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Tom Cochrane, "The Aesthetic Value of the World"

Jennifer Welchman

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Tom Cochrane. *The Aesthetic Value of the World.* Oxford University Press 2022. 240 pp. \$70.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780192848819).

Cochrane is proposing a new form of aestheticism, according to which aesthetic value is peculiarly important to us, because it ‘reconciles us with this world in all its light and share, and in so doing, it provides a vital buttress against nihilism and despair’ (141). Consequently, Cochrane’s aestheticism is more than a theory of aesthetic value or experience; it is a theory of the value of life, the universe, and *everything*. His goal is to provide ‘at least a partial response to problem of evil, for theist and atheist, alike’ (9). If, like Cochrane, you see the universe as riven through and through with suffering, but would prefer not to draw the anti-natalist’s conclusion, this monograph will be both interesting and instructive.

Cochrane introduces the text with a discourse on the impossibility of eliminating evil from our world, and the powerlessness of morality to reconcile us to it. Chapter 1 outlines his view of aesthetic value and experience. He follows with chapters analyzing his five main types of value: beauty, the sublime, the dramatic, the tragic, and the comic. In the last two chapters, he defends his aestheticism against objections and proposes a life centered on aesthetic value as a paradigm of a good life. An appendix offers brief but suggestive analyses of the ‘minor’ aesthetic values (the cute, cool, kitsch, uncanny, horrific, erotic, and the furious.)

Cochran distinguishes aesthetic values from both practical values and moral values, arguing that only aesthetic values are truly final goods, valued for themselves alone and not their facilitation of our own or others’ ends. For Cochrane, to appreciate ‘aesthetically’ is to appreciate engagement with the (response-dependent) aesthetic properties for their own sakes alone. We can do so because the properties we aesthetically appreciate give us a peculiar kind of pleasure thanks to evolutionary adaptations of our cognitive systems. Cochrane’s hypothesis is that our brains have evolved systems which reward our detection of signals of vital practical resources in our environment (‘distal detections’ in Cochrane’s terms) As obtaining these goods was once vital, cognitive systems which rewarded their mere detection would have favored our survival. So, for example, our brains would reward detecting ‘sweetness’ because it is a ‘distal’ marker of high caloric, survival-enhancing foods (20). These systems operate continually, rewarding us whenever we perceive the ‘distal’ traits of practically valuable resources, independent of our having any current use for them. Thus, their perception is now a source of enjoyment independent of any practical role they have in modern life. This, he thinks, explains the peculiar ‘disinterestedness’ of aesthetic experience.

Objects and persons often trigger responses that are contradictory or in tension with one another. The actual degree of reward we gain in a given case depends on how we negotiate these tensions. He writes ‘for each aesthetic value there is a cognitive or affective challenge that we typically need to overcome (complexity, hostility, stress, suffering wrongness) in order to access a reward (distal versions of various practical values.) The magnitude of the reward is proportional to the magnitude of the challenge’ (23). This claim is puzzling given the sort of reward aesthetic engagement is supposed to generate, *not* the reward for obtaining a practical good but rather the reward we receive merely for detecting its presence. This issue arises again in Cochrane’s discussion of Beauty in



Chapter 2.

In Chapter 2, Cochrane opines that all agree beautiful things display ‘formal perfection’ with ‘their parts related to each other in a definitely ordered way,’ while incorporating sufficient complexity to avoid a boring unity (31). Why do we aesthetically appreciate things with these formal features? ‘The basic idea is that the pleasure of things fitting together is a distal version of the reward we get from knowledge’ (43). Cochrane believes that our brains not only reward us with pleasure when we gain knowledge (fluently process information), it also rewards our perception of things *as being* rich in details to be known whenever these appear to be readily grasped ‘cognitive bargains’ (44). We experience a rose as beautiful when its form signals the ‘marvelous clarity’ it promises (44). We recoil from things as ugly whenever their signals indicate such inward disorder as to defy ready comprehension. Yet, he argues, even the ugly can have a (difficult) beauty, if we take the trouble to approach it as part of a greater whole to which it makes a constructive contribution.

So far, this seems consistent with Cochrane’s account of the reward system that explains our experience of the appearances of things of practical value, until he states: ‘It is not possible to find something beautiful without having at least some grasp of how the thing fits together, i.e. some knowledge. Thus the practical value of knowledge and the aesthetic value of beauty always coincide to a degree’ (46). In the case of beauty, mere detection of something being potentially informative isn’t enough to reward us with pleasure, we must actually obtain that practical good – information – as well. Why this should be the case, Cochrane doesn’t explain here. Nor does he consider the implication that if we follow his lead here, we will have to deny that our distant ancestors could have aesthetically appreciated stars, clouds, or other phenomena they did not understand.

The following four chapters offer analyses of his other main aesthetic values, similarly structured. We delight in the **Sublime** in which we detect ‘the distal version of the value of power’ with which we imaginatively identify; the effect is both thrilling and (often) reassuring about our capacities for coping with such entities (68). We delight in aesthetically **Dramatic** objects because our brains reward us ‘for approaching and engaging with exciting things’ (91). Even when the excitement is painfully intense, we can appreciate a further thrill from stretching our capacities to cope. We delight in the **Tragic**, when fictions and reality provide us characters (human or nonhuman) with characteristics signaling the potential for rewarding social attachment, so often most vividly conveyed to us when we observe those characters suffering (110-11). We delight in the **Comic**, when we perceive that social norm violations which would normally distress us are not serious, and so require no response. In Cochrane’s words, it is a ‘distal version of the pleasure of relief’ from anxiety (136).

Cochrane reasonably concludes in Chapter 7 that with this set of aesthetic values, it’s plausible that everything in the world will prove positively aesthetic valuable in some respect. He then defends his aestheticism against a series of objections. These include objections that aesthetic values are too subjective to outweigh human suffering; that the world’s moral defects disallow enjoyment of its aesthetic goods; that it contains too much ugliness to be aesthetically redeemable (and even if did our taste for its aesthetic appeals would become jaded); and finally, that if everything is positively aesthetically valuable we are licensed to be passive in the face of evil and ugliness. Cochrane argues

that his evolutionary explanation of our aesthetic experience is a sufficient rebuttal of the first. He argues for autonomism about aesthetic value in reply to the second. In reply to the third, he reminds us that beauty is not the only positive aesthetic value. Ugly things can also be comical, dramatic, tragic, or sublime. And if our taste for one kind of beauty becomes jaded, there are other positive aesthetic values to be called upon. Fourth, being an aesthetic autonomist does not entail one must accept moral evils simply because one does not see them as aesthetic defects. Nor does adopting aestheticism entail one should settle for the aesthetic value the world has offered one. Curiosity about new possibilities can motivate new discoveries through new forms of active engagement.

In his concluding chapter, Cochrane proposes that we recognize the life of artistic creation as a plausible paradigm of the good life. Artists are stimulated to explore the beauty of world for us, to reproduce aesthetic experiences in more lasting forms, and to give expression to unique points of view. Moreover, whatever cultivates our sensitivities to aesthetic values pays off practically because ‘the more effectively we can detect the distal versions of [practical] good, the more we can acquire these goods’ (180). Cochrane argues that society should recognize, and indeed celebrate, the benefits art and aesthetic values provide, ‘cultivating in our children the aesthetic sensibility that allows them to draw value from the world, and from each other, even when their lives are going badly’ (184). This way of defending aestheticism explains Cochrane’s insistence that we must understand beautiful things in order to find them beautiful. If we can find beauty in what we did not understand or actually misunderstand, our sense of beauty might be as deceptive as has so often been claimed.

Cochrane’s text will appeal most to those who share his evolutionary speculations, together with his identification of beauty and knowledge, his moral consequentialism, and his conception of the goal of aesthetic appreciation. Yet even those sharing none of these views will learn much from Cochrane’s well-informed yet fresh and provocative approach to enduring questions about aesthetic value.

Jennifer Welchman, University of Alberta