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Universalism and the Problem of Aesthetic Diversity

ABSTRACT: *This essay examines a recent line of thought in aesthetics that challenges realist-leaning aesthetic theories. According to this line of thought, aesthetic diversity and disagreement are good, and our aesthetic judgments, responses, and attachments are deeply personal and even identity-constituting. These facts are further used to support anti-realist theories of aesthetic normativity. I aim to achieve two goals: (1) to disentangle arguments concerning diversity, disagreement, and personality; and (2) to offer realist-friendly replies to all three.*

From the day we arrive on the planet
And blinking, step into the sun,
There's more to see than can ever be seen,
More to do than can ever be done.
There's far too much to take in here,
More to find than can ever be found
—*The Lion King* (1994).

So much beauty in the world, so few eyes to see it.
—attributed to Albert Cossery

It is common to think that there are no universal aesthetic values or aesthetic reasons. There are many ways to defend this view, but in this essay, I focus on three. The first two, centering on diversity and disagreement in aesthetics, will be familiar to many readers, though in a slightly different form than they appear here. The familiar worry for realist and universalist theories of value is the one posed by the existence and prevalence of diversity and disagreement. How can any realist rectify the existence of value facts with widespread diversity in views, and disagreement about what those facts say? The aesthetic universalist, however, is tasked not only or even primarily with explaining the existence or prevalence of aesthetic diversity and disagreement, but also with explaining why it seems to us that aesthetic diversity

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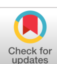

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and disagreement are *good*. It is one thing for diversity and disagreement to be tolerable features of our world; it is quite another for diversity and disagreement to be embraced and encouraged. But many think that aesthetic diversity and disagreement are good, and many think that universalism is ill equipped to explain this. Those who endorse this line of thinking often hold, third, that there is something deeply personal and even identity-shaping about aesthetic judgments, responses, and attachments, which the universalist is also ill equipped to explain. My aim in this essay is to spell out these charges more carefully than has been done in the existing literature and to propose a rival universalist solution to them all that allows us to recognize that the aesthetic is deeply personal, while also laying claim to all of us.

1. Diversity and Disagreement

It is easy to conflate diversity and disagreement. What is diversity aside from disagreement? Does diversity not at least imply disagreement? The difference is subtle but important. Where diversity is the variety of viewpoints (or actions, tastes, perspectives) different parties might take, disagreement highlights those diverse things as somehow opposed to or incompatible with one another. Disagreement is thus paradigmatically thought of as two parties' believing or asserting incompatible propositions, though it can be extended to incompatible intentions, prescriptions, or actions. The opposite of diversity is uniformity, whereas the opposite of disagreement is agreement. We speak of uniformity and diversity across a wide variety of phenomena. Uniformity of dress is lack of diversity in dress; uniformity of preference is lack of diversity across preferences; uniformity of viewpoints is lack of diversity of viewpoints. Contemporary philosophical discussions about disagreement, by contrast, are most classically restricted to incompatible propositions. On the traditional model, disagreement arises when you believe p, I believe $\sim p$, and only one of p and $\sim p$ can be true.

Some people drink coffee but not tea, while others drink tea but not coffee. These people's habits exhibit diversity without disagreement. Many coffee drinkers believe that coffee is good, while many tea drinkers believe that tea is good. These are different beliefs, but because coffee and tea can both be good, the beliefs are not incompatible. Here, too, is diversity without disagreement. However, some coffee drinkers believe that coffee *is better than tea*, while some tea drinkers believe that coffee *is not better than tea*. These beliefs are incompatible, and so this is diversity (difference) as well as disagreement. Still, the theoretically clear distinction between diversity and disagreement can become muddied in practice because our behaviors and preferences are often correlated with our beliefs about what is better or worse. But the distinction is crucial to properly analyzing a number of interrelated issues in metanormativity, not least among them debates about moral and other normative realisms.

Instead of discussing realism directly, I proceed in terms of what I call *universalism*, the view that there are some stance-independent normative truths. That is, there are propositions about values, reasons, and other normative concepts whose truth does not essentially depend on anyone's particular stance:

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their judgments, attitudes, or tastes. (Shafer-Landau [2003] puts this thought at the center of moral realism. Though characterization of realism has been contested, I take it to be definitional for universalism.) Suppose, for example, that we have moral reason to keep our promises. A universalist says that the truth of this statement does not depend on, say, our believing that we have moral reason to keep our promises. Similarly, suppose that a well-pulled espresso has aesthetic value. A universalist says that its truth does not depend on, say, one's having a taste for coffee. I call the denial of this view *anti-universalism*.

As I characterize it, realism is a form of universalism (and so universalism is a realist-friendly theory), but the reverse is not necessarily true. This is because forms of realism are usually thought to have heavyweight metaphysical commitments concerning the properties or objects in virtue of which normative claims are true, but universalist theories need not have such commitments. Constructivist theories could, for example, endorse universalism without endorsing the metaphysical commitments traditionally associated with realism. The universalist requires only that normative truths do not essentially depend on our *stances*, but this is compatible with such truths depending on constructed standards—or on perceptual or other responses, as many response-dependence theories hold. Response-dependence theories on which aesthetic truths depend on idealized perceptual and affective responses can thus also, at least in principle, endorse universalism without realist metaphysical commitments. On the present model, response-dependence conflicts with universalism only if it endorses a certain relationship to judgments, attitudes, or tastes as its putative responses.

Well-known worries for moral universalism stem from diversity and disagreement. Moral diversity may seem best explained by the absence of facts to tether our views to. Some cultures (or individuals) have strongly hierarchical practices and value social hierarchy very highly, while others have strongly egalitarian practices and value egalitarianism very highly. The best explanation of this, the argument goes, appeals to anthropological, sociological, or psychological facts, rather than to moral facts. At best, members of the hierarchical culture have reason to respect the social hierarchy, while members of the egalitarian culture have reason to be egalitarian. In this way, diversity of moral viewpoints undermines universalism.

Similarly, the apparent existence of faultless moral disagreement—disagreements where neither party makes any mistakes—arguably supports anti-universalism (see Mackie [1977] for an influential instance of both the diversity and the disagreement arguments). If a member of the hierarchical culture says that someone very high up in the hierarchy deserves more respect than does someone much lower, while a member of the strongly egalitarian culture says that the two deserve equal respect, then we have a disagreement. This may look like a faultless disagreement, since (allegedly) neither party has committed any factual or reasoning mistakes. The anti-universalist has a ready explanation: there are no factual or reasoning mistakes because there are no universal moral truths to be ascertained. The universalist, in contrast, seems to have a much harder time explaining why such disagreements arise so prevalently and so evidently

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intractably. Thus it looks like anti-universalism provides a better account of disagreement.

Many argue that diversity and disagreement also tell against universalist aesthetic theories (Kennick [1958]; Mackie [1977]; Loeb [2003]; Nehamas [2007]; Evers [2019]). If anything, the problem is more severe. In ethics, a number of things have been taken to be valuable: happiness, well-being, compassion, equality, respect, desert, and justice. This already seems quite varied. Compare aesthetics. We could come up with a similar list: symmetry, harmony, balance, elegance, subtlety, and so on. But in the appropriate context, we might also include asymmetry, cacophony, imbalance—as well as cuteness, camp, funniness, playfulness, even scariness. Not only is this list of aesthetic values more varied (diverse), but there is much less convergence (agreement) on these than on the list of ethical values. Whereas the moral universalist can reply that most people appear to converge on some sort of non-harm principle, it is not true that most people converge on anything like that for aesthetics. (Indeed, the large literature denying the possibility of aesthetic rules or principles bears witness to this. For a classic statement, see Mothersill [1984].) If the best explanation for the plenitude of moral diversity and disagreement is moral anti-universalism, then surely the even more varied and disagreement-ridden aesthetic picture supports aesthetic anti-universalism.

In traditional metaethical debates, universalist theories must account for the existence and prevalence of the diversity of moral opinion and the existence and prevalence of moral disagreement. As shown above, the problems would be bad enough for aesthetic universalism if we stopped there, but they would not, perhaps, be especially interesting. However, the role that diversity and disagreement have come to play in current debates in aesthetics adds a twist to the version we typically find in moral philosophy.

2. Aesthetic Diversity, Aesthetic Disagreement, and Aesthetic Personality

The twist is that aesthetic diversity and disagreement are not only prevalent, but they are also thought to be *valuable*. Defenders of this approach think it is a good thing that there be rampant aesthetic diversity and disagreement, holding that the world is a better place for their rampancy. This brings me to the first two problems.

1. *The problem of aesthetic diversity*: An aesthetic theory must account for the value of diversity of aesthetic opinion.
2. *The problem of aesthetic disagreement*: An aesthetic theory must account for the value of aesthetic disagreement.

These are problems facing any aesthetic (or more precisely, any meta-aesthetic) theory. However, they are thought to be particularly troubling for universalism. Moreover, as challenges to universalism, these problems often emerge from authors whose views center aesthetic personality and community. As a

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consequence, the above problems are sometimes run together with a distinct third issue:

3. *The problem of aesthetic personality*: An aesthetic theory must account for the tight connection between aesthetics and one's individual personality, identity, and attachments.

There is thought to be a deep connection between aesthetics—including our aesthetic judgments, responses, preferences, and tastes—and the formation of our identities in both our individual personalities and communities. It is in this sense that I sometimes speak of aesthetics as importantly personal: I do not mean that it is private or subjective, but rather that it is tied to our identity and conception of ourselves. Below I explain this challenge in more detail, but it, too, is something that any aesthetic theory must address, and it, too, has been thought to be particularly challenging for the universalist.

As anti-universalist challenges, all three problems can be framed schematically as best explanation arguments:

Premise 1a. Aesthetic diversity is valuable.
Premise 1b. Aesthetic disagreement is valuable.
Premise 1c. Aesthetics is tightly connected to one's personality, identity, and attachments.
Premise 2. The best explanation of Premise 1a/1b/1c is aesthetic anti-universalism (because universalism cannot fully accommodate it).
Conclusion. We should endorse aesthetic anti-universalism.

Because these are three distinct problems, support for the premises varies, and each deserves a slightly different answer. To address this, I examine some presentations of the problems and existing solutions, then present universalist solutions to the problems of aesthetic diversity and disagreement, and finally address the problem of aesthetic personality.

3. Existing Solutions

Existing solutions to these three problems are largely anti-universalist, although two existing universalist proposals deserve attention. I highlight two moments in each anti-universalist solution: one establishing the first premise (the value of diversity, disagreement, or personality), and another establishing the second (the best explanation premise). These authors often do not explicitly offer the argument in the form I present above. Nevertheless, the arguments I trace below are, I think, not unfair reconstructions.

First, take W. B. Gallie (1956). Deploying his influential notion of essentially contested concepts to the domain of art and aesthetics, he writes that 'if we should hear about or happen upon a society whose aesthetic valuations showed as high a degree of uniformity . . . as do, say, our valuations of scientific achievement, we

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should be inclined to say that . . . its artistic life—its production and enjoyment of works of art—was of an unhappily stinted kind.' He continues, 'this supposition helps us to recognize that uniformity of judgment and appraisal, although so necessary in many fields of activity, is by no means necessary or even desirable at all' (Gallie 1956: 114).

Gallie decries both aesthetic uniformity and aesthetic agreement, while perhaps conflating them. (He does not directly address aesthetic personality.) Gallie dislikes the thought of a society that lacks a wide variety of aesthetic products or one whose members find enjoyment in all the same things. Both are instances of diversity. But he also says that a society lacking a high degree of 'uniformity of *judgment and appraisal*' would be undesirable, comparing this uniformity to 'our valuations of scientific achievement.' Though he uses the word *uniformity*, it seems he means *agreement*. Scientific evaluations actually exhibit a high degree of diversity in my preferred sense, in that a physicist may believe some physics research to be very good, while a chemist may believe certain chemistry research to be very good, without thereby issuing in any disagreement. They do, however, exhibit a high degree of *agreement* (at least, higher than in aesthetic matters), in that it is more or less agreed upon which scientific research is good. And this agreement, while good in the scientific case, is not 'necessary or even desirable at all' in the aesthetic case. So Gallie appears to endorse the first premise with respect to diversity and disagreement.

Gallie defends *art* as an essentially contested concept. He argues that there is no preferred concept of art and that art criticism—and aesthetic evaluation broadly—is impossible without some concept of art. As a result, aesthetic and artistic evaluations cannot command universal, art-concept-independent agreement. Here, we see that he appears to endorse the second premise, too. (Dominic McIver Lopes similarly appears to endorse a practice-based, anti-universalist view: 'Gallie is right,' he writes. For Lopes, disagreements are valuable because they 'lubricate' the dynamism of aesthetic profiles and practices [2018: 177].)

Next, take an influential thought experiment from Alexander Nehamas's *Only a Promise of Happiness*:

> If aesthetic judgment makes a claim to universal agreement, then, ideally, everyone would accept every correct judgment: in a perfect world, we would all find beauty in the very same places. But that dream is a nightmare . . . 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 (Nehamas 2007: 83).

Nehamas goes on to imagine a world where everybody loves *Baywatch* or Bach, claiming that this would be 'truly frightful' (2007: 84). Nehamas, like Gallie, appears to defend the first premise as it concerns diversity and disagreement: diversity is good (it is nightmarish that 'we would all find beauty in the very same places') and disagreement is good ('a world . . . where every disagreement about beauty can be resolved' is desolate).

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Nehamas argues that universalism cannot explain this well. He rejects Kantian universalism because universalists, in Kant's terms, must demand universal agreement and, in Mary Mothersill's, will find those who disagree 'slightly defective' (2007: 79). In short: 'The price for thinking that aesthetics speaks with a universal voice is . . . too high' (2007: 79), and so he concludes: 'Aesthetic judgment, I believe, never commands universal agreement' (2007: 81).

His rival explanation focuses especially closely on the personal and identity-constituting nature of aesthetics. For Nehamas, our aesthetic judgments help define our sense of self. They are deeply and necessarily personal. Each individual's particular package of aesthetic judgments, or as he puts it, each person's *style* 'is part of who one is' (2007: 86); it is 'an essential part of what distinguishes a person from the rest of the world . . . the grounds of individuality' (2007: 86). Our style, defined by difference, helps us establish our individual personalities. It also provides an important basis for our interpersonal relationships and communities. Thus, on his view, our aesthetic judgments must be different from others' if our personalities are to be different from others'—or, equivalently for Nehamas, if we are to have genuine personalities at all. It is therefore no surprise why the thought of perfect uniformity and agreement is a very disturbing one on his view. It means nothing less than the loss of one's self. And though he welcomes small communities of shared appreciation, he emphasizes that he does not want those communities to share *all* of his aesthetic judgments and that those communities cannot include everyone.

Compare Nicholas Riggle's 'On the Aesthetic Ideal' (2015), in which he focuses on the problem of aesthetic personality. For him, 'our aesthetic responses, judgments, attitudes, and creations are expressions of the kind of person we are or aspire to be' (2015: 446). He connects this idea of aesthetic personality with what he calls our aesthetic loves, those aesthetic phenomena we are especially attached to. Our aesthetic loves are the focus of enduring and meaningful attachments, which 'have a claim to reveal or partly constitute the kind of person one is' (2015: 442). Much of his other work defends the view that our aesthetic endeavors help to define and build our communities (for example, Riggle 2017). Shared patterns of aesthetic appreciation are distinctive of those communities, so that shared loves are deeply and necessarily socially bonding.

He sees the universalist picture as giving rise to an unacceptable ideal of aesthetic life—unacceptable because incompatible with anything worth calling an aesthetic personality or community. If we pursue the 'wider world of aesthetic value' (Riggle 2015: 443) at the expense of our particular aesthetic loves, we will lose ourselves along the way. And how could this be ideal? Here, he defends the personal nature of aesthetics and, like others, relates it to the value of aesthetic diversity (and perhaps, though only implicitly and by extension, disagreement).

Riggle does not deny universalism wholesale. He admits that there may be times when we should give up our aesthetic loves in favor of that wider world of value. He appears to endorse the thought that there are genuinely universal aesthetic reasons, but that these often weigh unfavorably against reasons given by aesthetic attachments. He goes on to explicitly offer a best explanation argument, suggesting that a universalist picture is not 'the *best* way to resolve this tension'

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(2015: 443) but that we should prefer an account that frames aesthetic sensibilities as expressing an individual's style.

Or compare Matthew Strohl's *Why It's OK to Love Bad Movies*. In a telling passage, he endorses diversity, personality, and disagreement. He asserts that 'the diversity of aesthetic sensibilities in the world is a good thing' (2022: 184). He approvingly cites Nehamas's thought experiment, echoing that '[o]ur aesthetic preferences are an expression of *who we are*; diversity of aesthetic taste is a manifestation of more fundamental differences between us. The erasure . . . would be *very boring*' (2022: 184). He even adds, suggesting that the conditions he approves of are partly constituted by aesthetic disagreements: 'Frankly, if everyone liked bad movies, that would ruin it. There's no thrill of lowbrow transgression where there's no contempt from above' (2022: 184).

It is not entirely clear in the text whether Strohl endorses universalism. He distinguishes between an artwork's value in its own right and an artwork's value for a person, where the former concerns the artwork's 'capacity to enable valuable activities of engagement' and the latter in its capacity to do that '*for a person*' (Strohl 2022: 177). The former sounds compatible with universalism, while the latter sounds like a form of subjectivism. I confess I am not entirely sure how to rectify these two thoughts, but Strohl attempts to clarify the connection, writing, 'the fact that an artwork is valuable in its own right does not entail that it will be valuable for every single person' (2022: 178). If what Strohl means by this is that an artwork's being valuable does not entail that it is valuable for everyone to engage with it (that is, that everyone has reason to engage with it), then universalism does deny it.

These authors either reject universalism entirely or reject that universalism can fully answer the problems of aesthetic diversity, aesthetic disagreement, and aesthetic personality. More extreme versions, like those of Gallie and Nehamas, hold that there are no aesthetic objects with universal aesthetic value, no objects that everybody has reason to appreciate. More moderate versions, like those of Riggle and (perhaps) Strohl, hold that, while there might be such objects, the most central and important cases of aesthetic valuing are not of this type. The moderates take universal aesthetic value to play a supplementary rather than central explanatory role in our aesthetic lives. Call those who fall in the more moderate camp *moderate anti-universalists*, as opposed to the *extreme anti-universalists*. For both stripes, universalism cannot provide an ultimately satisfactory answer to our three problems.

The universalist may be keen to point out that the values of diversity, disagreement, and personality do not *contradict* universalism. The claim that it is good to have a distinctive personality or community, or that aesthetic diversity and disagreement are good, is not inconsistent with the claim that some things are stance-independently aesthetically good. Different sorts of things can be good.

Yet there is an important tension that can be brought out in a few ways. First, universalism claims that some aesthetic objects are universally good, and so accepting this while accepting that diversity and disagreement are good means these goods constantly and systematically pull us in opposing directions. Second and related, although the agreement promoted by universalism and the disagreement

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promoted by anti-universalism may be good in different respects, agreement and disagreement are ultimately and all-things-considered incompatible. Finally, anti-universalists place diversity at the center of a tapestry of values, attachments, and identity; they generate ideals of aesthetic life that look quite different from, and seemingly superior to, the universalist's. They warmly and tightly embrace diversity, disagreement, and individual personality, where the universalist seems at best able to offer only a cool handshake. That is what makes the anti-universalist's explanation seem superior.

One obvious universalist reply simply denies the explananda of premise 1, resisting pro-diversity, pro-disagreement intuitions. Call it the *big party model*. Nehamas's imagined world where we all love the same things really need not be so bad. Imagining that everybody tunes in to *Baywatch* stacks the deck unfairly because we implicitly imagine (or we are assumed to so imagine) that *Baywatch* is not worth watching—much less worth everyone's watching. Nehamas clearly states that a world of Bach lovers would be similarly frightful, but is that really true? Imagine a big party where we play the great music that we all love, furnished with food and drink that we all find delicious and impressive, decorated in such a way that we all find stunning. Does the party seem frightful? On the contrary, it sounds pretty great!

This universalist response, while prima facie tempting, does not do quite enough. Not only does it fail to address the problem of aesthetic personality, but there are also residual pro-diversity, pro-disagreement intuitions. Are we to imagine that each of us returns to our own house, but that all of those houses are decorated in exactly the same way? That we all wear the same style of clothing? That when we get together after seeing a movie, we all take turns gushing over the very same aspects of it, but not enhancing each other's understanding or challenging each other's takes in any way? This world seems to leave no room for critical debate and discussion, or individual taste and style, and that does sound grim.

Another universalist response accepts the explananda, but offers the advertised cool handshake. We find this in Jerrold Levinson's (2010) defense of Humean universalism, which presents the convergence of ideal judges' evaluations as determining (or constituting) certain objects as aesthetically valuable. He defends the Humean account from the problem of aesthetic personality, for him couched in terms of personal taste. Even the ideal judge will have experienced a particular, contingent path en route to becoming an ideal judge. They may then have fond memories and harbor especially warm feelings for those early aesthetic loves—those special and distinctive entry points that made aesthetic value first known to them. Nevertheless, he writes, 'were one to succeed in entirely perfecting one's taste in art . . . it is true that the aesthetic preferences one would then have would not distinguish one from a comprehensive ideal critic' (Levinson 2010: 231).

Levinson's solution does not speak at all to the problem of aesthetic disagreement. More importantly, despite the fact that he appears to take himself to be addressing the problem of aesthetic diversity, his solution does not speak to that, either. He worries that our ideal judges 'will appear to have become perilously clone-like with respect to one another' (2010: 229), but the account does not capture what, if anything, would be disturbing about a world in which we all shared the same

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loves, nor does it explain this intuition away. On his view, each ideal judge has some personal reason to be fond—in a nostalgic sort of way—of their younger self and the objects of that younger self's attachments, but this is no reason to value *diversity*. To see this, take a page from Nehamas. Imagine a world where all ideal judges happen to have followed the very same path. They all started out liking the accessible offerings from the Beatles and Radiohead, then proceeded through the more difficult ones to obscure influences like Ravi Shankar and Steve Reich, and from there developed an impressive knowledge of music history and ear for differences, suitable for full appreciation and ideal judge status (at least in this musical neighborhood). Levinson's view applies equally here as it does in worlds where each of the ideal judges follows a distinct path. It explains why someone can feel fondness for their own path, but fails to explain what might be valuable about people's having followed different paths.

Recognizing the relatedness of these problems sheds light on why the debate is sometimes framed as a conflict concerning what the aesthetically ideal person should be like—explicitly so for Riggle and Levinson. For universalists like Levinson, it is often thought that the ideal person should resemble the Humean ideal judge: a kind of dispassionate but keen observer who endorses all and only worthy aesthetic objects. For anti-universalists, the aesthetically ideal person should be more like Audrey Hepburn or Sid Vicious, two of Riggle's examples. These individuals have distinctive styles as well as aesthetic interests, projects, and activities that are very personally meaningful, where the ideal observer seems to be stripped of both such distinctiveness and (one may be tempted to imagine) meaningful aesthetic attachments.

Below, I defend a universalism that attempts to do better than the big party model and Levinson's solution by resolving all three problems with an addendum to universalism that any universalist should agree to.

4. A Universalist Solution, Part 1: Instrumental Value

To provide solutions to the problems of aesthetic diversity and disagreement, we need to look more carefully at the sense in which diversity and disagreement are meant to be good. Are they instrumentally good, in that they promote or lead to something intrinsically good—or are they themselves intrinsically good?

Most authors do not address this question directly. Still, many appear to endorse instrumentality. The anti-universalist who claims that diversity and disagreement are good because they help us form distinctive personalities and communities endorses the instrumental value of diversity and disagreement. (Riggle [2021] argues that aesthetic agreement is only instrumentally valuable when it assists practical coordination.) It is the distinctiveness of personalities and distinctiveness of communities that are good, and diversity and disagreement are a means to realizing that. Even if they are a necessary means, they are still only a means.

To give a universalist account of the instrumental value of diversity and disagreement, we need an addendum to universalism. The thought at the core of the proposal is very simple: There is more beauty in the world than one life can hold. To put it more precisely, there are so many things of aesthetic value that no

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individual can appreciate them all in the span of one lifetime. I take this thought to be extremely plausible. Take a moment to reflect on the vastness of aesthetic phenomena. Think of the bounty in nature: mountains, deserts, and oceans; animals, trees, and flowers; roses, chrysanthemums, and cherry blossoms. And this just scratches the surface. Think of all the art and artifacts throughout history. Think of all the music that was produced today alone. Think of all the buildings, graphic design, food, and more that we encounter constantly, and the aesthetic value those offer. Even if we do not have reason to seek out things of aesthetic value in order to appreciate them, if we assume we only have reason to appreciate the aesthetically good things that we in fact come across, in a lifetime we come across an enormous number of aesthetically worthy objects.

But we often need familiarity with a variety of related objects as well as background knowledge in order to appreciate good art. One with minimal knowledge of film history who enters the theater to see *Citizen Kane* may leave confused by all its accolades—thinking it was fine, maybe a little hokey, but not exceptional in any way. One with only passing familiarity with rock instruments and metalhead culture is equally likely to be bewildered by a Gwar performance. And one without developed sensitivities will be unable to detect subtle differences of taste, so that most chocolate will taste more or less the same.

Achieving fluency in any medium or genre takes time and dedication. Levinson claims that everyone's becoming ideal appreciators is 'admittedly extremely unlikely' (2010: 231). Calling it extremely unlikely is an understatement. In any world sufficiently like ours, in which people have roughly the life spans we actually have and roughly the wealth of aesthetic phenomena that we actually have, it is simply not possible. Maybe one can become an ideal judge in a relatively circumscribed domain, but nobody is an ideal judge of *all* music, to say nothing of music *plus* film, literature, architecture, food, nature, and all the rest.

Accepting the core thought means accepting that each of us has to determine what aesthetic pursuits we will spend our one life on. Shall we invest our time in films or fashion? Shall we spend it with Chinese ceramics or contemporary popular media? Shall we become aesthetic polymaths or dive very far into one domain? The finitude of life forces these decisions upon us.

The universalist is now in a position to offer a solution to the problems of aesthetic diversity and aesthetic disagreement as they concern instrumental value. They should agree, first, that diversity is instrumentally valuable. Diversity helps us individually and collectively access more bearers of aesthetic value. If no one person can access all of them, then our best way forward—if we want to know what is out there and what is good—is to employ a division of labor. There will be many aesthetically good things that only those with the appropriate background can appreciate, and thus things whose value the rest of us are not aware of or appropriately sensitive to, even when it stares us in the face. We collectively cover more ground this way. Moreover, talking with each other helps us individually access that value in ways that we could not before. We read art criticism, we discuss with others, and we learn about different cultures' aesthetic practices. Such activities improve our aesthetic sensitivity and expand our aesthetic horizons. We are thus each able to

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broaden our appreciation of aesthetic arenas with which we are unfamiliar, or at least our awareness that there is value to be had in those arenas.

Next, the universalist can explain why disagreement is instrumentally good. We are biased, imperfect reasoners, and we have limited access to the facts—access that is especially limited given our finitude. It is through debate and discussion that we correct our mistakes and expand our perspectives. We do not encourage disagreement for its own sake, but we do encourage it as a means to truth. Compare accounts of moral and scientific disagreement. Even the staunchest moral realist should value disagreement out of pure epistemic humility (see, for example, Rorty 1992; Appiah 2007; Muldoon 2017). After all, why should they, in practice, think that they have gotten everything about morality right? Listening to other perspectives is one of the ways we make moral progress over time. In fact, this valuing of disagreement, pace Gallie, is very much present in scientific inquiry. It is important to have people who disagree about the nature of dark matter or quantum mechanics, for in any world that is remotely like ours, we will in fact disagree. And one of the central ways to improve our theories is to have a free and open-minded exchange of ideas, even when those constitute disagreements.

However, I wager that we often enter aesthetic debates with a more open mind, readier to be convinced that we are wrong or missing something. (Note that this is not to deny aesthetic autonomy, the commonly held view that, roughly, we must make aesthetic judgments ourselves rather than, say, taking it on testimony that something is good or bad. When someone brings me to believe that I am wrong about some aesthetic judgment or brings me to see what it is that I am missing, I make a new judgment for myself.) Maybe this is because aesthetic expertise is hard to develop, or because the stakes of aesthetic disagreements are lower than moral and scientific disagreements, or even because many parties to aesthetic disagreements only half-believe that there is a right or wrong answer in the disagreement. The universalist can agree with all of this. Just because people believe something doesn't make it so; and it is anyway consistent with universalism to hold that the terms of many disagreements—that this is better than that, tout court—do not have right or wrong answers.

This open-mindedness makes such debates freer than their moral and scientific counterparts. That freedom enables aesthetic debates to be fun and enjoyable. People often say funny, surprising, and interesting things in these conversations. And we often use aesthetic debates to get to know each other. One might discover that their friend is really interested in fan service and fandom cultures; the other might discover that their friend knows a lot about the history of film. Or, in larger-scale disagreements, one might learn that a friend has a personal history that makes punk especially personally meaningful, and learn something interesting about punk culture on the way. In sum, aesthetic debates offer us a way to learn things, to strengthen our relationships and become better acquainted, but also to have a good time.

The suitably amended universalist view therefore has plenty of resources to accommodate the instrumental value of diversity and disagreement. Diversity helps us to individually and collectively cover more aesthetic territory and to sort ourselves into communities. Disagreement can help us learn more, form

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connections with each other, and have some fun. These considerations go a long way to explain why universal aesthetic agreement would be instrumentally bad. But they are entirely consistent with and even supported by a reasonable universalism.

5. A Universalist Solution, Part II: Intrinsic Value

Above, I showed how the universalist can accommodate the intuition that diversity and disagreement are instrumentally good. What seems much more difficult, by contrast, is to explain why they might be intrinsically good, why the presence of aesthetic diversity and disagreement as such make the world a better place. Maybe this is what the anti-universalists have in mind.

Most authors do not address this question explicitly either. A notable exception is Riggle, who argues that aesthetic conversation is intrinsically good when its participants interact in a way that forms and supports a certain kind of community. Riggle calls this 'vibing' and writes, 'Aesthetic conversation is intrinsically good exactly when it is vibing, and vibing is just the point of it' (2021: 655). But if aesthetic conversation has a point, and it is only good insofar as it serves that point, then aesthetic conversation (disagreement included) is not intrinsically valuable; vibing is, or communities are.

Nehamas occasionally hints that diversity and disagreement are good because they make the world lovelier, richer, or more interesting. If forming one's (aesthetic) personality is an aesthetic endeavor, then diversity and perhaps disagreement are required if the artwork of one's life is not to be a forgery. On this view, diversity and disagreement turn out to be *aesthetically* good. But the view that it is aesthetically better that there be diversity and disagreement about aesthetic matters cannot be combined with extreme anti-universalism. That diversity and disagreement about aesthetic matters is aesthetically good, which is the fundamental datum to be explained, is presumably something that we should all recognize. Insofar as we fail to recognize the aesthetic superiority of an aesthetically diverse world, we fail to appreciate something of genuine aesthetic value. More surprisingly, this view cannot be combined with moderate anti-universalism, either. Moderate anti-universalism acknowledges some universal aesthetic values but does not consider them the most important and central aesthetic values, but the present view specifically *does* center the universal aesthetic value of diverse aesthetic personalities. It is a universalist theory, through and through.

Maybe the thought is that diversity and disagreement are not good in some aesthetic way, but generally so, good *simpliciter* or all-things-considered. To explain this, the universalist can adopt one further supposition: that it is intrinsically good when valuable things are valued, and intrinsically bad when valuable things are not valued. Coupled with the core proposal, this means that Nehamas's uniform world is bad because so many aesthetically good things go unappreciated. The landscape of aesthetic value is so vast and so rich that it would be heartbreaking if we all clustered in one area. An incredible amount would be neglected, and there is tragedy in that vision of the world. Put less poetically, this would be intrinsically bad. After all, I may not read Russian

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literature or listen to Bhangra music, but I am quite confident that a lot of it is good. So even if I do not appreciate it myself, it is good that somebody does. Diversity is just what arises when we spread out valuing across the great variety of valuable things.

One worry is that this view implies a near infinitude of aesthetically valuable things that go unvalued, and that my proposal, if taken seriously, suggests we only make a tiny dent in that. As Kant puts it, 'nature has spread beauty so extravagantly everywhere, even at the bottom of the ocean' (2000: 160 [5:279]). Is it tragic or somehow intrinsically bad that we cannot appreciate beautiful deep ocean creatures, spectacular sunsets on faraway planets, or lost or hidden artworks? I think here the universalist—again, if interested in accommodating the intuition that there is something intrinsically good about diversity of aesthetic opinion—should simply say 'yes.' There is something sad about this. That is why we should, and often do, try to alleviate it. This claim does not strike me as unduly radical.

In this way, universalism can explain why diversity seems intrinsically valuable. Next, universalism should simply deny that disagreement is intrinsically valuable. If disagreement were really intrinsically valuable, then presumably we should not merely embrace it but actively promote it. But if this were true, many of our everyday aesthetic engagements with each other would not make sense.

Take two common occurrences. First, in discussions about aesthetic matters, we often aim to convince or persuade interlocutors—or to be convinced or persuaded ourselves. This is part of why friends and critics engage in debates when they face disagreements about aesthetic matters. One friend does not merely say that the latest installment in the Marvel Cinematic Universe was good and leave it at that. She offers reasons to bring her interlocutor into agreement. She might point to the production value, the cheeky humor, or the allusions and callbacks for franchise devotees. Typically, a friend who disputes this does not merely assert that the latest installment was bad; rather he tries to convince her that he is right and so bring them into agreement, citing, e.g., the lack of character development, the dizzying and hard-to-follow fight scenes, or the unmotivated plot turns. It would be confusing if the Marvel movie defender managed to convince her interlocutor and became immediately upset by that very fact. We might well wonder what she was trying to do, or what she thought she was doing, if that was her reaction.

Second, we have robust practices of recommendation. We share things that we find good with others, hoping that they will also find them good, and we solicit their recommendations. We share playlists, suggest hiking trails, and offer restaurant tips. To engage in these practices hoping for disagreement seems almost malicious. Top Ten lists ('Ten Best Albums of the Year'), restaurant reviews in newspapers, and aggregators like Rotten Tomatoes also exist within these recommendation practices, and they only make sense in a domain where we assume some base level of agreement. The prevalence of these situations suggests that aesthetic agreement is not as bad as it might have seemed. On the contrary, we often take it for granted, hope for it, and actively aim to achieve it.

But communally minded anti-universalists may protest that these disagreements are only discouraged because they exist *within* a particular community. Because Marvel movies are all a certain type of blockbuster action-comedy, or because the

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two friends are both the type to watch Marvel movies, we aim for agreement. Parties would not do this with someone who did not accept the genre's norms or with those outside their communities.

In practice, however, we still do aim or hope to resolve many inter-genre and inter-community aesthetic disagreements. Think of masterpieces and natural beauty, where we are often talking across communities, trying to get members of other subcultures or genre fans to see what is good about *this thing*. The same mechanism is at work in many other cases too. It is at work in museum labels, lecture halls, and many casual conversations that aim to bring someone without the relevant background to understand that background and why it makes something great, even if it is niche. And it is at work when we try to help others perceive differently, that they might detect what is aesthetically valuable in strange natural objects, flavors, or sounds that are not prototypically beautiful.

But what of Strohl's observation that it is sometimes thrilling to garner the contempt of outsiders? Here, perhaps, disagreement does seem intrinsically valuable. But if we do value disagreement in these cases, it is not *aesthetic* disagreement. If it is thrilling to garner the contempt of outsiders, there seems to be nothing aesthetically special about that. People can be thrilled to garner contempt from those whose moral and social views they take to be outdated (freaking out the squares), or from those whose aesthetic views they take to be misguided. Furthermore, the disagreement in these cases is still instrumentally, rather than intrinsically, valuable: for the thrill or pleasure of it, for the social progress it might promote, and so on.

This is important. Many nonaesthetic values are at play in these contexts. My best friend's photography is very personally valuable to me, and I have (nonaesthetic) reason to display it and even appreciate it. Gallery shows featuring underrepresented groups are socially and morally valuable, and audiences have (nonaesthetic) reason to attend. This is true regardless of the aesthetic status of the photography and shows. Similarly, it may be nonaesthetically valuable to participate in communities defined by disagreement with outsiders.

At the end of the day, universalism can explain the intrinsic value of diversity but should deny the intrinsic value of disagreement. Accepting the intrinsic value of disagreement has undesirable implications. But denying that value might have its own undesirable implications, to which I now turn.

6. Contingency

It might seem troubling that, on the universalism I have sketched, diversity and disagreement are in many respects only contingently good. Large parts of the argument rest on their being good to the extent that we actually have the lifespans we do, with the epistemic limitations that we actually have, and with the wealth of aesthetic affordances that we actually enjoy. On this view, a world with no aesthetic disputes is not, as such, a worse one, and it is instructive to see why. The contingency can be brought out by supposing either that there are radically fewer things of aesthetic value or that we have unlimited time.

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Imagine a world where there are radically fewer things of aesthetic value. Does the universalist really say that we should all converge on those things, and that therefore diversity and disagreement are not valuable there? Yes. But it is extremely hard to imagine a world as aesthetically limited as is required for this objection. I have been talking, for the sake of simplicity, about things being aesthetically good or aesthetically bad. In reality, a television show might be good insofar as it has beautiful cinematography, but bad insofar as it has underdeveloped characters. A painting might be good insofar as it is visually balanced, but bad insofar as it is heavy-handed. To say that there are only a few things that bear any genuine aesthetic value is to say that there are only a few things that are good in any respect. We are to imagine a world where, of the hundreds of thousands of movies that have ever existed, only a handful are good in any respect. Or that very few movies have ever existed, and they are good. We are to imagine this of nature too, so that there is, say, one solitary lovely flower but no gorgeous trees, cute animals, or inspiring landscapes. There are only a few poetic turns of phrase, very little that is funny or delicious, and so on.

One does not even have to bite a bullet to deny the value of aesthetic diversity and disagreement in such worlds. If there is one solitary lovely flower and everything else is grotesque or at best bland, surely we should all appreciate that flower. If someone finds the flower lovely, surely that does not ipso facto give us reason to *disagree* with them. To insist otherwise fetishizes diversity and disagreement. We can find something else to organize communities or construct personalities around, but let us take a moment to appreciate this one lovely thing in our aesthetically barren universe.

Conversely, rather than limiting the bearers of aesthetic value, we could imagine our own finitude eliminated. What if we were immortal, not limited by our at best triple-digit lifespans? Such worlds also plausibly contain a continued growth of bearers of aesthetic value and an increase in possibilities for aesthetic expression. Think of the works Hokusai and Albrecht Dürer could create were they still alive or the new avenues for aesthetic expression that further technological developments would enable. Earlier, I considered the music that was created today alone: one additional day of life is not enough to keep up with one additional day of production. Assuming artistic production and natural beauties continue apace, each individual will still be unable to access all bearers of aesthetic value.

Even setting that aside, immortality would not erase our forgetfulness or our ebbing and flowing familiarity with things. We might change and move in and out of different aesthetic arenas, only to return to them and rediscover things forgotten in the meantime. This already happens in our actual lifespans; an eternity could only intensify the effect.

Of course, we could try to imagine our finitude eliminated not *ceteris paribus*, as I have, but along with these features of our world and lives. For such a world—where these things do not continue apace, where we have perfect memories, and so on—the universalist should rest on the same response as before. We are again in an aesthetically barren universe, relative to our infinite lifespans, and we should converge on the few million or billion things of aesthetic value.

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7. A Universalist Solution, Part 3: Aesthetic Personality

The anti-universalist views I have looked at reject uniformity so fervently because they see uniformity as a threat not only to aesthetic diversity and dispute but also to aesthetic personality and community. Our aesthetic judgments and attachments, they hold, cannot be especially personal or help us organize communities if they are shared by everyone else. Indeed, these authors often argue that aesthetics is tightly connected to personality, identity, and attachments in a way that morality is not. 'While the values of morality are the emblems of our commonalities, the emblems of aesthetics are the badges of our particularities,' says Nehamas (2007: 86). And Riggle voices a similar sentiment: 'In moral philosophy we can make sense of the thought of someone who is completely alienated from the world of personal attachments but who is nonetheless fully in touch with moral value' (2015: 445–46).

But there is something more particular about morality and something more universal about aesthetics than these authors acknowledge. In fact, morality, far from being a domain that gives up personality and community for the sake of universality, illustrates how and why universality and personality can coexist. In doing so, it provides a model for a universalist vindication of the tight connection between aesthetics and personality, identity, and attachments.

The beginnings of a response are in Nietzsche:

> What, if some day or night a demon were to . . . say to you: 'This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence'. . . . The question in each and every thing, 'Do you desire this once more and innumerable times more?' would lie upon your actions as the greatest weight. (1974: 273–74 [Section 341])

This passage contains the eternal recurrence thought experiment, in which one imagines reliving one's actual life infinitely many times. Nietzsche claims that our decisions would take on a special gravity that we do not normally infuse them with. We need not adopt Nietzsche's own response to this thought experiment. For our purposes, the passage makes vivid the knowledge that each of us only has one life and that we have to choose very carefully what we spend that one life doing. What we spend that one life on is of course deeply personal. Our aesthetic judgments and our aesthetic loves are part of this. They are personal because they are among the things that make our lives our own. We can thus see why, even if there are other things of genuine value to spend our life on, *which* things we choose is of the utmost importance to us. And there are parallels to this in morality.

When we think about the moral domain, we often think of values that are demanding and reasons that are binding. There is a pressing urgency to moral matters that is absent for aesthetic ones. We are not *required* to watch a good

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movie, so how can we understand the claim that there is aesthetic reason to do so? These thoughts lend themselves to the conclusion that there are no universal aesthetic values or reasons that lay claim to all of us.

But morality also furnishes us with models of non-binding and non-requiring universal reasons. Think of the supererogatory or of imperfect or discretionary duties (or even of justifying reasons, as opposed to requiring reasons). It would be good for us all to compost any compostable biomatter. But we are not morally obligated to do so. Or think of imperfect duties: if we suppose that we all share the duty to help others, it is a discretionary matter *which ways* we elect to provide that help. Some donate money, others donate time. In both cases, moral reasons justify our actions, but do not require them—they encourage without binding. Notice that this in no way undermines their universality. It is true for everyone that composting is a morally good thing to do; it is true for everyone that donating money to Oxfam is a morally good thing to do. But this does not mean that everyone is obligated or bound to do these things. Similarly, while it is true on the present aesthetic universalism that there are reasons that apply to us all equally, those reasons need not be thought of as requiring. We are justified in promoting or appreciating anything of aesthetic value.

Furthermore, despite the universality of these reasons, it can still matter a great deal to a person's sense of self and sense of community *which* supererogatory or discretionary moral actions they choose. Let us suppose that the following are supererogatory: composting, being vegan, joining the Peace Corps, and volunteering to register others to vote. Each of these is something that people use as a centerpiece around which to build identities, personalities, and meaningful communities. And even if we take for granted that we cannot do all of these things, something is still unfortunate about a world in which we all only compost at the expense of any of the other things. It is that so many morally important pursuits go unpursued. So I may be very glad indeed that one friend registers others to vote, while another joins the Peace Corps and another is vegan. By the same token, I may be very glad that one friend spends her life cultivating a deep appreciation for punk music, while another spends his life cultivating a deep appreciation for pop. In this way, the core proposal illustrates that the universality of aesthetic value is not fundamentally at odds with its personality- and community-defining roles.

But can the punk fan truly be happy that her friend enjoys pop *while genuinely believing that pop is bad*? The composter can be happy for the vegan in a way that they cannot for someone who thinks that photographing birds is morally supererogatory (which is, let us assume, completely morally neutral). Similarly, the punk can be happy for the metalhead in a way that she cannot for the pop fan whose pursuit she takes to be valueless.

Expertise is difficult to acquire, so the punk aficionado should be epistemically modest in her judgments about which other aesthetic endeavors have value. Indeed, if she thinks pop is unqualifiedly bad, she should take it as evidence of her incorrectness that so many others—including her friend—disagree. Furthermore, to the extent that morally and aesthetically neutral actions do not harm anyone, we can be happy that people pursue at least what they take to be good. We might

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wish that we could convince them that other things are good, and we might try to do so. But they are doing better than they might otherwise be doing.

These cases also remind us of the importance of nonaesthetic goods. If others find happiness, meaning, or a sense of identity or community in something, that is wonderful. Those things are deeply important, even if they are not aesthetic. Just as we can be happy for others in this way, we can be happy—and justified—in our own pursuit of personal, moral, or other nonaesthetic values.

So, though there might be aesthetic reason to pursue all sorts of things, personal resonance brings me back to this particular album or this particular dish. These reasons may in many instances be stronger than aesthetic reasons. There will always be some mismatch between, say, what albums are best and what albums we really like. But what a wonderful thing, to find art that resonates personally; what a wonderful thing, to find endeavors around which we want to construct an identity; what a wonderful thing, to experience true pleasure. Of course we may be perfectly well justified, all things considered, in listening to albums we like. That is reason enough to listen to it over others, and those reasons can be as shallowly or as deeply personal as one wishes.

All of this suggests that views that sort morality neatly with universality and aesthetics neatly with particularity profoundly oversimplify these domains. From debates about agent-centered reasons to Bernard Williams's famous integrity objection to utilitarianism (1973), the personal and particular aspects of morality are very much live issues in moral philosophy. This is not to say that aesthetics and morality are or must be universal and personal in the very same ways. The point is simply that it is far from obvious that universality and particularity—or in our case, universality and personality—need to be thought of as incompatible opposites. Indeed, it is precisely Nagel's task in *The View from Nowhere* to defend the ineliminability of *both* the personal and impersonal points of view for moral and philosophical thinking. The view I suggest follows Nagel in attempting to combine these elements. Thus, he says, in a way that fits well with the spirit of this essay, '[i]t is necessary to combine the recognition of our contingency, our finitude, and our containment in the world with an ambition of transcendence, however limited may be our success in achieving it' (1986: 9).

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