 1996, pp. 4-8.

³As I am presenting it, Humeanism is neutral on the question of whether artistic value itself can be analyzed without reference to the preferences of ideal critics. This departs somewhat from most forms of Humeanism—in aesthetics and in value theory more generally—which hold that it is facts about ideal observers that are truth-makers for facts about values. See, for example, Lewis, 1989. I’m also putting aside a large number of worries that have traditionally occupied commentators on the Humean tradition, including at least the following questions: Is there any reason to believe that there exist any ideal critics? Is there any reason to believe that, if they do exist, such critics will actually reach consensus in their appreciative preferences? Finally, and most pressingly, should we understand artistic value as consisting primarily in the capacity to yield intrinsically valuable experiences? There may be good reason to believe that the answers to each of these questions is no—but addressing each would take us well beyond the focus of the present paper.

One way of responding to this question is to insist that we ought to treat the judgment of ideal critics not just as a benchmark for resolving conflicts about artistic value but rather as an ideal that we, individually, ought to try to approximate in our own appreciative preferences. In other words, we ought to treat the true critic as a kind of regulative ideal for our aesthetic lives: each of us ought to try to both make our preferences identical to those of ideal critics, and to develop qualities similar to those which make ideal critics ideal. We each ought to try to *aesthetically idealize*.

For most of us, the effects of aesthetic idealization would be quite drastic: it would involve trading all of those artworks with which we currently have appreciative relationships for those which are ultimately artistically best.⁴ We'd substitute *The Searchers* for *Star Wars*, Dickens for Dan Brown, Bach for bubblegum pop, and so on. As Jerrold Levinson, an influential defender of aesthetic idealization, puts it, "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"—namely, an ideal critic.⁵

Is there good reason to undergo the ambitious undertaking of aesthetic idealization? The defender of aesthetic idealization is quick to build an argument out of Humean materials. The argument goes like this: As art appreciators, we have an interest in having the richest, most fulfilling experiences possible. Works with greater artistic value have the capacity to yield experiences of greater value. It follows that we should prefer those artworks with greater artistic value. Our best guides in identifying works with greater artistic value will be the set of ideal critics. Therefore, we ought to attempt to individually approximate the preferences of ideal critics insofar as we are antecedently interested in maximizing the quality of our experiences of artworks.⁶

⁴Aside from changes in the set of artworks that we prefer, aesthetic idealization might also involve further large-scale changes in our discriminatory capacities, our background knowledge, etc. Some of these are discussed in Kieran, 2008, pp. 281-3 and Riggle, 2013. I largely put aside this aspect of aesthetic idealization here and only consider the issue of trading up.

⁵Levinson, 2010, p. 225.

⁶This argument is the main claim of Levinson, 2002.

But is this a sufficient reason for each of us to trade up? I suspect that it is not. Why not? I think that the beginnings of an answer can be found in the following analogy: Consider the fact that, for the most part, each of us is partial to a particular set of other persons—our friends. We prefer to spend time with them, we appreciate their particular qualities, and we take pleasure in their company. Now suppose that it is pointed out to me by my friendship guru that, in fact, most of my friendships are non-ideal with respect to the experiences they provide me. I could have much more fulfilling experiences if I started spending time with new friends who would tell funnier jokes, have slightly better hair, mix up more delicious cocktails, and so on. In fact, the guru has identified a set of such individuals for me, and is willing to make the requisite introductions. Suppose also that I have good reason to believe that the guru is correct: he is an ideal judge of which relationships would provide me with the most fulfilling experiences. Does this give me a compelling reason to “trade up” by dumping my current friends and establishing new friendships?⁷ Intuitively, the answer in this case is no: even if we recognize that our existing relationships may be less than ideal with respect to the experiences they afford, there doesn’t ultimately seem to be reason to “idealize” in this way with respect to our friendships. We don’t think it irrational to maintain our existing friendships even if they are less than ideal in this respect.

Perhaps the same could be said about *aesthetic* idealization: just as there isn’t compelling reason to trade up to ideal-with-respect-to-satisfying-experiences friends, so too might there be insufficient reason to trade up to ideal artworks. Levinson anticipates this objection; he notes that it might seem 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.⁸

Levinson dismisses this worry, citing “significant differences between our relations to persons

⁷The language of “trading up” in this context—meant to be reminiscent of upgrading one’s car or computer, no doubt—is due to Nozick, 1989, p. 76.

⁸Levinson, 2010, p. 230.

and our relations to works of art, differences in the obligations and opportunities involved in the two cases.”⁹ However, Levinson does not provide any explicit further discussion of or argument for this claim; this is a lacuna that needs addressing.

While it is no doubt true that there *are* significant differences between our relationships with persons and our relationships with works of art, I think that there are enough similarities between the two to support skepticism about the attractiveness of aesthetic idealization on these grounds. In the remainder of this paper, I first characterize those aspects of friendships which give us reasons not to “trade up” to other individuals even if they would provide us with more fulfilling experiences than our current friends. Second, I argue that the very same features of these interpersonal relationships can be found in (some of) our relationships with artworks. This gives us sufficient reason in these cases *not* to aesthetically idealize. Finally, I defend this claim against objections and use it to appraise the Humean approach more generally.

2 Against Upgrading One’s Friends

Let’s return to the example I sketched above: my friendship guru has presented me with a set of potential new friends who—provided that I cease my current friendships in order to trade up—would provide me with more valuable experiences than those on offer in my current friendships. I suggested that in this case, there is a great deal of intuitive pull to the idea that I shouldn’t trade up. The trick comes in explaining exactly *why* this is the case; as Robert Nozick has put it:

A readiness to trade up, looking for someone with “better” characteristics, does not fit with an attitude of love. An illuminating view should explain why not, yet why, nevertheless, the attitude of love is not irrational.¹⁰

In other words, in order for the common-sense understanding of loving friendship to be vindicated, one needs some justification for continuing attachment to individuals who are recognizably suboptimal in their personal qualities. What is it about my current friends that makes

⁹Levinson, 2010, p. 230.

¹⁰Nozick, 1989, p. 76

it the case that *not* trading up is ultimately reasonable?

One salient difference between my current friends and those individuals identified by the guru is the fact that I have an established historical relationship with my friends. We share a friendship. I do not have any such relationship with the guru's picks. Perhaps it is the value of these relationships—in addition to the qualities of the individuals with whom I share them—that explains my continued commitment to them. Consider the fact that I cite my friendship with Henry as a reason for my being more concerned with his well-being than I would be for that of a stranger, or for treating him preferentially compared to individuals who are not my friends. Jennifer Whiting suggests that it is my relationship with Henry itself that provides me with reasons to be partial in this way:

Once someone has become my friend, I then have reasons to care for her which I did not previously have, and which I would not now have, had I never come to care in the first place. And I then have reasons to care for her which I do not have to care for other equally deserving persons about whom I never came to care. This is presumably because the *friendship relation itself* (as distinct from factors which may serve to explain its existence) is taken to provide reasons for concern additional to those (if any) existing prior to its establishment.¹¹

On Whiting's view, one's existing relationship serves as an additional source of reasons which go beyond those reasons associated with, for example, the valued qualities of the person that one shares the relationship with. With respect to Henry, even if his valuable qualities warrant my concern as much as those of any other individual, I have added reasons to treat him preferentially which are the result of my having a particular actually-existing relationship with him. Following Samuel Scheffler, we can refer to such reasons as *relationship-dependent reasons*.¹²

Perhaps among the relationship-dependent reasons that I possess are reasons not to trade up. Once I am Henry's friend, my relationship with him might give me reasons not to dump him and upgrade to a friendship with Hilde, even if Hilde happens to be smarter, funnier, and so on. If this were true, it would provide us with a means of answering Nozick's initial challenge: it would show us that one ultimately might have sufficient reason not to trade up—reason which

¹¹Whiting, 1991, p. 7.

¹²Scheffler, 2010, pp. 48-49. cf. also Scheffler, 2003; Kolodny, 2003; Wallace, 2012.

would ultimately rest on the value of one's existing relationship, as considered independently from the non-relational qualities of one's current and potential friends.¹³ But is it really the case that relationships such as friendship provide us with reasons not to trade up?

We can make some headway on this question by reflecting on the nature of friendship.¹⁴ At the very least, a friendship consists in an ongoing pattern of actions and attitudes between two particular persons that persists over time. It is a relationship that is both historical and ongoing; to call Henry my friend *now* is to affirm the fact that we share a history of interaction and concern which constitutes our friendship. Plausibly, it is this historical relationship which generates relationship-dependent reasons within the context of friendship.¹⁵

Why and *how* does the existence of such a history of interaction and concern provide us with reasons to resist the pull of trading up? I believe that there are two general features of such historical relationships which provide reasons not to trade up: first, in virtue of participating in friendships we accrue obligations and responsibilities. Some of these require us not to trade up. Second, friendships often bear an important relationship to our practical identity—one which might lead us to resist trading up. I elaborate on each of these features of friendship in the two sections below.

2.1 Friendship and Obligations

In any interpersonal interaction, our actions are constrained by moral obligations towards those with whom we interact. Some of these are obligations not to violate expectations which we have intentionally raised on the part of those with whom we interact; for example, if I promise to return your book to you when I've finished reading it, then I am morally obligated to return it to

¹³Of course, one's existing relationships might not provide *conclusive* reasons not to trade up: it's possible that considerations in favor of trading up might still outweigh these relationship-dependent considerations against. I discuss this more below.

¹⁴The sort of friendship I aim to characterize below is that of a genuine, intimate friendship; it is a familiar enough cultural ideal, although I do not mean to make a normative claim that it is the best form of friendship or the only "genuine" form of friendship. Some kinds of friendship, such as friendships of convenience or friendships centered on shared activities, might not possess the features I list.

¹⁵Perhaps not all relationship-dependent reasons depend on the existence of such a history. Plausibly cases of love at first sight or parental love are different from friendship, in that they might generate reasons without the existence of such a history.

you.¹⁶ Participating in intimate personal relationships, however, can give rise to an especially extensive network of such expectations, which ground corresponding moral obligations. In friendship, might there be such obligations to one's current friend not to trade up? The answer is usually yes—but to see why, we'll need to look more carefully at the kinds of expectations that are generated by participating in a friendship.

Consider an example: Suppose that my friend has a special interest in the early films of Pedro Almodóvar. Understanding this, upon learning about an upcoming screening I go out of my way to get tickets for the both of us, brush up on Almodóvar before hand, and do whatever else I think might be in some respect beneficial to my friend's interest—this being what good friends do for each other. Now suppose that, having gone to see the Almodóvar film—and, perhaps, having enjoyed it—I make it known to my friend that I'd be happy to see more films with her in the future. Perhaps she begins to make plans around our seeing several other films together and comes to view me as someone she can count on to take to see films that are a bit too edgy for her other friends.

What this rather innocuous example illustrates is the ease with which, in a friendship, we can raise our friends' expectations about our future behavior. Plausibly, raising these expectations grounds moral obligations on our part. In the case above, I would be letting my friend down if I blew off her invitations to go to the movies for no good reason; this would be violating her expectations about my behavior which I had intentionally raised after our viewing the Almodóvar film, and would likely lead to the frustration of the plans that she made on account of her expectations about my behavior.

These obligations are no different in kind from those that we accrue when we raise the expectations of strangers about our behavior. I could just as easily make a similar commitment to a stranger about seeing films together and this would ground the same kind of moral obligation on my part not to violate the commitment. The difference in the case of friendship lies in both the depth and the breadth of the expectations that we raise on the part of our friends. As Harry

¹⁶cf. Scanlon, 1998, pp. 296-317.

Frankfurt has put it,

Our relationships with those we love are frequently intimate, and intimate relationships lead inevitably to the formation of expectations and modes of dependency by which unusually weighty obligations are engendered. Because of the peculiarly intense and relatively unguarded character of the relationships within which they arise, these obligations tend to be more serious than those that are normally generated within relationships of lesser consequence.¹⁷

As Frankfurt notes, given the extent of the interaction between friends and the level of intimacy and trust present in such relationships, the possibility of both raising extensive obligations and incurring significant obligations to meet these expectations is particularly acute.

Do these obligations provide one with reasons not to trade up to new friends? This will depend in large part on the details of the friendship in question. Perhaps we can imagine a friendship in which both friends have no expectations whatsoever about their friend's commitment to remaining in the relationship, pursuing common activity, and so on. But I think this is far from the ordinary. Many close friendships involve commitments to shared interests, goals, and projects, developed within the context of the friendship itself. Nancy Sherman has referred to this aspect of friendship as a "shared life" between friends:

In true friendship, we might say, friends realize shared ends which develop through the friendship and which come to be constitutive of it. Specific common interests are thus a product rather than a precondition of the relationship. Together my friend and I develop a love of Georgian houses, having had no real interest in them earlier.¹⁸

To the extent that friends share ends in this way—and, as Sherman notes, this sharing of ends may come to be constitutive of their relationship—each presumably forms expectations about the continuing participation of the other in the pursuit of said ends. My friend comes to count on me as part of the duo who goes to see art-house films together.¹⁹ Without explicit release from such expectations or other extenuating circumstances, I have an obligation to her to continue in my pursuit of this shared end—and, by extension, to continue the relationship.²⁰

¹⁷Frankfurt, 1999b, p. 171.

¹⁸Sherman, 1993, pp. 98-101.

¹⁹For more on plural agency in friendship, cf. Stroud, 2010; Helm, 2010, ch. 8.

²⁰Kolodny discusses several circumstances in which one might plausibly be released from such obligations in a friendship in Kolodny, 2003, pp. 163-166.

Importantly, it is my history of interaction and shared activity with my friend that is ultimately responsible for the generation of these obligations; without such a history, one would not have accrued any of these obligations.²¹ This is the first respect in which one's relationship with one's friends might generate reasons not to trade up. I pursue the second below.

2.2 Friendship and the Self

It is a commonplace that our friendships play a role in distinguishing us as individuals—but how exactly do these personal relationships play such a role? Dean Cocking and Jeannette Kennett have written insightfully about the relationship between friendships and the self.²² On their view, friendship involves a commitment to being directed by one's friend's interests and a commitment to interpretation of one's friend.²³ Below, I develop their account, and then deploy it to make a claim about the relationship between friendship, the self, and trading up.

The first aspect of this account of friendship is a commitment to direction. A commitment to direction involves a friend's being "receptive to developing interests or activities, which they do not already pursue, primarily because they are the interests or activities of the other."²⁴ Going with my friend to see the Almodóvar film might be an example of this; I might have no antecedent interest in Almodóvar's films, but as a friend I allow my friend's interest to direct me towards buying tickets and going along. What is particularly important about such openness to direction is the fact that engaging in these activities might have significant ramifications; I might find myself with new beliefs, new sets of interests, and new attitudes that are a product of my being directed by my friendship. These may persist well beyond the boundaries of my friendship and into the rest of my life.²⁵

According to Cocking and Kennett, friendship also involves a commitment to interpreta-

²¹Some have argued that, in addition to these moral obligations, there may also be *sui generis* "duties of love"—obligations that one accrues simply in virtue of loving another individual. The most notable example of such an argument is Wallace, 2012. I remain neutral here about the possibility of the existence of such duties.

²²Cocking and Kennett, 1998, 2000.

²³Cocking and Kennett, 1998, pp. 503-506.

²⁴Ibid., p. 504.

²⁵This point is well argued in Rorty, 1993.

tion. If I aim to be directed by my friend's interests, I thereby commit myself to interpreting him. It is only by interpreting him in the context of our friendship that I am able to be sensitive to who he is, to what his interests are, and to what we ought to do together as a result. More substantively, Cocking and Kennett argue that such interpretation is reciprocal: I not only interpret Henry, but I also license his interpretations of me. What's more, Cocking and Kennett argue that in a friendship we come to rely on our friend's interpretations of us by granting them more authority than we would grant the interpretations of, say, a stranger.²⁶ If a friend draws attention to some aspect of my actions—perhaps she's noticed that I seem worried or preoccupied about something—she might put into words something that I hadn't previously noticed. More importantly, her interpretation may affect how I view myself and how I later act on the basis of such an interpretation—both in the context of our relationship, and beyond it.

I think that we can use Cocking and Kennett's account of friendship to develop a much clearer picture of the relationship between friendship and the self. Through the process of direction, friendships function as causal mechanisms whereby we can acquire new and different interests than those that we had prior to participation in the friendship. Through our friends' interpretations of us, we might gain insight into our own interests. We can cash out the effect of friends on us in terms of what Christine Korsgaard calls a *practical identity*: “a description under which you value yourself, a description under which you find your life to be worth living and your actions to be worth undertaking.”²⁷ Our friends ultimately have a major role to play in constituting our practical identities and offering us knowledge of them.²⁸ It is one's history of interaction with one's friend—and the direction and interpretation that occurs therein—that

²⁶Cocking and Kennett don't ultimately explain *why* we grant such an authority. Most plausibly, we think that friends are in the best position to know us and interpret us as a result of our intimacy, our history, etc. Thus the old adage that your friends often know you better than you know yourself. Thomas, 1993, on the other hand, argues that privileging one's friends' advice and interpretation of oneself is a means of affirming intimacy within the relationship.

²⁷Korsgaard, 1996, p. 101. Korsgaard here seems to be developing Williams's notion of a “ground project.” cf. Williams, 1981. Although there are differences between these two notions, I treat them here as equivalent; one might substitute “ground project” for “practical identity” in what follows.

²⁸This functions in two ways: First, being Henry's friend means that I view “friend of Henry” as part of my practical identity. Second, as a result of a history of direction and interpretation within our friendship, I will come to acquire entirely new practical identities: lover of Almodóvar films, friend of someone else, Georgian architecture enthusiast, and so on.

leads to these effects on our practical identities.

Going back to our original concern, why might this fact about my history with my friends provide me with reasons not to trade up? There are at least two distinct reasons why:

First, many of the particular interests, activities, and projects that I acquire within a friendship as a result of direction will involve my friend in some direct way. Recall Nancy Sherman's example of developing a love of Georgian houses together within a friendship: presumably what I love is not just admiring Georgian houses, but admiring Georgian houses *together* with my particular friend. Now consider the fact that, as a result of my friendship, I've come to regard this as a particularly important part of my practical identity. Were I to end my friendship, this would lead to me abandoning this part of my practical identity. In the same vein, Nozick suggests that "a willingness to trade up, to destroy the very *we* you largely identify with, would then be a willingness to destroy your self."²⁹ Harry Frankfurt has suggested that such change would constitute a kind of psychological violence, which we seek to avoid due to "a quite primitive human need to establish and to maintain volitional unity."³⁰ Abandoning an important practical identity constitutes a threat to this volitional unity—one which could be disorienting or alienating and which, for such psychological reasons, we are keen to avoid.

This psychological rationale is distinct from a normative worry about trading up: even if my guru's picks are funnier or smarter than my current friends, I might nevertheless be worried about how my friendship with these new individuals might come to affect me, given the possibility of my future direction and interpretation by them. This is ultimately a concern about the effects of a relationship on oneself: aside from the pleasures that I may take in my new friendships, I might nevertheless be troubled by what I perceive to be the effects of entering such a relationship on my practical identity. Would I become a less distinctive individual? A less interesting person, perhaps, with more mundane interests? A more or less virtuous person? All things considered, I might prefer who I am now to who I might become were I to abandon my

²⁹Nozick, 1989, p. 78. Nozick is talking about romantic partnerships in particular, but I think that his remarks apply equally well to intimate companion friendships. For a longer discussion of the idea that friendship involves creation of a "we" over and above the two friends, see Helm, 2010, ch. 8.

³⁰Frankfurt, 1999a, p. 139.

current friends for new friends.³¹

In the above two sections, I've identified two kinds of reasons not to trade up: first, the moral obligations accrued within a history of interaction and concern; and second, the close connection between one's historical relationship and one's practical identity. These reasons are *relationship-dependent*: one accrues these reasons in virtue of the existence of a particular historical relationship with one's friend.

Before moving on to consider the case of one's existing appreciative relationships with artworks, it is worth noting two points: First, I do not take the above to constitute a full account of the nature of friendship, nor do I aim to give a full taxonomy of the sorts of relationship-dependent reasons that we might take friendships to generate.³² Second, and more importantly, I do not take the above considerations to *always* constitute sufficient reason not to trade up. There may be cases in which one is not under any obligations to one's current friends, or cases in which one's existing friendships do not contribute to one's practical identity in a way that favors maintaining them—although I suspect that such cases would be quite rare. Indeed, there might even be cases where such considerations *do* apply, but are not sufficient reasons *not* to trade up. One might nevertheless have weightier reasons in favor of trading up. Even so, the argument above shows that aspects of one's historical relationships—and not only the individuals themselves or the non-relational qualities they possess—can be sources of reasons in their own right. These relationship-dependent reasons, I've argued, give us a means of responding to Nozick's initial challenge—in many circumstances, these considerations make it reasonable to resist the pull of upgrading one's friends. As I will argue below, a similar set of considerations has its source in our existing appreciative relationships with artworks.

³¹This worry may not seem as pressing in the case of trading up one's friends. However, as I argue below, it is more pressing in the case of aesthetic idealization, in which coming to prefer the artistically ideal might seem to present a grave threat to the distinctiveness of one's aesthetic identity.

³²I discuss the notion of a relationship-dependent reason—and, in particular, how such relationships provide us with reasons for partiality—in an earlier chapter of my dissertation.

3 Relationships with Art

Admittedly, the idea of thinking about works of art as similar to one's friends might strike some contemporary readers as strange. This has not always been the case; there is a rich history of analogizing artworks to friends and lovers. As Wayne Booth notes of the literary arts,

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the personification [of books] was widespread, celebrated overtly in the titles of many books and essays—*Friends in Council* (Helps 1847-59), *The Friendship of Books* (Maurice 1880), *Letters to Dead Authors* (Lang 1886), *Friends on the Shelf* (Torrey 1906). Often the language of friendship was not enough: only words of love spoke strongly enough for what books inspire.³³

Reaching back still further, we find Ovid's characterization of myth of Pygmalion, the sculptor who, having fallen in love with his own statue:

...lifts his hands to the work to try whether it be flesh or ivory; nor does he yet confess it to be ivory. He kisses it and thinks his kisses are returned. He speaks to it, grasps it and seems to feel his fingers sink into the limbs when he touches them; and then he fears lest he leave marks of bruises on them.³⁴

Of course, Pygmalion is meant to come off as foolish—that is, until Venus turns his statue into a real woman—and most of the nineteenth century discussion of friendships with books really concerns a kind of attenuated friendship with the *author* of the book. Works of art are not and cannot be our friends.³⁵

That said, there is nevertheless a grain of truth in such personifications of artworks: we turn to such metaphors because the relationships that we have with them can be of similar importance to us as our friendships. Stanley Cavell makes the following suggestive claim about the nature of our interaction with works of art:

Objects of art not merely interest and absorb, they move us; we are not merely involved with them, but concerned with them and care about them; we treat them in special ways, invest them with a value which normal people otherwise reserve only for other people—

³³Booth, 1989, p. 171. Booth goes on to adopt such a metaphor—of narratives as offering a sort of friendship or companionship—as a means of grounding a program of ethical criticism.

³⁴Ovid, 1916, Bk. X: 243-297.

³⁵Although perhaps they can be objects of our love. cf. Levinson, 2012; Nehamas, 2007, pp. 95-101.

and with the same kind of scorn and outrage. They *mean* something to us, not just the way statements do, but the way people do.³⁶

The virtue of Cavell's way of putting it is in his focus on the *kinetic*: through our care and concern for them, and our active engagement with them, some works of art *move* us—into new perspectives, new activities, and new ways of living. To exhibit such a history of care and concern for a work of art is to have what one might call a significant relationship with that work.

Ultimately, I will argue that, like friendships, such relationships with artworks also provide us with relationship-dependent reasons—and that some of these reasons consist in reasons to resist the pull of aesthetic idealization. Before making this argument, it will help to begin with an example of just what a significant relationship with a work of art might look like. Let us return to Stanley Cavell. Consider Cavell's relationships with the Hollywood remarriage comedies he discusses in his book, *Pursuits of Happiness*. I am not so much interested in a substantial exegesis of his readings of these films, although there's no doubt that a full accounting of this would be an important part of understanding his relationship to the films in question. Instead I'll aim to sketch out what he has to say, autobiographically, about his relationship with these films as a means of illustrating the nature of such relationships more generally.

In this vein, we find Cavell describing the period of his first exposure to the films, in public screenings at movie theaters in the 30s and 40s.³⁷ Over time, his relationship with these films and others led him to ask certain general question about the medium of film, and about his responses to it. In *The World Viewed* he describes these questions as leading to a series of conversations with the art critic Michael Fried; his working his way through the writings of Panofsky and Bazin; his (unsuccessful) attempt to lead a seminar in the philosophy of art on the topic of film; and, eventually, his attempt to express his thoughts on the matter—that is, on the films themselves and the issues they raised—in written form.³⁸ But his interest in these

³⁶Cavell, 2002, pp. 197-198.

³⁷Cavell, 1979, pp. 9-10.

³⁸Ibid., Preface.

Hollywood comedies of remarriage persisted and changed: after doing substantial criticism on Shakespearian remarriage comedies, Cavell noticed certain generic affinities in these films. He became interested in attempting a more dedicated reading of the films, both individually and as members of a genre. This led him to conduct a seminar on the films in question at Harvard; to repeatedly screen the films for himself and assorted audiences; to speak about them with almost anyone who might listen;³⁹ and, finally, to dedicate himself to substantial reading and criticism of each of the films, the results of which constitute the seven chapters of *Pursuits of Happiness*.

In referring to Cavell's *relationship* with these films, I mean to refer to the history of his interaction with them as I've characterized it above. A relationship with a work of art is constituted by such a history of interaction with that particular work. In this sense a relationship with a work of art is similar to a friendship; it is a historical pattern of actions and attitudes focused on a particular individual. As I will argue below, such relationships are also: a) marked by a kind of care and concern similar to that which is characteristic of friendships; and b) demonstrate similar commitments to direction and interpretation.

3.1 Caring about a Work of Art

Friends are disposed to act in the best interest of each other; this is a major component of what it is to care about one's friend. Does a relationship with a work of art manifest a similar concern? Whether Cavell's relationship might be characterized as one of acting in the "best interest" of these films leads us into strange waters: what would it be to act in the best interests of a work of art?

On the one hand, we might contribute directly to the well-being of a work of art that we care about: our concern might be manifest in our attempts to preserve the work, to contribute to its conservation, its continued performance, or its broader dissemination. But many of us do not take such a direct role in benefiting the works of art that we care about.⁴⁰

³⁹See the almost comically long list of acknowledgments in Cavell, 1979, pp. 75-78.

⁴⁰Although perhaps we have reason to do so. I think that the topic of our obligations to the works of art that we value has been little explored—and that, perhaps, a comparison with the obligations of friendship and love might lead us to realize that our obligations to the works of art that we care about are more substantial than they

There is, however, another sense in which artworks might be thought to have interests: Works of art are artifacts. As such, they have particular aims or purposes. These aims and purposes depend on the intentions of the creator of the work, as constrained by artworld conventions surrounding acceptable aims and purposes for artworks.⁴¹ The “interests” of an artifact concern its ability to fulfill this aim or purpose in an appropriate fashion: a tack hammer should hammer tacks, just as a Bernini sculpture should inspire awe. To the extent that one attempts to interact with a work of art in such a way that fulfills this aim or goal, one acts in the interest of the object.

This is not to say that all artworks have the same aim or purpose, that individual artworks have only single aims or purposes, or that the aims or purposes of an artwork are always easily or clearly stated; indeed, it is often the work of interpretation to *discover* the aims and purposes of an artwork. Caring about a work of art within the context of one’s relationship to it will involve understanding it and appreciating it on its own terms: it will, in an important sense, involve a commitment to interpreting the artwork, trying to understand its aims or purposes, and ultimately being directed by it in engaging with it. As I suggest below, these commitments are remarkably similar to those found within friendship.

3.2 Direction and Interpretation

To make the above claim about direction and interpretation a bit more concrete, let’s return to Cavell. Cavell’s relationship demonstrates a commitment to being directed by the films. He claims that in engaging with the Hollywood remarriage comedies, we “must let the films themselves teach us how to look at them and how to think about them.”⁴² In his case, this commitment to direction is made manifest in the aforementioned series of viewings, readings, conversations, seminars, and other pursuits to which he turned himself in trying to learn how

might seem. I discuss this point in a later chapter of the dissertation.

⁴¹The view alluded to here is similar to Nick Zangwill’s “aesthetic functionalism” in Zangwill, 2007, ch.5. However, I disagree with Zangwill that having an aesthetic function is a necessary condition for being an artwork; some anti-aesthetic artworks plausibly have no aesthetic function whatsoever. cf. Binkley, 1977.

⁴²Cavell, 1981, p. 25.

to look at and think about these films. Connect this back to our relationships with works of art more generally: think about the times that you've talked to everyone you could about a favorite film; how one painting opened your eyes to a whole host of others; or about the times that you've been so enamored with a piece of music that you've learned to play it—or written a piece of your own. In a significant relationship with a work of art, one allows the work to guide one, both in the direct experience and engagement with the work, but also on a path through the world that one couldn't have planned or expected prior to entering into the relationship. This might involve the development of new interests, activities, and beliefs which are causally sourced in one's relationship with the work of art.⁴³

Cavell's relationship also demonstrates a commitment to interpretation: not just interpretation of the films—the evidence of which is manifest in *Pursuits of Happiness*—but also to interpretation of aspects of his life that go beyond the film itself. Insofar as he is open to letting the films teach him to think about certain topics in new ways, and to learn what they have to say about relationships, conversation, and the medium of film, Cavell might come to revise his view of these phenomena—and, indirectly, his conceptualization of his *own* participation in such relationships—in light of what he has learned from the films.⁴⁴ Again, I don't think we need to look far to see that this sort of commitment to interpretation is characteristic of many of our significant relationships with works of art. It is a commonplace that many artworks change the way that we look at the world—and, by extension, at ourselves. To take a paradigmatic example, consider the way that we often look to figures and plots within narrative fiction as a means of understanding and patterning our own lives.⁴⁵

As is the case in friendship, this openness to direction and interpretation comes with some risk to the self. Who Cavell *is*, is shaped in part by the relationships he has developed with these films and the directions in which these relationships have taken him. This is generally true of

⁴³In a similar vein, one might also look to Alexander Nehamas's discussion of his relationship with Manet's *Olympia* in Nehamas, 2007, ch. 4, as well as T.J. Clark's characterization of his relationship with Poussin's *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake* in Clark, 2006.

⁴⁴This is admittedly speculative, but given the significance Cavell affords these films in his philosophical work and in his life, I don't think it's too far of a reach.

⁴⁵For more detailed discussion of this point, see Rorty, 1976, pp. 307-309.

many of our relationships with works of art: In engaging with these artworks we substantially commit ourselves to being directed by them and to continual interpretation both of them and of ourselves. We take our relationships as giving us good reason to engage in such patterns of direction and interpretation. This may indeed lead to large-scale changes in our practical identities; as Alexander Nehamas puts the point, my relationships with works of art may pose questions and challenges that “literally determine the course of my life, directing me for their answers to other people, other objects, other habits and ways of being.”⁴⁶

While this account of what it is to have a significant relationship with a work of art is partial at best, it is nevertheless enough to provide us with the grounds for making a case against aesthetic idealization. It is to this that I now turn.

4 The Case Against Aesthetic Idealization

The Humean claims that we should each aim to aesthetically idealize, trading our existing appreciative relationships with artworks for appreciative relationships with artworks that are artistically best. The rationale for this claim is that doing so would lead us into relationships with artworks with the capacity to yield the most valuable possible experiences. As individuals antecedently interested in maximizing the quality of our experiences, this gives us a reason to aesthetically idealize. But is aesthetic idealization always the most reasonable course of action?

In the case of trading one’s current friends for a different set of individuals whose friendship would yield more valuable experiences, I suggested that our existing friendships provide us with reasons not to trade up. These depend on a) a set of obligations one has to one’s current friends; and b) the contribution that one’s current friendships have made—and continue to make—to one’s practical identity.

I’ve argued above that relationships with artworks share important similarities with friendships. Below, I argue that these similarities ultimately provide reason to resist the pull of aesthetic idealization; just as there may be relationship-dependent reasons to maintain one’s ex-

⁴⁶Nehamas, 2007, p. 85.

isting friendships, so too are there relationship-dependent reasons to maintain one's existing appreciative relationships with works of art.

4.1 Artworks, Obligations, and Community

In friendships, friends nearly always incur obligations to each other: One commits to shared ends with one's friend, thereby raising one's friend's expectations about one's future behavior. This generates a set of moral obligations not to violate these expectations. As I've argued above, abandoning one's friend for a slightly more entertaining individual would in most cases involve failing to live up to this obligation.

I do not intend to argue here that, in our existing appreciative relationships, we have similar obligations directly to artworks. It is far from clear that we could even *have* such moral obligations to non-sentient objects. Even if we could, we certainly couldn't accrue such obligations by raising the expectations of artworks during our history of interaction with them—artworks generally being the kinds of objects which lack the ability to form expectations at all.⁴⁷

However, there is a way in which one's relationship with a work of art might lead one into a set of obligations—not to the artwork, but to other persons. Appreciative relationships with artworks are seldom private matters. In interpreting and appreciating a work of art, we often share it with others, and it matters to us whether other individuals find the same things that we do in the work. As Ted Cohen puts it:

It is somehow important to me that others respond to Aaron Neville's amazing version of "Will the Circle be Unbroken?" And I need others to gasp at the Bach-like character of Paul Desmond's saxophone. And I need others to shudder when Paul Celan says that Death is *ein Meister aus Deutschland*.⁴⁸

Often this impulse to share leads us directly into a very literal communities. Wagner lovers, Trekkies, and punk culture are three of the more well known examples, but not every community is so large or so established. Consider again my friend with whom I've come to develop an

⁴⁷Alan Tormey has argued that artworks have moral rights which generate obligations in Tormey, 1973. For a compelling argument to the contrary, see Sparshott, 1983.

⁴⁸Cohen, 1993, p. 153.

interest in the films of Almodóvar: our individual relationships with the films and our friendship have become entangled, to the extent that our shared appreciation of the films is partly constitutive of our friendship. It is an end that we share.

To the extent that our relationships with artworks put us into contact with a community of fellow appreciators, it is a short step towards the claim that we might generate expectations within the context of these communities which are obligation-grounding. Usually, our fellow appreciators expect us to be a willing conversant, to participate in a joint attempt to understand and appreciate the work, and perhaps to contribute to its preservation or dissemination.

The important question to ask is whether any of these obligations concern the continuation of our existing appreciative relationships with artworks. Is there an expectation, for example, within a community of Wagnerians that each of the individuals remain devoted to the Ring cycle, and will return year after year to see it performed? I think that it's undeniable that, if such an expectation exists, it is much weaker than the expectations that friends have concerning the continuation of their friendship. However, to the extent that we might view shared appreciation of an artwork as a shared end with other individuals—and to the extent that these individuals rely on us in continuing to pursue this end—it would seem that we have at least some responsibility to these individuals not to abandon this shared end without some compelling reason to do so.

Even if we might resist the language of obligation here, there is nevertheless a broader point worth making about the role that our relationships with works of art play in putting us in touch with a community of other persons who have similar relationships with the same artworks: It seems to me that we might come to value our membership within such communities in their own right. Being a member of the punk community, for example, is something which might be a valuable aspect of one's identity, or might involve a set of interpersonal relationships that one values. Membership in such communities is predicated upon one's maintaining an appreciative relationship with the artworks around which the community clusters. In undergoing the process of aesthetic idealization, by changing our appreciative relationships we might lose

our ticket to membership in the community. This would be a loss of something of value; and this might provide us with a reason—if not an obligation—not to trade up.

This may not be the weightiest reason not to aesthetically idealize; after all, the promise of richer and more fulfilling experiences might outweigh one's commitment to shared appreciation with a community of appreciators. However, there are further—and I think weightier—reasons to resist the pull of aesthetic idealization.

4.2 Artworks and the Self

Our appreciative relationships with artworks can have a major impact on our practical identities. As in friendships, in an appreciative relationship with an artwork we commit to a pattern of direction and interpretation that can have a major role to play in both the constitution and the understanding of the self.

Aesthetic idealization, insofar as it involves large-scale changes in our appreciative relationships, involves risks to the self similar to those I discussed in the case of upgrading one's friends. There is in the first case a threat to the volitional unity of an individual: in abandoning one's existing appreciative relationships, one also gives up on a number of practical identities connected with those relationships and with the activities and interests which they gave rise to and ultimately supported. To give up on my long-running relationship with, for example, *Star Wars* or *Moby Dick* would be to cut myself off from part of my practical identity. Practical identities change over time, of course, but insofar as aesthetic idealization would likely involve giving up on a large portion of those artworks with which I have existing appreciative relationships, this would constitute a major change in identity—the prospect of which might seem alienating. I might worry that, following aesthetic idealization, I would no longer be the same person.

A related concern—and a normative one—concerns the possibility that, if I were to aesthetically idealize, I would end up as a much less distinctive individual. Suppose that we *were* all ultimately successful in the process of aesthetic idealization. The result would be a world in which each individual shares the same aesthetic preferences; we would all prefer those works of

art which yield the most valuable experiences. Alexander Nehamas argues that this would be a repugnant outcome:

Imagine, if you can, a world where everyone likes, or loves, the same things, where every disagreement about beauty can be resolved. That would be a desolate, desperate world. Such a world, even if Shakespeare, Titian, and Bach were to be a part of it...would be no better (but also no worse) than a world where everyone tuned in to *Baywatch* or turned on Wayne Newton at the same time. What is truly frightful is not *what* everyone likes but simply the fact that *everyone* likes it.⁴⁹

What Nehamas's thought experiment invites us to consider is the value of being distinctive—not just with respect to one's artistic preferences, but also with respect to one's character. Like friendships, our relationships with artworks function as mechanisms for developing, understanding, and expressing something distinctive about ourselves. Such distinctiveness might be valuable in itself, aesthetically.⁵⁰ Were we to aesthetically idealize with respect to our appreciative relationships, our artistic preferences would become identical to those of every other individual who had aesthetically idealized—and so we would lose this means of differentiating ourselves from each other.

This worry about aesthetic idealization is similar to the worry that, in upgrading friends, I might worry about the sort of person that I would become as a result. Here, the thought is that in virtue of aesthetic idealization, even if I might become a person with much more fulfilling experiences with respect to works of art, I would also become a much less interesting individual.⁵¹ Retaining my existing appreciative relationships with artworks might seem to present a more attractive option—especially if I value distinctiveness and individuality to a greater extent than I value pleasure.

These considerations about our existing appreciative relationships provide us with reasons to resist the pull of aesthetic idealization. Of course, as is the case with upgrading our friends,

⁴⁹Nehamas, 2007, pp. 83-84.

⁵⁰cf. Jesse Prinz's engaging discussion of how punk culture encourages the cultivation of such distinctiveness in Prinz, 2014, pp. 587-591.

⁵¹Levinson is to some extent sensitive to this worry, which he refers to as the "paradox of aesthetic perfectionism" in Levinson, 2010. There, Levinson attempts to show that we might nevertheless retain some means of remaining distinctive even after we have become aesthetically ideal. For a convincing argument to the contrary, see Riggle, 2013.

there is nevertheless a very real possibility that, all things considered, our reasons to trade up to relationships with better works of art would be weightier than our reasons to stick with the works of art with which we have existing appreciative relationships. Whether or not we ought to trade up in individual cases will likely depend on how central certain appreciative relationships are to our practical identity, how antecedently distinctive our taste is, and how closely we are connected with communities of fellow appreciators. Even so, what the above examples show is that our choices with respect to art are subject to considerations that go beyond those which are solely concerned with maximizing the quality of our experiences. As I argue below, this presents a serious challenge to central Humean assumptions about our engagement with the arts.

4.3 Objections Considered

There are two objections to the above argument to consider: First, it might be objected that I've attributed too much to our relationships with works of art. Many of our interactions with works of art are less formal and less sustained than the sort I've appealed to above. Consider a few of the following examples: We often go to see movies and care very little about *what* we see so long as we are seeing something entertaining. Trashy novels keep us busy for a few days at the beach, but rarely make lasting impressions on us. We hang prints and paintings—even acknowledged masterpieces—in waiting rooms and lobbies and barely look at them. While we do have what might be called “relationships” with these objects, it would be absurd to characterize them in the same terms as we characterize our relationships with our close friends. These works of art aren't central to our lives; we often hardly give them a second thought.

By way of reply, first, a concession: I think that what this objection gets right is that our interactions with art—like our interactions with many things in life, including other people—often don't rise beyond the level of superficial (and perhaps instrumental) concern. But this in itself doesn't rule out the possibility that we could have more significant relationships with some works of art. Consider an analogy: many of my interpersonal relationships are purely

professional. It doesn't generally matter to me who my librarian, my dentist, or my mechanic is. I don't pay much attention to each of them as individuals, or to the nature of our relationship, so long as they are doing their job and we manage to get along together well enough. Even though many of our interpersonal relationships are similar, this doesn't mean that we can *never* have more significant friendships. The same is true with respect to relationships with works of art.

The second objection is more serious. Suppose that the Humean responds to my argument with the following claim: There are all sorts of reasons to adopt—or refrain from adopting—appreciative relationships with artworks. However, only a subset of these reasons are reasons of the right kind, i.e. those centrally connected to capacities of artworks to afford intrinsically valuable experiences. Consider the analogous case of belief: as *believers*, we ought to aim to track the truth, even though there may be pragmatic reasons not to do so. Similarly, the Humean objection goes, as *art appreciators* we ought to aim to make our artistic preferences track those artworks which yield the most intrinsically valuable experiences. Aesthetic idealization therefore still serves as the ideal for each of us *qua* art appreciator. The reasons I've identified to resist aesthetic idealization are at best reasons that have nothing to do with the activity of appreciating art.

In responding to the Humean, I think that we should challenge the contention that artistic appreciation ought ultimately to be sensitive only to the experiences that artworks offer. I think that an argument for such a challenge can be made using resources internal to the Humean position: Remember that, for the Humean, the ideal of artistic appreciation is the ideal critic. Is it the case that ideal critics are only sensitive in their appreciative preferences to the quality of experiences offered by artworks?

Although I cannot make the case fully here, I believe that there is good reason to believe that even at the highest levels of actual criticism, appreciative preferences are responsive to much more than this. Matthew Kieran has argued that “criticism of the highest order is shot through with art critical evaluations that are partly a function of personal experience and attitudes. The

features that are focused on, the ways those features are understood, and evaluations of the work often depend on personal assumptions and attitudes.”⁵² Many critics often confess as much. Consider the French poet and novelist Anatole France’s claims about his approach to doing literary criticism:

As I understand it, and as you allow me to practice it, criticism is...a sort of romance designed for those who have sagacious and curious minds, and every romance is, rightly taken, an autobiography. The good critic is he who relates the adventures of his own soul among masterpieces.⁵³

Taking Kieran and France seriously involves viewing criticism even at the ideal level as a kind of testimony about appreciative relationships with artworks which are sensitive to biographical and personal features of the critic just as much as they are sensitive to qualities of the artworks themselves.

If this is true, and ideal critics serve as a benchmark for the kinds of practices and activities characteristic of artistic appreciation, then it would be hard to maintain that such appreciation ought to be sensitive only to those qualities which the Humean has identified as being central to artistic appreciation—namely, the capacities of artworks to yield intrinsically valuable experiences. It is still open to the Humean to respond that even actual critics are not ideal with respect to their activity of artistic appreciation, but doing so would come at great cost to the Humean. Namely, if actual critics are not ideal, then their joint verdicts would no longer serve as a reliable guide in settling disputes about artistic value. This, I suspect, would be too steep a price to pay for the Humean.

5 Conclusion: Beyond Humeanism

The major shortcoming of the Humean approach seems to me to be its rather one dimensional picture of what a relationship with a work of art might consist in, and what our interests might be in developing such relationships. Significant relationships with works of art are not *only* a

⁵²Kieran, 2008, p. 287.

⁵³France, 1911, vol. 1, p. vii.

matter of experiencing a work and appreciating the value of this experience; like friendships, such relationships may furthermore consist in a history of actions, responses, commitments and direction that can make a significant difference to one's individual character. They are mechanisms of individuality, which often allow us to differentiate ourselves from other individuals. Insofar as such cultivation of an individual character is valuable in itself, and insofar as relationships with works of art, like significant personal relationships, play a valuable role in such a project, one can see both why the prospect of aesthetic idealization might seem so troubling *and* why we have a countervailing reason not to abandon our existing relationships even if the works of art with which we have established relationships are suboptimal with respect to their artistic value. In discussing the issue of aesthetic idealization, I've sketched the beginnings of an account of what it is to have a significant relationship with a work of art.

To date, consideration of such relationships is largely missing from the philosophy of art. Indeed, much contemporary philosophy of art systematically downplays the importance of these relationships, focusing almost exclusively on questions concerning the impartial evaluation of works of art. The primary question motivating these discussions is whether or not we can specify any objective, impartial, and rational method of coming to make judgments concerning artistic value independent of any particular historical relationships one might have with particular works of art. The Humean approach is the most influential attempt to provide such a method. This method is meant to apply *universally* to all works of art. As evaluators of art we are meant to be *impartial*; our own histories with works of art are downplayed as mere sentimental connections that, should we attempt to judge a work properly, we would have to ignore as a potential source of bias.

These questions are important; but in focusing on them the philosophy of art has left an important dimension of our artistic lives undertheorized. I take what I've said above to be the beginning of an attempt to remedy this omission; and I believe that, with further expansion, such an approach can yield substantial new insights into long-standing problems in the philosophy of art.

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