

# Can Aesthetics Be Global?

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## Abstract

Philosophical aesthetics is to some extent beholden to what I will call personal aesthetics. By personal aesthetics, I mean the phenomena of individual aesthetic sensitivity: how each of us discerns and responds to elements of experience. I take that sensitivity to be finely woven into feeling to some degree at home in the world. There is something extremely local, and in a certain sense unreflective, about personal aesthetics – it is hard to notice one's own, historically specific aesthetic formation. Philosophical aesthetics, meanwhile, aspires to understand aesthetic life in a more reflective and general way. Aesthetic theories in the Western tradition, like most philosophical theories, try to articulate universally relevant and illuminating theoretical concepts and values. But can a theory of this kind acknowledge what is important at the level of personal aesthetics? Can aesthetic theories find fruitful application while also respecting the locality and variability of aesthetic sensitivity? What kinds of theoretical ambition and humility are called for in philosophical aesthetics?

## 1. Introduction

This essay considers the scope and aims of aesthetics, a branch of philosophy. I typically take this branch of philosophy – what it is, what counts as 'doing aesthetics' – for granted, roughly because I am immersed in it and find it hard to step back and question the bigger picture. On this occasion, however, I examine a big-picture issue, concerning what happens to philosophical goals when they meet the core phenomena of aesthetic life. Can the following three things be triangulated?

- a) The individuality and cultural located-ness of each of our aesthetic lives;
- b) the aim of aesthetics to account for aesthetic life in philosophical terms;
- c) the aim of philosophy to formulate concepts, principles, and theories with universal relevance.

The partially negative answer that I reach – to the effect that aesthetic life resists some kinds of philosophical theorising – will be paired with some positive suggestions about what aesthetics can fruitfully do. I certainly do not want to cast doubt on the value of aesthetics;

I hope this discussion can even help to indicate and explain its importance. But my argument does suggest that aesthetics is difficult, and particularly difficult when taking the fully wide human world as its domain. Aesthetics calls for care, self-questioning, expanded knowledge and perspectives, and constructive, bridge-building philosophical labour.

Let me note at the outset that this discussion intersects with extensive debates on the problem of imposing, and assuming the validity of, one aesthetic tradition over others. These debates highlight the harms and injustice of entrenching a hierarchy of cultures, nations, races, or classes by aesthetic means – by elevating one socially-politically-economically powerful set of aesthetic values and practices over others. Activities of conquest, colonisation, enslavement, and exploitation have often (always?) incorporated aesthetic expectations and values into processes of control and denigration.<sup>1</sup> Aesthetic demands have been put in the service of unjust domination. But my triangulation question does not take the wrongs of aesthetic domination as its focus. It is a – perhaps unsatisfyingly abstract! – question about meeting the expectations for a philosophical aesthetics, while reckoning with a globe's worth of aesthetic life. Even if thinkers are not motivated or moulded by aims of aesthetic domination, and are motivated to understand and theorise fairly, what philosophical difficulties do they face? My possibly naïve speculative claim – and my hope – is that aesthetic 'global domination' is indeed not realisable. Aesthetic life goes on and evolves without top-down permission and control, despite the huge efforts and impact of political and empire-seeking movements, commercialisation, industrial modes of production, and social media. Ideally, philosophical aesthetics can play a role in helping us to understand, appreciate, and sustain the control-resistant nature of aesthetic life.

## **2. Philosophy and the Aim of Universality**

Turning to the triangulation question, I will start at the bottom of my list and work up, from (c) a basic aim of philosophy, to (b) a basic aim of aesthetics, to (a) the realities of aesthetic life. By positing a basic aim of philosophy, I risk or even doom myself to misrepresenting a multifarious practice with all sorts of aims. For the purposes of this

<sup>1</sup> For a few routes into these debates, see Gates (1988), Shusterman (1989), Blocker (2001), Bhushan (2009), Radano and Olaniyan (2016), Taylor (2016), Maira (2017), and Nzegwu (2019).

argument, I take that risk in order to articulate the problem I am interested in with respect to philosophical aesthetics. But I grant that one way to respond to my argument would be to dispute and reject the universalising ambition that I attribute to philosophy. In any case, this is an aim in the sense of an aspiration and a self-conception: what one conceives of oneself as striving for, when doing philosophy, and how people identify philosophy, rather than a description of what philosophically aimed endeavours actually achieve.

A modest way to articulate the aim I posit for philosophy is to say that philosophy aims to achieve general and deeper understanding of reality. Achieving generality and depth requires offering ideas, principles, conceptual relationships, and evaluative frameworks that give insight into reality, that account for the nature and value of things, rather than describing, recording, causally explaining, and predicting the cornucopia of historically particular fact. Philosophical generality and depth, as aspirations, rest themselves on a somewhat nebulous assumption that there are deeper, general levels of understanding to be had.

Now, how general does philosophical understanding aim to be? The less modest articulation of the aim is that philosophy seeks universal validity. A claim can be general if it avoids attributing properties to a specific individual, but it might do that by concerning a quite limited, contextually focused section of reality. Claims about all carrot cakes from that bakery or about some UK prime ministers are general in that sense (and even logically universal in the cake case), but they are unpromising as philosophical claims. Universality as an aim in philosophy seems both to have to do with the kinds of things considered – broad categories that putatively have application to all people (mind and body, self and other, happiness, knowledge, ethical character, death and immortality, freedom; not carrot cake or UK prime ministers) and with the kind of audience and acceptability they aspire to. This universality is not equivalent to using the universal quantifier ('All Fs are Gs'); a claim such as 'some lies are virtuous' can hold the universal aspiration I am trying to sketch. Such a claim would be offered with the hope or expectation that, given relevant explanation and support, any person could understand the possibility of combining lying and virtue. A philosophical claim aims to have significance and force for people in general, not for a targeted audience (even if the actually interested, engaged audience for a philosophical claim can be pretty small). Trying to avoid the limitations not only of any given individual's perspective and concerns, but of historically limited societies and cultures, a universal philosophical claim would be intended to apply

wherever and whenever the topic of the claim has a foothold in reality (whenever there are minds and bodies, selves and others, conditions that allow for happiness, knowledge, beings that can lie, *et cetera*). The foothold can be partly speculative or hypothetical, engaging with conditions that have not been and may never be realised ('if robots achieve consciousness'; 'if everyone were behind a veil of ignorance'; 'if there were a beautiful world with no minds in it'; 'if the rulers were lovers of wisdom') but that nonetheless can be held to promise insight into real people's concerns. Note that this account of philosophy's aim does build in a limitation in scope by tying philosophy to human concerns. I am taking philosophy to be a human project, one that tries to understand things that figure in and can matter to the reality and experience of human beings.

Universality as an aim sounds outrageous and arrogant. How could one take oneself to be in a position to make claims that could reasonably be thought to apply to or concern anyone? Let me note that philosophers are often cautious about how ambitiously to frame their aims. Philosophy is frequently characterised in terms of the questions it poses – 'the big questions' – allowing for a reserved or non-committal attitude toward the status of the answers.<sup>2</sup> But I take it that the bigness of the questions is implicitly supposed to be met by the bigness of the answers. Exactly how big may often be left unspoken, but if their scope were explicitly limited in certain ways – 'this philosophical thought is pertinent to you, Eileen, right now, but it doesn't matter beyond that' or 'this is pertinent to understanding reality and value in Dakar in 1776 (or Coventry in the 1990s, or Phnom Penh today, or Lima in 2050)' – that would cast doubt on their 'philosophicality'.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> A number of philosophy textbook titles refer to 'the big questions' to demarcate the subject. Roger Scruton and others further distinguish philosophy's questions methodologically: 'philosophical questions arise at the end of all other enquiries, when questions about particular things, events and practical difficulties have been solved according to the methods available, and when either those methods themselves, or some metaphysical doctrine which they seem to presuppose, are put in question' (Scruton, 1995, p. 6). Similarly, the 'purpose of philosophy [...] is truth, truth with respect to fundamental and general questions, typically questions whose answering has not yet been made a matter of settled method' (Honderich, 1984, p. 12). 'We are doing philosophy when we engage in dialogue about problems that are important to our culture but we don't agree about the method for solving them' (Van Norden, 2017, p. 142).

<sup>3</sup> Of course there are difficulties here, e.g., philosophical issues that hang on specific historical conditions and movements (nation-states,

This conception of philosophy is likely to seem stubbornly Euro-Anglo-centric, one of the many legacies of Plato, who has Socrates in the *Republic* distinguish the philosophers – ‘those who are capable of apprehending that which is permanent and unvarying’ – from ‘those who wander erratically in the midst of plurality and variety’ (Plato, 2019, 484b). Julian Baggini sees this legacy from Plato, that the ideal of knowledge is ‘timeless, placeless, eternal and unchanging’ (Baggini, 2020, p. 25), as running up against an inevitable tension: ‘the attempt to transcend the particularities of the individual thinker and her time and place can only be made by specific individuals in specific times and places’, and he charges Anglophone philosophy with ignoring this tension (Baggini, 2020, p. 24). Baggini argues that philosophy can give up on ‘placeless universality’ as a goal and still seek objective truth or greater objectivity, by seeking out the ‘many clear views’ held within different traditions. We can increase objectivity by multiplying and comparing the philosophical views that have made sense to different peoples in different times and places. This process would be able to make manifest the parochial nature of many Western philosophical concerns. Baggini cites as an example the notion of free will that has been central to Anglo-European debates but is not central to or even available in various other traditions; if we can appreciate its limitations by studying other traditions, that will ‘contribute to a more objective understanding of human freedom and its limits’ (Baggini, 2020, p. 29). Baggini notes Bryan Van Norden and Jay Garfield’s call for many philosophy departments to make plain their cultural narrowness and concomitant neglect of many philosophical traditions through renaming, e.g., as ‘Department of European and American Philosophy’: ‘This simple change would make the domain and mission of these departments clear’ (Van Norden and Garfield, 2016). Otherwise, ‘departments can hide behind the name “philosophy,” which represents a topic with cosmopolitan significance, to disguise the fact that their

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secularism, feminism, artificial intelligence, genetic modification). My claim is that efforts to address these issues philosophically would include, in attending to contextually specific conditions, the aim of making sense of those conditions to anyone. A different difficulty, the fact that philosophers can hold ‘particularist’ views – e.g., ‘a particularist conception of morality [...] which sees little if any role for moral principles’ (Dancy, 2004, p. 1) – was suggested to me as evidence that philosophers can reject universality. But a philosopher defending particularism is likely to defend it as *the* way to understand moral judgement, whenever and wherever there is such a thing as moral judgement.

approach is indefensibly parochial' (Van Norden, 2017, p. 35). Like Baggini, Van Norden and Garfield suggest that globally inclusive study of philosophy would multiply our philosophical resources: 'Non-European philosophical traditions offer distinctive solutions to problems discussed within European and American philosophy, raise or frame problems not addressed in [that] tradition, or emphasize and discuss more deeply philosophical problems that are marginalized' (2016). As with Baggini's point about achieving more objective understanding, the suggestion here is that a more globally inclusive philosophical practice would not just increase the diversity of traditions studied, with each preserving its distinct cultural-linguistic affiliations and intellectual concerns. New philosophical activity would be generated, new ideas, questions, and solutions would be available due to the expansion, comparison, and sharing of resources.

It is not easy to say whether the result of such mutual interaction and influence would generate what could be called a global or more global philosophical practice. We have not given this kind of philosophical evolution much of a chance to occur. Rather than speculate about that, let me make a few comments about how to reckon with the diversity of philosophical traditions vis-à-vis aspirations to universality. The first is that the idea of different traditions fruitfully interacting suggests that there is some prospect of doing philosophy with less clear or less committed 'location'. The impact of one's historical and cultural location on one's philosophical orientation is in any case complex, not settling, for instance, whether one is a physicalist or idealist or committed to the centrality of reason, emotion, divinity, or chance. The unsettled or unsettling potential of philosophy is perhaps hinted at in the claims that philosophical problems lack agreed methods of resolution, if this means they are persistently open to new attempts at articulation and reflection. Second, even if philosophical activity is inevitably located in place, time, and culture and is inevitably shaped by that location, that does not rule out that what makes it philosophical is in part the – indeed arrogant – aspiration to reach universally significant understanding. When Van Norden refers to the term 'philosophy' as representing a 'topic with cosmopolitan significance', that could be an earnest identity, despite the great difficulty of achieving such significance. Here is a sample of ideas from different traditions, taken on faith from scholars who know more about these traditions than I do. On Navajo metaphysics, 'Things and beings, events and conditions, processes and powers, are neither good nor evil, or are potentially both good and evil' (Witherspoon, 1980, p. 9). 'The social ideal of

Mencian relational ethics is a harmonious community of persons cultivating themselves to live ethically within a network of relationships' (Tan, 2014, p. 502). 'In India a philosophical system is one which is pertinent to the ultimate supreme value of mankind, the gaining of liberation [...]. What is sought is truth; what truth is is itself a philosophical question' (Potter, 2015, p. 38). Potter continues to note differing Vaisesika and Nyaya systems with different lists of 'the "reals," the stuff of which everything else is made' (Potter, 2015, p. 43). Now, one cannot simply read off a claim to universality from formulations of such ideas, and people often fail to reflect – and get away with not reflecting – on the scope and conditionality of their claims. Exactly what one is committing oneself to may not be transparent to the one making such a claim. My limited point is that part of why these ideas register as philosophical is that they appear to claim universality. They are trying to get at truths that matter to human life in some contextually unbounded way. They seem to aspire to relevance to anyone at any time, and I offer this aspiration as a marker of the philosophical.

Let me close this section by noting that, if we do not attach this aim to philosophy, charges of parochialism seem to lose critical force. If a philosophical view is subject to counterexample and critique when it makes contact with other traditions, that suggests it is supposed to have relevance beyond the social-cultural home in which it emerges. It can be an important objection to a philosophical claim that it unwittingly assumes the validity of merely local and contingent conditions. In any case, highlighting the contextual located-ness of a philosophical view does not seem to rule out counting it against that view if it fails to apply or make sense beyond that context. Now, universality may be a doomed and crazy thing to aim for! Perhaps every philosophical claim from every tradition could look pointless, unilluminating, or false from some other angle. I doubt that this is true, but in any case my preferred view is that universal understanding, albeit arrogant and ripe for presumptuous imposition, is an important human aspiration. It opens us to test and challenge from all comers. The philosopher should not be able to deflect criticism by saying that a given idea makes sense here, 'to us', and does not have to do more than that.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> See Mitova (2020), and the special issue of *Philosophical Papers* she introduces, for sharp analysis of the need to undo the 'self-arrogated hegemonic authority' of the Anglo-European tradition (p. 191). My thought here is that it is the hegemonic authority that is the problem that calls for decolonialising projects, rather than the universal ambitions of any philosophical tradition.

### 3. The Philosophical Aim of Aesthetics

This section sketches a conception of aesthetics that is not the one I want to end up with; it is nonetheless one that I work with and loosely take for granted. It reflects my education and location within Anglo-European philosophy. The point of this sketch is to help show the difficulty of doing what seems to be expected of aesthetics, if understood in these terms. Aesthetics has a reason for being because human life has an aesthetic dimension. If one studied human life and focused on, say, its moral, physical, political, religious, and cognitively significant dimensions, but failed to recognise any aesthetically significant activity, something large – and I would say important – would be left out. Very broadly, the aesthetic dimension of life encompasses our experiential sensitivity and responsiveness. We do not merely acquire information (in some hard-to-imagine, non-aesthetically-encoded way) and then orient ourselves to the world on the basis of that information; we have qualitative experience of the world and respond to that experience. We attend to salient aspects of experience, find patterns, gestalts, contrasts and similarities, feel affectively moved, and assess experience, in everything from mildly pro and con terms to responses of elation and repulsion. Now, even within the limited philosophical tradition I know best, there is not a particularly compelling consensus about what aesthetics does or should concern, given that broad starting point. The aesthetic dimension can be understood to include almost every waking minute of life, given that we are rarely not attending and responding to experience in some way. But usually the focus is taken to be on what can be particularly valuable in experience. This had led to extensive articulation and consideration of specifically aesthetic values, such as the beautiful and the sublime, as well as to approaching aesthetics as the philosophy of art, construing art as a domain devoted to the deliberate shaping of valuable experience.<sup>5</sup> Especially in its attention to art, aesthetics ends up concerning

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See also Chimakonam (2017) on the issue of globalisation around accounts of justice.

<sup>5</sup> ‘Experiences [...] are the starting points for aesthetics, the starting point for reflecting on the nature and value of the arts, the quality of our experiences of the arts, of natural and constructed environments and of various aspects of ordinary life’ (Feagin and Maynard, 1997, p. 3). ‘[A]esthetics is particularly concerned with our experiences of art and natural beauty, in which our perception seems to be especially worthwhile and satisfying in itself’ (Higgins, 1996, p. 1). But sometimes art is the primary focus, or



various issues that are less directly focused on qualities of experience, but that matter to how people identify, interpret, and appreciate art in non-experiential terms (e.g., the role of art history, skill, artists' intentions, creativity, truth). As a branch of philosophy, then, aesthetics is where you can turn for study of qualities of experience, experiential responsiveness and evaluation, and the making, experience, interpretation, and appreciation of art.

To specify a dimension of life that 'belongs to' aesthetics does not say much about what the work of philosophical aesthetics would be. I will give one brief example of how a philosopher has built on this starting point, choosing Immanuel Kant as the most influential European aesthetic theorist.

Kant focused on the activity of judging something to be beautiful, specifying the nature of the relevant experience and the conditions under which such a judgement is made. Meeting these conditions, on Kant's view, means that I have had a first-person experience of something's form that supports a free play of my cognitive powers, different from the conclusive cognitive work of applying concepts to experience (unlike 'that is a sock'). I feel a distinctive pleasure, a disinterested pleasure – distinct from the satisfactions of gratifying sensory appetites, instrumental goals, and moral requirements – in this free play. For Kant, this basis for judgement is most purely available to us in experiencing beauty in nature rather than art; his account of finding beauty in art is more complicated. There are many interesting moving parts in this theory, and all of them have been variously interpreted and debated.<sup>6</sup>

The further interesting aspect of Kant's account that I will highlight has to do with the individual yet universal accessibility of this kind of judgement. Kant ties beauty to the combined body-and-mind capacities of humans: 'beauty is valid only for human beings, i.e., animal but also rational beings' (Kant, 2000, §5, p. 95). These capacities are exercised individually and yet representatively: when judging whether 'a garment, a house, a flower is beautiful', '[o]ne wants to submit the object to his own eyes [...] and yet, if one then calls the object beautiful, one believes oneself to have a universal voice, and lays claim to the consent of everyone' (§8, p. 101). 'One solicits assent from everyone else because one has a ground for it that is common to all' (§19, pp. 121–2); our apparently

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even just the evaluation of art, as in Beardsley's account of aesthetics as the philosophy of criticism (Beardsley, 1981, pp. 3–4).

<sup>6</sup> See Wenzel (2009) for routes into this scholarship.

individual pleasure is made to serve ‘not as a private feeling, but as a common one’ (§22, p. 123).

Clearly there is a lot to argue about here. Fortunately, my present concern is not to defend or attack Kant’s view; I offer it as an example of an effort to address some of the difficulty that aesthetic life holds for philosophy. Kant gives us a vision of aesthetic response as a universally shared human capacity, one that, if exercised in the way Kant specifies, manifests a potential for experience and feeling that people have in common. If we went further into the details of Kant’s view, we could find more consideration of the roles of knowledge and aesthetic cultivation (emphasised by David Hume in his conception of ideal critics and their cultivation of taste), but Kant’s big picture emphasises a basic human readiness for beauty experience. The judgement of beauty does not divide us into idiosyncratic bearers of personal interests and backgrounds, but rather involves activating common experiential, cognitive, and affective capacities, enabling each of us to speak with an aesthetically ‘universal voice’.

In making these claims about human capacities, universal human access, and the abstractly characterised conditions for judgement of beauty, Kant is a great example of arrogant, universalising philosophical ambition. Although I have not documented this here, he fully recognises that he is trying to do something philosophically difficult in arguing that the phenomena of individual experiential activity, i.e. each human taking pleasure in experience, can support a practice of judgement with universal validity. However, he does not recognise, it seems, that the whole project of doing things as he does – unpacking the distinctiveness of beauty, positing disinterestedness and free play, minimising the sensory and emotional, tying beauty to certain examples, singling out beauty as the focus at all, emphasising individual subjectivity and autonomy, mostly ignoring the social context in which people experience beauty – can be viewed as a parochial, culture-bound endeavour.<sup>7</sup> Let me agree that his theorising, in its universalising mode, leaves him exposed to criticism at nearly every turn. Still, his view has gripped generations of philosophers and continues to be at the centre of debates in Anglo-European aesthetics. Part of what explains that grip, I speculate, is that it makes itself available to criticism in its universal mode. But for the purposes of argument here, I just want to cite it as a prime example of what philosophical aesthetics can look like. What sort of thing might one

<sup>7</sup> See Bourdieu (1987) for a sociological takedown of Kantian aesthetic commitments.

do and claim in thinking philosophically about aesthetic life? One might, taking Kant as the example, identify a form of aesthetic value taken to be relevant to all human beings, articulate conditions under which that value is experienced by all human beings, and defend the distinctive role of that value in human life.

### 4. The Individuality and Cultural Location of Aesthetic Life

If the aesthetic dimension encompasses human beings' experiential sensitivity and responsiveness, philosophical aesthetics will struggle to achieve the kind of universal understanding that Kant and many philosophers may have assumed is possible. Our aesthetic lives resist universality in two ways: through each person's aesthetic formation over the course of a life and through the differing aesthetic influences and norms offered within different cultural contexts. These kinds of differentiating formations are not separable in the living of a life, but they resist universality in somewhat different ways. While these points may seem obvious, I want to take a little time to illustrate the phenomena I have in mind to convey the complexity of individual and cultural aesthetic formation. An overarching claim that I hope to get across is that the aesthetic dimension of life is central to what it is to have a life – it is where 'what it is like to be me' takes shape, in a person's responsive interface with an environment, in the large and small experiential preferences, patterns, limits, and expectations that go into having one's experiential bearings. We persistently orient ourselves to reality aesthetically. This involves responding to our environments through more than conceptual classification, through feeling what is familiar, coherent, out of sync, interesting, boring, mood-enhancing or deadening, glorious, awful, to be shunned or savoured.<sup>8</sup> These experiential responses quickly feed into and bind with cognitive and practical orientations to reality (categorising, comparing, choosing), but those levels of orientation often need or draw on aesthetic orientation. If we ever feel at home in the world, this will in large part be on aesthetic terms. This is not simply a matter of liking the aesthetic possibilities on offer – though presumably we cannot be aesthetically at home if we dislike all of them – but of recognising them, feeling adequate sensitivity to them, and feeling comfortable with one's responses to them.

<sup>8</sup> See Saito (2007) on the pervasiveness and importance of aesthetic responsiveness.

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My thinking on this was triggered some time ago by Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye*, which concerns in part a struggle to be aesthetically at home in the world.<sup>9</sup> But I will refer here instead to some works of autobiographical non-fiction. Each of us has an aesthetic formation, but I think it is rather unusual to be able to evoke aspects and moments of it in words. These passages are all written retrospectively, as attempts to remember scenes or recurrent experiences from childhood or youth. Of course the reader cannot test their experiential adequacy, but I hope they serve to convey the kind of personal aesthetic formation I have in mind. What is displayed here are acute attentiveness, familiarity, and evaluating response within an environment that is somehow of meaning to the speaker. Here is Stuart Hall remembering something of his childhood in Jamaica:

But I often relive the forbidding climb along precipice-sided potholed roads up into the mountains; then beginning the descent on the other side down towards the north coast, with the aquamarine ocean glimmering seductively ahead through the trees. The wind has a balmy softness in the morning before the sun sets fire to everything. The body unfolds from inside as the day warms up. (I have never really stopped being cold in Britain.) The sea has a powerful, enticing presence in my memory: swimming before breakfast, the water still as glass; or at midday, sliding through the ever-changing green depths at Discovery Bay; or in the afternoon, riding the surging, spume-tipped – and scary – ocean waves at Boston Beach, followed by jerk-pork and festival barbecues. [...] I am still addicted to Jamaican cooking: the creole blend of spices and seasonings – garlic, thyme, pimento, spring onions, Scotch Bonnet hot peppers. [...] These smells and tastes bring back an entire life which, for me in London, is no longer mine. (Hall, 2017, pp. 8–9)

Ben Hamper summons up the quite different cafeteria food and his kinaesthetic-psychological competence on a General Motors assembly line:

For about five bucks you would receive a slim gray slab of cow-thing, a side of artificial tater goop, a washed-out rainbow of veggies, a rectangle of lime Jell-o and a carton of warm milk. (Hamper, 1986, p. 78)

The blisters of the hand and the mind had hardened over, leaving me the absolute master of the puppet show. [...] I became so

<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., pp. 19–20 and 45–46 in Morrison (1999).

proficient at twirlin' my rivet gun to and fro that the damn thing felt as comfortable as a third arm. [...] Graceful and indomitable. Methodical and brain-dead. [...] The Rivethead. (Hamper, 1986, p. 94)

Maxine Hong Kingston describes staying late after school one day, a kind of out-of-bounds moment that leads into trying to force one of her peers, also from a Chinese immigrant family, to speak:

I and my little sister and the quiet girl and her big sister stayed late after school for some reason. The cement was cooling, and the tetherball poles made shadows across the gravel. The hooks at the rope ends were clinking against the poles. [...] Inside the playroom the lightbulbs in cages had already been turned off. Daylight came in x-patterns through the caging at the windows. [...] She was so neat. Her neatness bothered me. I hated the way she folded the wax paper from her lunch; she did not wad her brown paper bag and her school papers. I hated her clothes—the blue pastel cardigan, the white blouse with the collar that lay flat over the cardigan, the homemade flat, cotton skirt she wore when everybody else was wearing flared skirts. I hated pastels; I would wear black always. I squeezed again, harder, even though her cheek had a rubbery feeling I did not like. (Hong Kingston, 1989, pp. 174–177)

Here is John Carey remembering doing errands with his mother in their London neighbourhood in the 1930s.

At the top of the road [...] was a branch of the United Dairies. A bell tinkled as you entered, and inside was a temple of immaculate whiteness, white marble counters, white-tiled walls, and the ladies who presided were all in white too including their gloves and hats. I was captivated by their dexterity. If my mother ordered a pound of butter one of the ladies would take up a pair of wooden butter pats, slice a wedge from a gleaming mound on the counter, beat it into a precise rectangular shape, drop it neatly onto a square of greaseproof paper on the scales, wrap it with a couple of deft flutters of the white gloves, and hand the completed artefact to my mother as if it was nothing remarkable. (Carey, 2014, p. 2)

It is interesting to me that I find these descriptions so interesting. They are not evoking my life, with the exception of Hong Kingston's attention to the after-school 'feel', but I think they hold appeal in the way they register a path of experience with such

intensity and care. The passages convey something of how a person was situated in and responsive to reality within the unfolding of a given life (and in Hall's case noting how that past sensitivity still follows him into a very different environment).

We have each followed such a path, with its own patterns, habits, surprises, pleasures, and cumulative impact. For each of us right now there are lived-in settings and patches of earth that are familiar – perhaps loved, perhaps not – and that activate the aesthetic tendencies we have developed. Each of us could offer a different answer about flavours, textures, bodily sensations, kinds of light and shadow, sounds and settings that have been familiar, comfortable, wonderful, or otherwise. This is some of the stuff of aesthetic life. I hope that it begins to look difficult to see how one might conceptualise and generalise about how people respond aesthetically to the world. In these passages some canonically aesthetic vocabulary was used, 'graceful' and more marginally 'neat', and perhaps some artistry was invoked, in the 'master of the puppet show' and the 'remarkable' artefact of the butter parcel. Big aesthetic concepts, e.g., beauty or ugliness, might be able to be applied, but it seems they would bring a loss of acuity and would seem forced. What might I, as an aesthetic theorist, be able to generalise about here, and what would be the point of aiming for universality? The gloss on philosophical universality offered above is that such claims are intended to apply wherever and whenever a topic has a foothold in reality, to have significance and force for people in general. But if the truths of aesthetic life are so individual, so continually developing and sensitive to one's life situation, it is not clear what universal force they could have. The concepts and tendencies needed to state or account for these truths seem pretty closely tied to the things being experienced in that context (the need to rivet quickly, that walk to the beach, the malleability of the butter, the feel of that girl's cheek). I can find these claims interesting, as I do, as evidence of something parallel to – but distinct from – my own aesthetic formation. But to say that they have relevance to me in my status as a person in general and to human life universally seems implausible.

Let me now complicate this first claim, concerning our personal aesthetic formations along individual life paths, with the role of cultural aesthetic formation. In the examples above, though I was emphasising the personal specificity of these aesthetically charged memories, the cultural location of the writers' lives was manifest as well. It is hard to acknowledge the content and influence of cultural contexts without oversimplification and error. I will not attempt to say much about these examples, but the expectations and pressures

of a given social community, involving class, race, fashion, immigration and citizenship, and cuisine, were in some way known or felt by these people and contributed to how they experienced and responded to, say, the demure clothing of a classmate, the gleaming whiteness of a dairy shop, or experiences of typical foods. The excerpts above reflect not only individual life paths, but different social and cultural forms that presumably do support some generalisations (standard flavours of Jamaican cuisine, physical and psychological demands of assembly-line labour, clothing possibilities for girls in a given time and place). Our aesthetic lives end up manifesting all sorts of influences – expectations, interests and desires, conceptual categories, evaluative standards, forms of knowledge, the salience of certain stimuli – that we acquire as members of specific groups and cultures. This is yet another broad claim that could be illustrated in many ways.<sup>10</sup> I will turn to some work in aesthetics that I think acknowledges the cultural depth and complexity that can lie behind a way of experiencing things. This will narrow the focus to experience of objects identified as works of art or of fine craftsmanship; such things exemplify particularly well the deep and complex cultural influences that I want to illustrate.

In these examples, philosophers explicitly aim to make Chinese and Japanese aesthetic traditions accessible to people who are not likely to be ‘at home’ in them. Harold Osborne, discussing the theory and practice of traditional Chinese painting, notes many features that are striking for someone who takes for granted a European painting tradition. The scroll was a paradigmatic structure, to be ‘opened gradually and “read” consecutively in time by the observer, not seen in a piece’, and monochrome variation and blending of ink and elaborately differentiated calligraphic brushwork (‘like tangled hemp’ or ‘the veins of the lotus leaf’) were central to appreciation (Osborne, 1970, pp. 107–108, 123). In terms of the aims and values at work in the practice of painting,

The Chinese painter was not concerned, except incidentally to the pursuit of other aims, to “imitate” the appearances of things or to represent things ideally as he would like them to be [...]. The cultivation and practice of painting were thought of

<sup>10</sup> Hamper gives such an account of music played at work: ‘The music of the Dead Rock Stars is redundant and completely predictable. [It] infinitely mirrors the drudgery of our assembly jobs. [...] the same wearied hepsters who used to dodge economics class for a smoke in the boys’ room would later in life become fossilized to the hibernatin’ soundtracks of their own implacable youth’ (Hamper, 1986, p. xviii).

as a ritualistic activity creating an embodiment of the cosmic force of order which infuses all reality, human society, and the individual personality. [...] his work would be imbued with and would reflect the Tao. (Osborne, 1970, p. 106)

This is an entry into understanding what is relevant to aesthetic life for those participating in this painting practice, whether as painter or appreciator. It signals that deep participation would involve fine-grained perceptual discernment and classification, appreciation of skills and chosen techniques, the action and temporality of looking, and being attuned to the meaning of the ritual and the cosmic order that are at stake in the practice.<sup>11</sup>

Yuriko Saito discusses what she refers to as ‘a quintessentially Japanese taste [...] the celebration of those qualities commonly regarded as falling short of, or deteriorating from, the optimal condition of the object’. This long-developed taste has embraced appreciation of ‘objects with defects, an impoverished look, or aging effects’, such that, for instance, ‘impoverished-looking and irregularly shaped Korean peasants’ bowls, often with chips and cracks, were highly esteemed’ (Saito, 1997, pp. 377–378). Saito’s discussion traces complex sources and kinds of meaning for this aesthetic taste. There is the aesthetic potential of contrasts, endings, and wondering about an object’s history. The appreciation of imperfection can entwine with yearning for perfection. Saito documents complicated interpretations of this taste’s socio-political meaning: it has been viewed as representing a privileged pleasure taken in safely enjoying emblems of impoverishment, as having political value in restraining ostentatious display, and as encouraging the non-privileged to be satisfied with insufficiency – and therefore criticised for putting a positive aesthetic ‘spin’ on real poverty (Saito, 1997, pp. 379–381). Furthermore, the aesthetics of imperfection has religious and metaphysical meaning in its relation to Shintoism’s egalitarian affirmation of things in this world, making no value discriminations, and to a Zen Buddhist ideal of overcoming ego, surrendering to materials and accepting lack of control (Saito, 1997, pp. 381–383).

<sup>11</sup> See Man on the artist and ritual in traditional Chinese painting. ‘[T]he goal of art-making as such is completely circular: the creation of an art-making agent’; ‘art-making can be compared to ritual, especially the genre of rites of exchange and communion, which tends to help articulate complex systems of relationships among human beings, the world, gods, and so on’ (Man, 2020, pp. 9, 10).



Saito's and Osborne's essays were important in my own education in philosophical aesthetics, as they were some of the works that introduced me to the issues I am trying to consider here. Saito and Osborne signal the great scope, depth, and intersection of factors that can lie behind being 'at home' with an aesthetic taste or artistic practice. They describe intricately meaningful traditions that have supported forms of aesthetic life. It is great to get some understanding of what could influence and be manifested in the experience of a cracked cup or brushstroke, but it is also overwhelming. To be situated within the relevant tradition could involve artistic, perceptual, political, religious, and metaphysical orientations. Although this kind of cultural formation does not resist universality by resisting generalisation, as perhaps the personally located aspects of aesthetic life do, it does make aspirations to universality of aesthetically relevant concepts and evaluative standards seem intractable. What is appealing about Saito's and Osborne's approaches is that they go deeper into a non-universal aesthetic-cultural form: they try to articulate what is perceivable, conceivable, connected, and valued in a specific tradition. It is hard to see why it would matter if those possibilities of experience and value differ from those in other traditions, and it does not seem one could hold it against these practices if they fail to move or be relevant to people in general.

This is a sweeping overview of phenomena that call for more subtle development. I will not pursue the question of how the individual and the cultural paths combine in a given person's experience, though we have some hints about that in the personal accounts cited above. The broad picture that I hope is in view is that our individual and cultural formations come together in aesthetic life in ways that challenge the feasibility and fruitfulness of seeking philosophically universal aesthetic claims. There is crucial substance in our aesthetic lives, as this is how each of us reckons directly with where we are, what it is like to be there, and what kinds of meaning and value can show up in our experience. But it is not obvious that this substance can be acknowledged, understood, and assessed in universal terms. Can the philosopher's quest for understanding that is relevant to anyone at any time have a point in relation to aesthetic life? Can aesthetics be genuinely global?

### 5. Prospects for Philosophical Aesthetics

It would be nice if I had a confident answer to my own question, ideally one that would be easy to implement in my own philosophical

practice. That is not what I have, but I can explain where this line of thinking has led me so far, and I will make some schematic suggestions. Let me also acknowledge, as I have not adequately done so far, that many other philosophers are alive to these questions and have responded to them in constructive ways.<sup>12</sup> First, thinking about how the universalising aspiration of philosophy can meet forms of aesthetic non-universality opens up a need for more of what might be called meta-aesthetics. What does ‘aesthetic life’ mean, and what problems face efforts to universalise about it? What is philosophically tractable and otherwise in this domain? I have used the notion of aesthetic life in a universalising way; is that initial move viable? This essay is my own preliminary effort in the meta-aesthetic direction; all of this needs deeper attention. Second, aesthetic theorising in the general but probably not universalising mode is of great importance, and this is a partial way of honouring the philosophical impulse. That is, what Osborne and Saito are doing is crucially generalising about distinctive aesthetic phenomena. In doing so, they will reveal aspects of practice, meaning, and experience that are shared, resonate, or contrast with other stretches of aesthetic life. This kind of generalising study rests on a very demanding base of experience and knowledge; the work of those who have that kind of base should be engaged with as well as possible by those who do not – there is an important division of labour that we can benefit from. Third, the fruits of extending knowledge and reflection on aesthetic life to more and more practices around the world and in time are not yet foreseeable. We have not done enough of the difficult work of becoming more experientially aware and informed about complex aesthetic practices, and of assembling, comparing, and reflecting on different practices. It may be that there is more scope for universalising than I can see at the moment.<sup>13</sup> Finally, as must seem obvious by now, the aesthetic theorist who is moved by

<sup>12</sup> E.g., in the more globally inclusive contents of anthologies such as Higgins (1996), Feagin and Maynard (1997) – who broach the need for multiple aesthetics – and Hussain and Wilkinson (2006); in the multiple traditions considered in Sartwell (2004); and in Blocker (2001), who probes the problem of constructing a non-Western aesthetics.

<sup>13</sup> I take Maira (2017) and Sartwell (2004), for instance, to be arguing for the universal significance of beauty. Maira looks hopefully toward an ‘Age of Inter-Relationality’, where it is recognized that all life and social systems are webbed, networked, interconnected, interrelated and interdependent, and where [...] art too must reflect, support and participate in these developments. [...] Not just in India but around the world’ (2017, p. 31).

philosophical impulses to say what is true and of universal relevance about some aesthetically interesting domain (e.g., in my own case, fiction or moral learning from art) simply has to be looking out for local and contingent conditions that affect how these things have a 'foothold in reality'. This is a philosophically important habit under any circumstances, but it seems that humility about this ought to be the default attitude for aesthetic theorising. While trying as best I can to reach claims with universal significance and application, I should assume that I am going to end up with something more limited. A further philosophical prospect may then open up, as the limitations of the ideas and phenomena I have considered may help reveal alternatives in a bigger space of possibilities.

### 6. Conclusion

Let me close with a few summary suggestions. In formulating these in the imperative mood, I am speaking first to myself, but I hope these points hold some combination of reasonableness and provocation for other philosophers.

1. Do not set out to achieve a Global Aesthetics, in the sense of seeking a harmonised conception of aesthetic engagement and set of evaluative concepts that apply universally. Maybe such a thing will emerge over time, but it does not seem we have had good reason to posit one so far.
2. Study the diverse substance of aesthetic life: encounter more than one feels at home with; do not assume convergence and interpersonal agreement; try to compare, translate, and enable access to aesthetic variation, with care, caution, and humility.
3. Defer, or demote concern for, judgement of aesthetic and artistic value. Assessing what is best or most valuable seems unhelpful if not thoroughly intractable; understanding forms of aesthetic life comes first.
4. Explore a space of possibilities, looking to find out what factors can combine in aesthetic life. Given whatever possibilities appear, think about whether any general patterns, tendencies, and common values can be discerned.
5. Attempt to identify and test one's own universalising commitments. This would include, for me, everything I have said here about 'aesthetic life'. Can I assume that aesthetic orientation is central to being at home in the world? That humankind is *the* aesthetically relevant kind? Can I assume that the personal

aesthetic path has weight and is not simply a product of collective pressures and socialisation?

6. Acknowledge and reflect critically on the global movements of aesthetic traditions: their collision, melding, imposition, suppression, elevation, appropriation, 'primitivisation', commercialisation, loss and renewal.<sup>14</sup> Philosophical tools may be particularly helpful when aesthetic practices and discourses come into contact and the claims of different universalising terms and values are put in question.

When thinking about what philosophical aesthetics can fruitfully aim to do, the personally and culturally shaped form of aesthetic life has to be recognised and properly grappled with. If one accepts the importance of aesthetic life to what it is to have a life at all, then it does not seem that philosophy can ignore the aesthetic dimension. However, the universalising ambition that I think indeed characterises philosophy has to be held loosely, self-consciously, and self-critically. The formulation of aesthetic ideas and values needs to be tentative and needs to be based on more inclusive and unsettling evidence than will come easily to any one of us.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> See Nguyen and Strohl (2019) and Young (2021) for some of the ongoing work on these issues.

<sup>15</sup> Many thanks to Julian Baggini, Kirk Surgener, and the audience at the lecture version of this paper.

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