

In Defense of Artistic Value

Is there a distinctively artistic value that works of art have over and above their aesthetic value? *No*, Dominic McIver Lopes claims in a recent paper.¹ To frame things in terms of the key distinction that Lopes uses, there are many values *in* art (it can lead to political change, improve our health, and so on). But not all of these are values of art *as art*. If there is such a properly *artistic* sort of value, Lopes thinks, then it is simply going to amount to aesthetic value. Lopes's paper thus presents the case for a form of skepticism about any non-aesthetic notion of artistic value. He canvases various non-aesthetic options for underwriting artistic value. Yet none, he thinks, is successful. He sets up a dilemma: One either collapses the distinction between values *in* art and values *of* art, trivially taking all values of the former (political, therapeutic, etc.) to be values of the latter. This would, however, deprive the concept of artistic value of its ability to mark off the distinctive value of art as art. Or else—as Lopes prefers—one equates the work's artistic value with its aesthetic value. Either way, Lopes wants us to dispense with any notion of artistic value that is something beyond aesthetic value.

Lopes, it seems to me, has set up a false dichotomy. He dispenses too quickly with a promising account of artistic value that would present a non-trivial (and, I think, a highly plausible) conception of the grounds of artistic value, but would avoid either option of his dilemma. This account would look to the artwork's status as an achievement: On this achievement-based view, the value of the work of art *as art* (that is, its distinctively artistic value) consists in the artistically-relevant achievement that it itself constitutes. While I will not seek to vindicate the achievement view, I do want to show that Lopes's arguments against it are unsound. Contrary to what he concludes, there is an attractive potential conception of artistic value—one that does not amount to the trivial thesis that collapses the value of art into the manifold values to be found *in* art and, further, one that does not amount to the claim that artistic value is nothing more than aesthetic

¹ "The Myth of (Non-Aesthetic) Artistic Value," *Philosophical Quarterly* Vol. 61 (2011), No. 244, p. 518-536.

value. Indeed, as I go on to suggest in closing, Lopes's preferred horn of the dilemma—the one making artistic value a function of aesthetic value alone—makes no sense as a conception of artistic value unless it is supplemented by the more basic claim that the aesthetic value in question is something *achieved by an artist*. The mere possession of aesthetic value by an object is not enough to endow it with artistic value. Unless the work's artistic value is ultimately underwritten by the art work's status as an artistic achievement, aesthetic value cannot be an element of artistic value at all.

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In making his case, Lopes draws on the work of Richard Wollheim, in particular on Wollheim's hazy notion of a "thematizing activity."² On Wollheim's view, when one is engaged in a thematizing activity, one has the "reflexive" conceptualization of what one is doing *as* that of being engaged in the activity one is.³ Certain behaviors, such as putting pigments on a piece of canvas to represent shapes, have an intelligibility insofar as the agent conceives of what she is intentionally doing in terms of the thematizing activity of painting. Wollheim employs this notion as a way of understanding what makes a painting a work of art. He rejects what he calls "externalist" accounts, which would, on one popular institutionalist variant, make a painting's status as a work of art depend on relations it bears to the art world and the art world's representatives. Wollheim wants, by contrast, to propose an "internalist" account that would look to the painter's psychology and her self-conception of what she was doing as a way of separating the paintings that are art from those that are not art. What an agent has done, Wollheim notes, is something that can be described truly in many different ways. What, by contrast, an agent has done *intentionally* is something that can be described only by looking to the agent's own perspective and her self-understanding of her actions. If person A knocks over her cans of paint, and yet by amazing coincidence, the finished product ends up being perceptually indistinguishable from what person B, an abstract drip painter, was

² Wollheim, "What the Artist Does" in *Painting as an Art*, (Princeton, 1987).

³ Wollheim, at p. 24. There are other ways of interpreting what Wollheim means by a thematizing activity, but I am going to stick with Lopes's own interpretation of Wollheim and put issues of Wollheim exegesis aside.

intentionally and meticulously doing, then there is good reason to think B's painting is a work of art and A's painting is not, precisely because B had a particular reflexive self-conception of being engaged in the thematizing activity of painting, whereas A did not. Although Wollheim focuses on painting in particular, the same idea of a reflexive thematizing activity can be extended to cover composing music, sculpting statues, writing poems, and the like, as well as to various other practices that humans engage in.

But is there, Lopes goes on to ask, a correlative thematizing activity of *making art*, in addition to the more specific thematizing activities of painting, composing, and so on? Lopes is doubtful, and he uses this claim to underpin his argument for why the value of an artwork should not be understood in terms of its value as an artistic achievement. He writes:

The value of a work as art is its value as the product of an artistic achievement only if making art is a thematizing activity, but art is not a thematizing activity. There is art. Artists make it. What they do when making art is often an achievement of some kind. However, it is not an artistic achievement because there is no description under which their activity is a thematizing activity of making art.⁴

The basic argument here I take to be this *modus tollens*:

P1. If works of art are valuable as artistic achievements, then the artists of those works would have to be engaged in the thematizing activity of *making art*- that is, they have to reflexively conceptualize what they are doing under that description of "making art."

⁴ Lopes, at p. 532.

P2. Artists do not engage in the thematizing activity of making art— that is, they do not reflexively conceptualize what they are doing under that description of “making art.”

C: Thus, works of art are not valuable as artistic achievements.

As I have reconstructed it, this argument is of course valid. But I think both of its premises are questionable.

Let’s begin by considering the first premise. We can stipulate for the time being the second premise, namely that making art is not a thematizing activity that artists routinely, or ever, engage in. But even if making art is not *itself* a thematizing activity, the value of art, I want to suggest, can still consist in being an artistic achievement. For the achievement of making a work of art could be something one achieves *only by way of* intentionally engaging in other, more specific thematizing activities that constitute the practice of art.

Take this example from outside the arts: When I was in high school, there were awards given out each year for athletic achievement. (Not to me.) This was not an award for engaging in some ultimate amalgam of sports—an insane polyathlon—or in some vague sort of physical self-cultivation. One succeeded in athletics by excelling at *some particular sport* or sometimes at several. An achievement is an athletic achievement *because* it is an achievement in cross country or lacrosse or squash. Those sports require their own particular skills: In playing squash you need to know to hit the ball to the back corner to foil your opponent. If you stand on the court trying to engage in “athletics,” whatever that is, and not at squash in particular, you can guarantee that you are not going to get the athletic laurels. It is neither sufficient nor necessary for achievement in athletics that one conceptualize what one is doing as “engaged in athletics.”

Why then is this *not* true with the arts? You succeed at the arts by engaging in and succeeding at one or more of the specific thematizing activities united under the general banner of “the arts.”

The practice of art, like the practice of athletics, is constituted by a range of different, more specific activities. Lopes could be right when he notes that “there are practices and traditions of painting and music, but there are no practices of making art over and above these.”⁵ Yet even if there is no thematizing activity of “making art,” one can still achieve something in the arts by achieving something in one of those art-constituting practices. Artistic achievement, it seems to me, is relevantly like athletic achievement in this respect.

Success in the arts is thus a disjunctive matter. But just because the category is disjunctive, what reason does Lopes give us that we should give it up on this basis? None. And it is good thing for his own account that he is not suspicious of values that are realized in disjunctive ways, since this is true of his own preferred notion: aesthetic value. Aesthetic value will be differently realized in the various arts and in various sub-genres of those arts. There may be some commonalities, but the aesthetic virtues of music are not, one for one, the aesthetic virtues of painting. And the aesthetic virtues of Baroque opera are not, one for one, the aesthetic virtues of German expressionist opera. If aesthetic value can earn its theoretical keep while being disjunctive, why not achievement value too?

Let’s now give up the stipulation and consider the second premise in its own right. One might think it useful, by way of counterexample, to point to Wagner and those of grandiose Romantic ambitions. Wasn’t Wagner, in inventing the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, doing away with artistic categories, engaged, if anyone was, in the thematizing activity of making Art with a capital “A”? But even if this were true about Wagner—and I’m not sure that this is the best description of his ambitions—this sort of isolated counterexample wouldn’t help the case at hand. We need it to be the case not that a few artists engage in the thematizing activity of making art, but that *most* or *all* do.

So we will need to adopt a different strategy. Yet because the notion of a thematizing activity is itself so slippery, it can be difficult to get a grip on the second premise. The conceptual role this

⁵ Lopes, at p. 532.

“thematizing activity” was supposed to serve in Wollheim’s work was the following: by way of the agent’s psychological states, to separate the person who produces a painting as a work of art from the person who simply, perhaps even unintentionally, produces a painting that is not a work of art. I say the notion is slippery because it is underdetermined just what form this reflexive self-understanding must take in order for it to be the case that one is engaged in the particular thematizing activity one is. Need this self-understanding take the form of an *occurrent belief* that lasts for the entire time one is engaged in the practice? That would be an extraordinarily implausible requirement.⁶ I think I (moments ago) was engaged in the thematizing activity of writing this essay. Just now, I brought to consciousness an occurrent belief about what I was doing. But that occurrent belief about what one is doing is far from the norm. When one is absorbed in painting, presumably one does not, as a kind of repeating accompaniment, have running through one’s mind the thought *I am now engaged in the thematizing activity of painting*. That would be a kind of perverse self-awareness—not to mention being highly distracting. If having such a thought were a necessary condition for being engaged in the thematizing activity of x, it would be doubtful that *anyone* ever engaged in the thematizing activity of x very often. So what *is* required?

Maybe we look to dispositions: Is it simply the first thing I would be disposed to describe myself as doing if I reflected on or was asked about what I was doing? I don’t think so. Consider this example. I like to cook. I sometimes have my friends over and cook dinner for them. In doing so, I am, I take it, engaged in the thematizing activity of cooking, thinking about how long to sear the steaks, how to season the vegetables, and so on, even if that thought is not occurrently on my mind the whole time. If someone asked me what activity I was engaged in, I would probably reply, “cooking.” So far so good. But here’s something else I would also seem to be engaged in, and not unintentionally either: the activity of being a good friend. Do I conceptualize what I’m doing, while

⁶ What Wollheim says on p.18 in §4 about how a thought guides an action might lend itself to this interpretation that the thought must be occurrent, but he distances himself from this implausible view in the following section, §5, on p. 19.

I'm doing it, *as* the activity of being a good friend, even in an on-and-off way that floats in and out of my conscious awareness? Typically not. There's something oddly self-congratulatory about thinking of what one is doing in this way— "one thought too many," as Bernard Williams might say.⁷ Would that—being a good friend—be my first answer about what I was doing? Almost surely not. Of course, one can imagine circumstances in which I cook for or entertain my friend with other motives— to curry his favor, say, so as to get him to side with me in a dispute we are having with a mutual friend. *That* instance of cooking would not count towards being a good friend. But, other things being equal, supposing I have no such additional machinations in the works, it would seem that I am being a good friend, even if I wouldn't be disposed immediately to describe myself as doing *that in particular* and instead am most disposed to reply that I am engaging in the activity of cooking.

So is being a good friend a *thematizing* activity? We perhaps shouldn't fetishize that term itself, since it is, if you will pardon the expression, "a term of art" and Wollheim's own use of it is rather opaque. But I am, after all, engaging in the friendship practice, doing what it is that friends do, guided by certain tacit norms, even if all this happens without explicit thought to that effect. What I do is *intelligible action* by my own lights. Shouldn't that be enough, if not for thematizing activity *per se*, at least for something that could play the same conceptual role?

Will this be enough? Suppose that unbeknownst to me, I am cooking with poisoned ingredients. I'm not, I presume we would want to say, by any means engaged in the thematizing activity of poisoning my guests. The important difference between the friendship and the poisoning case, I suspect, is something of the following sort: The reflexive understanding is something I *could* get, without additional information, in the friendship case and not in the poisoning case. I could ratify the description of what I was already doing in slightly different terms, even if those are not the terms that would first come to mind.

⁷ "Persons, Character and Morality" in *Moral Luck*, (Cambridge, 1981), p. 18.

Returning to our point about the first premise, there are various ways to succeed at being a friend. I can cook for my friends, meet them for drinks, lend an ear, provide a shoulder to cry on, and the like. Doing those things in the appropriate circumstances with the appropriate motives are all ways of being a good friend. There is no general way of being a good friend that does not include successful engagement in one or more of these more specific activities. But from the fact that there are multiple ways to succeed at being a good friend, we should not draw the eliminativist conclusion that there is no activity of being a good friend that one can engage in.

With these considerations in the background, let us consider how we are to interpret Lopes's second premise, as I have reconstructed it: *Artists do not engage in the thematizing activity of making art—that is, they do not reflexively conceptualize what they are doing under that description of “making art.”* If we take the notion of a “thematizing activity” to require that the artists have an occurrent belief about what it is that they are doing, then it would be doubtful if they engage in *any* thematizing activities at all, including making paintings or composing music. They couldn't genuinely be absorbed in their work. If we take the more permissive understanding, however, then we can just deny the second premise. Artists (at least of the past few centuries) are in fact typically engaged in the thematizing activity of making art, even when that is not at the forefront of their minds, much as I can be engaged in the thematizing activity of being a friend, even when that is not at the forefront of my mind. Even if an artist might not think of herself in the first instance as making art, much as a squash player wouldn't typically think of himself, or be disposed immediately to describe himself as engaged in “athletics,” those are self-descriptions the agent could ratify, without further empirical information. On the most plausible construal of thematizing activity, artists thus in fact *do* engage in the thematizing activity of making art.

Artists, as I alluded to with my parenthetical qualification, have of course only begun thinking of themselves in this way in the past few hundred years, with the rise of the modern

institution of the fine arts. When I step back from trying to debate with Lopes and Wollheim on their own terms, I see this as very good reason to reject from the outset their strongly internalist approach that would emphasize “thematizing activities” in trying to understand the status of artifacts as art and as achievements. For this, it seems to me, is a starting datum that must be accounted for: *Antigone* is *now* a work of art and valuable as an artistic achievement, even if Sophocles couldn’t think of what he was doing in just those terms. Any theory that rejects this must have gone wrong somewhere. But that is a dialectically unsatisfying approach, and is, in any event, a matter for a full paper. My goals have been modest. While I haven’t tried to argue for the achievement view directly, I have cast doubt on Lopes’s overly hasty rejection of it.

Now, in closing, I would like to ask what we are to make of Lopes’s preferred suggestion that artistic value is going to need to be aesthetic value. I will argue that in order to accommodate the idea that aesthetic value is even *a* value of art as art, let alone *the* value of art as art, Lopes will need to allow that artistic value ultimately depends on achievement value.

Earlier in the paper, Lopes mentions the possibility of an argument from indiscernibles of the sort made famous in aesthetics by Arthur Danto.⁸ Two objects may look the same, but differ in their respective artistic worth: An ordinary urinal and Duchamp’s *Fountain* have the same perceptible features, the argument goes. But the latter is valuable as a work of art, and the former is not. So artistic value cannot supervene on perceptible features alone. As Lopes points out with some justice, the assumption that aesthetic value would need to supervene on *perceptible* features might be questioned. With a broader notion of aesthetic value, one’s aesthetic experience might be seen as taking account not just of *Fountain’s* perceptible features, but, in a more cognitively rich way, of its message. Thus, one can indeed see *Fountain* and the ordinary urinal as differing in the *aesthetic* experiences that they can afford. One affords a rich experience of intellectual contemplation; the other does not.

⁸ Danto, “The Artworld,” *Journal of Philosophy*, 61 (1964), pp. 571-84.

Suppose we grant Lopes this more expansive conception of an aesthetic experience. Even so, once we reflect on a different argument from indiscernibles, we will see that it is achievement value that is ultimately going to need to underwrite artistic value. To the extent that aesthetic value is a component of artistic value, it is only *derivatively* so. Consider the classic case of a random painting generator. Suppose it just shoots out paint that lands on the canvas, coincidentally in the very same pattern as that of Giorgione's *Tempest*. Looking at this paint array would afford a very rich aesthetic experience in many of the same ways as would looking at the real painting. Yet Lopes will surely want to say that only the painting produced by Giorgione has *artistic* value. After all, given Lopes's Wollheimian internalism, the array is not even a work of art; how might it have the distinctive value thereof? Lopes thus needs a way of explaining why, even though the array has many of the same aesthetic values as the painting, this aesthetic value does not redound to the array's artistic value, since the array has no such artistic value. Simply pointing out that the painting is a work of art and the array is not would just restate instead of answer the pressing question: What feature accounts for this drastic difference in artistic value between Giorgione's work of art and the duplicate that is not a work of art, when the two share many of the same aesthetic values in common? The most intuitive explanation, it seems to me, is that Giorgione's painting is a great human achievement and the array is not. When aesthetic value is a value of art as art, it is only *because* this aesthetic value *has been achieved by an artist*. The mere possession of aesthetic value is not enough. For Lopes's own focus on artistic-value-as-aesthetic-value to be tenable, he will need to fall back on this achievement idea that he rejects.

As we have seen, Lopes would not want to allow that the *Tempest* and the array have the same aesthetic value, since he wants a richer conception of aesthetic value, where that value does not simply supervene on perceptible properties. Let us then assume with Lopes that there is *also* a difference in aesthetic value between the real work and the array that moves in step with this difference in artistic value between the two. Although the array would have many aesthetic values in

common with the painting, it would not, on this view, have all aesthetic values in common. Still, what would explain this residual difference in aesthetic value? The most intuitive explanation would again be the marked difference in *achievement* value. The aesthetic experience of Giorgione's work is richer *because* one is knowingly experiencing something that is a human achievement and not simply the fortuitous upshot of painting generator. Being valuable as an achievement is thus the source of an artwork's greater aesthetic value, compared with that of the randomly generated duplicate.

Now perhaps Lopes could modify his claim to hold that artistic value is nothing over and above aesthetic value *in artworks in particular*. But this is questionable. Even if aesthetic value *tracks* artistic value, so that works with greater artistic value thereby give rise to better aesthetic experiences, it is not obvious that aesthetic value *just is* artistic value in artworks. This potentially conflates the value of *the appreciation* of something with the value of the thing itself. Running the four-minute mile is a considerable achievement. Yet the value of this achievement does not consist in the appreciation of this achievement by the spectators in the stadium.⁹ If the view I have been suggesting is right, then artistic value, similarly, is realized in the artist's achievement itself, in being the particular exercise of skill and creativity that it is. It is another matter what values are realized through the appreciation, or potential appreciation, of this achievement. The aesthetic experience, on the view I would prefer, is a *response to* that artistic value in works, not what their artistic value consists in.¹⁰ Much more remains to be said about the details of such a view. That I will need to leave for another occasion.¹¹

⁹ I am indebted to Michael Williams for suggesting this sort of example.

¹⁰ James Shelley, although not in the service of an achievement view *per se*, makes a similar point in his "Against Value Empiricism in Aesthetics," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 88, No. 4, pp. 707-720 (December 2010), at p. 715.

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