

# Investigators' Paradise: An Epistemic Formalist Theory of Aesthetic Norms

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"There much is lawful which is here unlawful  
unto our powers, by virtue of the place  
made for the human species as its own."

-Dante, Paradisio, Divine Comedy

## 1 Introduction

Despite the saying, "there's no arguing about taste" many people do find themselves arguing about the beauty of a film or the literary merit of a novel. Such arguments often have the following odd feature. We don't just hope to argue our opponents into agreeing that something is beautiful, but also into sharing our enjoyment of it. When someone denies that *Lolita* is a great novel, I am tempted to feel that they are not only wrong in believing that *Lolita* is not beautiful, but also somehow wrong or missing something in failing to enjoy reading it.

This temptation to demand that others *share* our response makes beauty seem importantly different from notions like edibility or being-hard-to-parse. If I am arguing with an idiot-savant who maintains that some mon-

strously convoluted sentence is not hard to parse, I will say that she has a false belief, but not that she is somehow wrong to have the psychologically abnormal response to the sentence which she does. Similarly if someone who is allergic to peanuts maintains that peanut butter and jelly sandwiches are not edible on the basis of her own experience, I will say that she has a false belief but not that she is somehow wrong or missing something in having this biologically unusual reaction.

Now, can it really be the case that people who enjoy certain novels are getting things right and those who don't enjoy them are getting things wrong? The very idea of facts about what experiences ought, or ought not, give one pleasure can seem extremely counter-intuitive.

In this paper I will propose a loosely Kantian theory of a definite, but attractively weak, sense in which failing to enjoy a work of literature can be wrong. I will then show how this theory solves some problems that beset major existing answers to this question. (I will leave aside the question of whether it can be extended to make sense of disputes about taste concerning objects that aren't works of literature).

In a nutshell, my idea is that the component of our pleasure in a novel that's relevant to arguments about taste is the epistemic pleasure of satisfied curiosity. If we follow Kant in using 'beauty' as a label for the kind of aesthetic merit we can demand that others share our enjoyment of, I propose that beautiful works of literature are ones that "facilitate... the play of the two mental powers (intellect and imagination) [in] that proportioned attunement which we require for cognition in general"<sup>1</sup> in the following

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<sup>1</sup>[Kant, 2001] 220

sense. A question can be epistemically motivated by a given set of information; for example, certain patterns in a series of measurements can ‘cry out for explanation’ in the sense that they make it rational to look for some underlying explanation of the pattern in question. We can identify works of literature with something like a set of syntactic facts about the text together with common knowledge<sup>2</sup> for a linguistic community. When so understood, some works of literature have the feature that merely following up on epistemically motivated questions suffices to generate a chain of repeatedly aroused and satisfied curiosity, and thereby (under normal circumstances) an experience of pleasure. Thus the person who is bored by a beautiful novel will indeed be ‘missing something’ - in the sense that they are either failing to ask an epistemically motivated question or failing to appreciate how the set of information that is the work of literature gives us evidence that bears on that question.

## **2 The Theory**

### **2.1 Initial motivation**

The initial motivation for my proposal comes from a combination of two ideas. First, there’s the Kantian idea that only a certain component of our enjoyment of a great work of art has the special feature that others are in some sense wrong not to share this enjoyment. Kant associates the term ‘beauty’ with this special aesthetic response that we can demand that others share, and then discusses response to beauty as something distinct from

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<sup>2</sup>[Lewis, 1969]

other positive aesthetic reactions like feelings of agreeableness, charm and the sublime. I will follow him in this convention.

Second, there's the currently fashionable idea that a significant part of our enjoyment of art comes from the pleasures of investigation: pleasure in noticing patterns and making discoveries. Literary critic Brian Boyd writes that, "Art concentrates and plays with the world's profusion of intersecting and interrelated patterns"[Boyd, 2009]. Cognitive scientist Steven Pinker picturesquely hypothesizes that human production and enjoyment of art amounts to a kind of cognitive lock-picking which (among other things) allows us to get at the pleasures of investigating our environment on the cheap. There's evolutionary benefit to knowing things about our environment, so we have evolved to seek out and enjoy making certain kinds of discoveries. But making art objects allows us to get at this pleasure without the dangerous journey and costly experiments which investigating natural objects and systems can often involve, by artificially producing items that allow for lots of whatever kind of discoveries we find pleasurable to make.[Pin, 1999]

Putting these points together, we might tie beauty to this epistemic component of aesthetic enjoyment, and say (roughly) that beautiful literature is literature that is particularly dense with opportunities for pleasurable investigation. Beautiful objects are ones that not only allow for pleasurable discoveries but lead us on a whole cascade of pleasurable discoveries, in which our curiosity aroused and satisfied by discoveries which themselves raise further questions.

This idea seems promising in that it would explain how we can some-

times hope to argue people into sharing our pleasurable response to a beautiful object. For, on the one hand, if a beautiful object sends *me* off on a cascade of pleasurable discoveries, I might well hope to get you to share that pleasure by making the evidence for some of these discoveries salient to you, or displaying the methods I used to make them, and thus putting you in a position to make the same kind of discoveries yourself. On the other hand, if a work doesn't send me off on a chain of apparent discoveries but it does have that effect on you, there's a sense in which your response might be wrong: the propositions which you think you have discovered may be wrong or unsupported by your evidence. In this case, I might be able to argue you out of your appreciation of a work by convincing you that the apparent discoveries about descriptive features of the work which you found so much pleasure are wrong.

This idea also seems to fit the further puzzling datum that people sometimes cite and argue for non-aesthetic facts about a work when trying to get someone to appreciate it (e.g., "look how this character is very tactful while in the grips of obsession"), while not accepting anything like the general claim that novels with the relevant features tend to be more beautiful than average. Perhaps the aim of such arguments is not to offer evidence for the beauty of the work, but rather to offer evidence for a central non-aesthetic discovery about the work, such that knowing it will put an investigator in a better position to make many other pleasurable discoveries on their own.

## 2.2 The Problem

But there's a problem. What does it mean for a work of literature to 'offer' opportunities for such a chain of pleasurable curiosity and discovery? There are infinitely many true propositions about *any* string of words, hence plausibly infinitely many things that one could in principle be curious about and enjoy discovering with regard to any work of literature.

If we merely appeal to facts about what (up to vagueness) typically makes people curious to distinguish some works from others, then we lose the idea that there's any sense in which someone who doesn't enjoy a work that invites pleasurable investigation is making a mistake. For, such a person *might* be failing to enjoy the work because they have failed to notice some pattern that would indeed arouse their curiosity, or because they failed to notice some suitable explanation for this pattern. But they might, instead, fail enjoy investigating what most people enjoy investigating because their curiosity is stirred by different things. And it's hard to see any sense in which the mere fact that, say, the majority of people are very inclined to become curious about how scenarios involving power, sex, and deception would play out in accordance with folk psychological laws and hence enjoy contemplating such scenarios, could make it wrong for someone not to share those patterns of curiosity.

## 2.3 The Proposal

To address this problem of blameless variations in what makes people curious, I propose to follow Kant in appealing to epistemic norms for how to

investigate the world around us. I will define a sense in which a piece of literature can invite us to go on certain chains of investigation in terms of these epistemic norms. Then I will propose that we understand beauty and norms for aesthetic enjoyment in terms of the structure of these invitations to investigation.

For concreteness and simplicity, I will take a work of literature to be an ordered pair whose elements are: a list of the strings of symbols that make up the work in question and a set of propositions that are common knowledge<sup>3</sup> for some linguistic community (usually this will be a community in which an instance of that text was composed or published as original work). Identifying a work of literature with this kind of ⟨text, community common knowledge⟩ pair allows us to say that the (verbally identical) novels produced by Cervantes and Pierre Maynard in Jorge Luis Borges' famous story constituted different works of literature, and hence make sense of the intuitive idea that they could have different literary critical properties.<sup>4</sup>

Now, what are the relevant norms of investigation?

Certain kinds of patterns of data can “cry out for explanation” relative to a set of background information. For example, given most normal background information, the following questions seem like appropriate topics for further investigation ‘Why did this coin come up heads 10000 times?’

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<sup>3</sup>I mean ‘common knowledge’ in the sense analyzed by [Lewis, 1969]. If P is common knowledge in a community then each community member knows that P, and knows that each other member knows that P and knows that each other member knows that they know etc. See [com, 2011] for technical issues about how exactly to spell this out

<sup>4</sup>The ontology of art is a huge topic of debate in it's own right, from [Wol, 1980] and [Collingwood, 1958] to [Tomasson, 2004]. I will state my proposal in terms of this simple theory, but I see no reason why it would not generalize to more nuanced ones.

'Why did this person pose, but then evade, answering that question?'. In contrast other questions like 'why did the coin come up 10001010...?' or 'why did this person use a word that's an anagram for "green Steve"' do not. Roughly, spending time looking for explanations of the first set of regularities seems like a good way to go about investigating the world, whereas looking for an explanation for the regularities in the second set. Obviously there are huge questions to be asked here, in epistemology and philosophy of science. All I need for my purposes is that we have some such notion of a sense in which a fact can either cry out for explanation or (in less extreme cases) make looking for a certain kind of explanation epistemically reasonable.

In addition to this sense in which looking for certain kinds of explanation can be motivated, there are presumably also more familiar epistemic norms concerning justification i.e. facts about when a proposed explanation is sufficiently well supported by a given set of background beliefs to warrant accepting that explanation.

Now I propose that *a work of literature is beautiful* (i.e. aesthetically enjoyable in the particular way that others would be somehow mistaken not to share) to the extent that merely approaching it with a continual willingness to investigate motivated questions and then believe whatever answers to these questions the evidence supports, suffices to generate sufficiently long chains of curiosity which lead to discoveries which raise questions and lead to more curiosity etc.

More formally, we might define a tree of investigative opportunities as follows. Think of the list of symbols plus common knowledge that make

up a work of literature as an initial belief set. Now, the facts about what regularities in the text “cry out for explanation”, combine with the more familiar epistemic norms for when a hypothesis is sufficiently supported by a set of background knowledge to justify accepting that hypothesis, to determine a relation between belief sets as follows. Given some initial belief set, there will be a fact about which other belief sets you could get to by asking some epistemically motivated question and then accepting some explanation which is adequately supported by that initial belief set. So the relation ties each belief set to all the other ones which you could get to by one step of epistemically motivated and justified investigation.

This gives us a tree structure whose nodes correspond to different stages of justified and epistemically motivated investigation. The ‘root’ node of the tree is initial data set which you get from the text plus common knowledge that constitute the work of literature. Each node has, as children, all the other nodes which it bears the relation defined above to (that is: all the other belief sets you could get to by asking an epistemically motivated question, and then believing the answer to that question).

Now, to say that a work of literature ‘quickens the harmonious free play of our investigative faculties’ in the sense we are interested in, is then to say that merely following out epistemically motivated questions leads to a long chain of discoveries. In terms of the tree that means that a) most nodes on the tree have many branches and b) the length of the shortest path through the tree is very large.

If this is right, then we have a real but indirect connection between beauty and pleasure. Good investigation requires of beautiful objects re-

quires a cascade looking for certain kinds of explanations and then finding them. Each such experience of satisfied curiosity is, under normal circumstances, pleasurable.

Thus, we can make sense of the idea that our interlocutor is wrong to be bored by *Lolita* as follows. The text of *Lolita* contains patterns such that merely (being a person that enjoys satisfying their curiosity and) repeatedly applying the tools of mere intellectual due diligence to it results in a pleasurable series of discoveries which raise curiosity and are satisfied by new discoveries etc. So, there's a portion of my enjoyment of *Lolita*, the pleasure that comes from this kind of literary-critical treasure hunt, which anyone who feels pleasure in satisfied curiosity, and lives up to this minimal intellectual due diligence would share. Hence, if some interlocutor of mine isn't going on such a volley of pleasurable reflection, it is because they have at at least one point failed to notice the kind of facts that merely continuing to follow up on epistemically motivated questions would reveal.

### **3 Contrast with major alternatives**

By positing a fairly indirect relationship between beauty, pleasure, and norms my theory avoids worries that plague other major strategies for accounting for making sense of aesthetic norms.

#### **3.1 Response Dependence**

For example, a familiar 'first pass' proposal is that an object is beautiful iff everyone/everyone in a certain linguistic community would be inclined to

enjoy it, if they had full descriptive knowledge of the world and all the various descriptive properties of the novel. This proposal is appealing because of its metaphysical modesty and naturalism, together with its simple way of cashing out the idea that someone who is bored by a great novel is missing something: if they knew all the descriptive facts about the novel they would enjoy it, so (in this sense) their failure to enjoy the novel reflects that they are missing out on some of these descriptive facts. However, it also faces immediate problems.

First, it is not clear that counterfactual questions about what a given person would like if they had full descriptive information will have well-defined answers. For psychological responses might depend on the order in which full information was acquired. For example suppose (as seems quite psychologically possible) that learning A before B would lead you to like a certain novel, and learning B before A would lead you to dislike it. If the worlds in which you learn A before B and B before A are equally close to the actual world, then the counterfactual 'if you learned all the descriptive facts, would you like the novel?' will not have a well defined answer.

Second, it is far from clear that there are any aesthetic responses which would be shared by everyone in our language community if they had full information. Many different things seem to play into our overall pleasure in a novel, ranging from nostalgia to hobbies to interests in a certain subject matter to sexual preference to deeply entrenched disgust for certain subject matters etc. It is far from clear that adding full descriptive information and time to consider etc. would erase these effects. So the simple idealization account just described threatens to generate the conclusion that almost

nothing is beautiful (or ugly).

In contrast, by appealing to facts about what's mathematically possible to get by repeatedly applying certain kinds of epistemically good changes in one's belief state, my theory considers a kind of idealization which doesn't involve any appeal to murky counterfactuals, or imply that judgements of beauty commit us to controversial psychological claims about convergence in these counterfactual scenarios. Then, by connecting beauty to pleasure through the fact that making these kinds of investigative transition is pleasurable, we get a suitably weak connection between beauty and overall pleasure in the work of art. For, since facts about beauty correspond to only one component of our aesthetic response to a work (pleasure in satisfying the kind of curiosity that's involved in any investigation of the work) there is no implication that avoiding the kinds of mistakes we make when we fail to appreciate beauty would lead to convergence in our overall response to a work.

Putting this same point more positively, it seems *prima facie* plausible that a work can have *some* special importance and charm for us, which it is neither a mistake for us to have, nor a mistake for others not to share. For example, some people living in America who find their homes bland and commonplace can get a certain kind of pleasure out of seeing how American roadside advertisements and diners can seem perilously enchanted while reading *Lolita*. It seemsto me that this additional pleasure in the text is not in any sense a mistake, but that also not be a mistake for, say, a confident Parisian, not to share this pleasure. By distinguishing beauty as only one component of our artistic pleasure in a beautiful object (the component

that will be felt by anyone who investigates the object well) we can make sense of this intuition. *Lolita* has a certain epistemological structure such that anyone who investigates it will thereby go through a series of pleasurable experiences of curiosity raised and satisfied. Insofar as the Parisian doesn't share *this*, they will be making a mistake. But if, in addition to this, they don't feel the further surprise and satisfaction the American feels at shifting from his usual way of thinking about common brand names and his home town to imaginatively participating in Humbert's way of thinking about these things, they are not thereby making a mistake.

Conversely, if the Parisian investigates well, and feels a slight pleasure in investigating all the details, surprises and patterns in *Lolita*, but this is overwhelmed by frustration at the fact that English has overtaken French at the international language, or unhappy memories of a visit to America, they are also not thereby making a mistake. All we have is the psychological claim that people get pleasure at finding answers when they are looking for them, and the epistemological claims that good investigation requires looking for answers to certain questions, and certain sets of data give enough evidence for provisionally adopting certain answers.

### **3.2 Obligations to the work**

Another, somewhat less popular, approach is to say that it can be wrong to be bored by a great work of literature because we have some kind of obligation to enjoy beautiful works. This strategy is naturally suggested by Kant's talk of a demand that others share one's enjoyment. However, spelling out this approach seems to generate overly strong consequences

for what people should do and how people should respond to objects of beauty.

For example, if we think of the beauty of a work as generating a kind of obligation to enjoy it, then (since enjoying a work presumably requires experiencing it) we would have a vast number of duties: duties to seek out and experience every beautiful work. Presumably that it not the case.

At a second pass, one might say that we have an obligation to enjoy beautiful works, if we experience them. But this seems far too strong. Surely we would not want to say that someone who is forced to read a great novel while their parents are being tortured to death, or a great novel which they strongly associate with the experience of watching their parents being tortured to death ought to feel pleasure.

Here the proponent of obligations to the beautiful might respond by saying that these obligations are very weak and easily overcome or suspended by grizzly situations like the above. But this fails to explain the intuitive difference between someone who choses to improve their stamp collection instead of reading *Lolita*, (or only to read *Lolita* during nauseating cancer surgery which ensures that they won't be able to concentrate and fully enjoy it) and someone who reads *Lolita* under normal circumstances, is bored by it, and bases a judgement that *Lolita* is not beautiful on this claim. Both people are going back on their supposed duty to enjoy the novel - if anything the person who reads the novel and is bored comes closer to fulfilling this duty than the person who memorizes baseball facts instead. Neither is satisfying any apparently more urgent obligation instead. Yet we (or I at least) have far more of a temptation to say that the

person who reads *Lolita* in normal circumstances <sup>5</sup>, and still is bored by it is getting something wrong.

In contrast to the above, my proposal that anyone who fails to take pleasure in *Lolita* is getting something wrong in that they are thereby failing to investigate *Lolita* well avoids these strong conclusions. For, failing to do a good job of investigating some item only amounts to responding wrongly in a person who either is or should be trying to investigate that item well. But whether it be because one's parents are being tortured or simple because one has some kind of pet project of memorizing baseball scores, it can be perfectly reasonable to choose not to investigate a given novel at a given time. Thus, we get the intuitive conclusion that a literary critic who reads *Lolita* under normal circumstances and tries to investigate it, yet gets no pleasure from it, is thereby responding wrongly. For he has chosen to try to investigate it thoroughly, and he is failing to follow up on at least one epistemically motivated question or failing to see how the evidence set associated with the text bears on that question. But we do not get the stronger, unattractive, conclusion that someone who fails to enjoy the novel because some other claim on their attention prevents them from even trying to investigate the novel thoroughly is thereby responding wrongly.

#### **4 Platitudes and argumentative practice**

Finally, I'd like to briefly suggest that the proposal advocated in this paper accounts fits well a number of more specific features of the way we carry

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<sup>5</sup>Roughly: in circumstances under which they would be willing to base an aesthetic appraisal on their experiences.

on debates about beauty, and which descriptive features we take to be correlated with beauty.

Novels are praised for having: inventive use of language, vivid and complex but coherent characters and artistic 'unity'. All of these are features which invite the reader to look for, and then allow them to find, explanations for regularities in the novel. Inventive use of language is unusual in a way that cries out for explanation, and then has an explanation. Vivid characters are ones whose particular actions "fit together" in the sense that they might be explained in terms of some kind of folk psychological theory about the personality of the character. Vivid characters seem complex when they act in ways that are initially surprising given a plausible simple theory of their personality and situation (and hence cry out for further explanation) but where this explanation can then be given. More generally, one might say that a unified-seeming work of art is one where parts of the work of art can be explained in terms of other parts of it: so that a good investigator would correctly detect that some aspect of the work has a further explanation and then find themselves in a position to actually give that explanation based on the text and common knowledge associated with the work. Finally, my neo-Kantian theory fits comically well with the platitude that 'great art makes you think'.

Finally, a bit more speculatively, novels often seem to be criticized by saying that the novel "is just a" such-and-such: just a phantasy of saving the day and being admired, just pornography, just a list of all the author's interactions and fantasies of interacting with high-society, just a tear-jerker, just a piece of propaganda against current divorce laws etc. If the beauty

of a work is a matter of allowing for long or perhaps infinite cascades of explanation, then the obvious way to show that a given work is not beautiful would be to exhibit a point where the cascade comes to an end: a point where nothing further cries out for explanation, or we have reason to think that any further regularities that do cry out for explanation cannot be explained merely in terms of the text plus common knowledge. So perhaps to feel with disappointment that some novel is “just” pornography, as opposed to merely being a novel that’s enjoyably sexual, is to feel that most or any patterns in the work which aren’t plausibly explained by an authorial intention to make the work more sexual (why do fruits keep re-occurring in the novel? why are all the machines in the novel described in such detail?) can only be explained by appeal to facts outside the text, plus common knowledge for the novel e.g. the author of the novel was an electronics hobbyist. Novels are then defended by saying that the relevant facts allow for explanations based on features within the novel (e.g. the constant sexuality serves to...).

## **5 Conclusion**

In this paper I have proposed a connection between beauty and pleasure, and a (rather weak) sense in which anyone who doesn’t share our pleasure in a beautiful work is missing something. On this theory the beauty of a work is a feature of its epistemic form: the tree of conjectures and inferences which it motivates. Beautiful works have the feature that merely following up on epistemically motivated questions suffices to generate a

chain of repeatedly aroused and satisfied curiosity, and thereby (under normal circumstances) an experience of pleasure.

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