THE COGNITIVE PHENOMENOLOGY OF AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

by

Carson Williams

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SUPERVISORY COMMITTEE:

_____

Garrett Mindt, Ph.D.

Thesis Advisor

_____

Nicholas Baima, Ph.D.

Supervisor Committee

_____

Nicholas Baima, Ph.D.

Chair, Philosophy Department

ABSTRACT

Author: Carson Williams

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Two issues in contemporary philosophy of mind and philosophy of aesthetics come together in this paper. The debate over the existence of cognitive phenomenology has been ongoing between the expansionist side (asserting the existence of cognitive phenomenology) and the restrictivist side (arguing against its existence). At the present moment, expansionists are tasked with finding an example of a cognitive phenomenology which outstrips sensory phenomenology. The second debate central to this paper regards the definition of aesthetic experience. Value-based views, content-based views and phenomenological views are among the most popular definitions in contemporary aesthetics.

In this thesis, I defend the existence of cognitive phenomenology against restrictivist concerns by taking on the framework of mental computation put forth by Ray Jackendoff and positing the existence of cognitive phenomenologies which outstrip sensory experience under this framework. Further, I defend a robustly phenomenological view of aesthetic experience which is an extension of the view put forth by Alan Goldman, arguing for the significance of the cognitive phenomenology of aesthetic experience in our understanding of aesthetic experience.

INTRODUCTION

Two issues in contemporary philosophy of mind and philosophy of aesthetics come together in this paper. The debate over the existence of cognitive phenomenology has been ongoing between the expansionist side (asserting the existence of cognitive phenomenology) and the restrictivist side (arguing against its existence). At the present moment, expansionists are tasked with finding an example of a cognitive phenomenology which outstrips sensory phenomenology. The second debate central to this paper regards the definition of aesthetic experience. Value-based views, content-based views and phenomenological views are among the most popular definitions in contemporary aesthetics, though these views take different aspects of aesthetic experience to be the crucial part of its definition.

In chapter one of this paper, I will familiarize readers with the state of the cognitive phenomenology debate, explaining the restrictivist view and the expansionist view. In chapter two, I will discuss the aesthetic experience debate, explaining three main versions of aesthetic experience definitions: value-based views, content-based views, and phenomenological views. In chapter three, I will argue for an expansionist view on cognitive phenomenology, asserting its existence using the framework of mental computation put forth by Ray Jackendoff. Finally, chapter 4 will utilize this view of cognitive phenomenology to argue for a robustly phenomenological view of aesthetic experience which is fit to stand up to the critiques which plague many definitions of aesthetic experience. I argue that the character of cognitive phenomenology can be found in conceptual understanding, which is experienced alongside sensory awareness in a way which tints the experience of the sensory. Further, I argue that both sensory phenomenology and cognitive phenomenology are central to aesthetic experience in that

aesthetic experience should be defined as the simultaneous, entangled engagement of the five mental faculties of perception, memory, affect, imagination, and conceptual understanding.

CHAPTER ONE

The Cognitive Phenomenology Debate

1.1. Restrictivism

Cognitive phenomenology generally seeks to describe the subjective phenomenology, or felt experience, of cognition or thought. Whether this is entirely subsumed and can be explained by the sensory or other accompanying states or whether there is a phenomenology which outstrips these is the central debate.

Those who believe that cognitive phenomenology can be fully explained in terms of other phenomenologies, are referred to as *restrictivists*.[1] There are two distinct formulations of the restrictivist argument,[2] including sensory restrictivism[3] [4] and the accompanying states view.[5] [6]

Jesse Prinz' version of sensory restrictivism is rooted in classical empiricism's formulation of 'vehicles' of mental representation as copies of perceived entities. Prinz argues that the content of a vehicle is sensory if it represents some aspect of appearance while non-sensory content would outstrip appearance in one way or another. He further argues that restrictivism is true if, for every vehicle with qualitative character, there could be a qualitatively identical vehicle that has only sensory content while expansionism is true if some vehicles with qualitative character are distinguishable from every vehicle that has only sensory content. Put

[1] Jesse J. Prinz, "The Sensory Basis of Cognitive Phenomenology 1," 2012.
[2] Marta Jorba, "Conscious Thought and the Limits of Restrictivism," 2015.
[3] Prinz, 2012.
[4] Ray Jackendoff, *Consciousness and the Computational Mind*, 1987.
[5] Eric Lormand, "Nonphenomenal Consciousness," 1996.
[6] Michael Tye and Briggs Wright, "Is There a Phenomenology of Thought?," 2012.

another way, restrictivism is the view that content which goes beyond appearance has no direct impact on the quality of any related phenomenological experience.[7]

In many ways, Ray Jackendoff's view is the basis for Prinz' restrictivism, within which three levels of mental computation exist with only the intermediate level being conscious. At the basic level, individual bits of data are processed by the senses, whether it be individual photons of light, each chemical making up a single fragrance, etc. At the intermediate level, which is the only conscious level for Jackendoff, these bits of data are processed and made available to the conscious mind as integrated wholes. At the highest level, abstracted concepts formed by repeated instances of experiences of integrated wholes are formulated and stored for the mind to utilize within its processing. For Jackendoff, this is as much an unconscious process as the processes at the lowest level. In order for the processes of the higher level to be accessed consciously, it must be translated into a mode the intermediate level can understand, such as an image in the mind's eye or inner speech.[8]

In the accompanying states view described by Eric Lormand, the range of phenomenological conscious states can be boiled down (perhaps not exhaustively) to a quartet of conscious phenomenological experiences including perceptual representations, bodily sensations, imaginings, and streams of thought. Any phenomenology associated with consciousness need not be described by an appeal to an experience of the overarching mood, attitude, or disposition itself but rather an experience of the accompanying states of mind which include any of the qualitative quartet.[9]

Michael Tye and Briggs Wright expand upon Lormand's account of the accompanying states view by adding emotional states to the list of significant conscious mental states, such as

[7] Prinz, 2012.
[8] Jackendoff, 1987.
[9] Lormand, 1996.

feeling anger or feeling fear. Despite Lormand's refutation of emotional states as a unique conscious mental state, Tye and Wright argue for emotional states being present in animals in a way separate from any of the other states represented by the qualitative quartet, which leads to the positing of their own quintet.[10]

For sensory and accompanying states restrictivism, any and all appeals to a purely cognitive phenomenology can be explained by appeals to other forms of phenomenological experience. Prinz' main challenge for expansionists is that cognition of sensory phenomena can clearly be experienced in isolation. It is possible to experience a pure form of sensory information in which one does not conceptualize or cognize the sensory data, such as when an English speaker listens to a speech in Mandarin. Prinz asks expansionists which aspects of cognitive phenomenology (separate from sensory perceptions) can be experienced in isolation, with no sensory perceptions?[11]

1.2. Expansionism

It is no coincidence that the main approach for many within the expansionist camp to assert their position is to first assert an expansive list of conscious states which all have separate, distinguished phenomenologies. Though it may be the case that many of the conscious states described by expansionists are underlied by or explicitly include sensory states as well, some of the described states claim to go beyond mere sensory phenomenology as well.

David Pitt, for example, proposes that for each conscious intentional state which holds a unique representational content, there exists a "proprietary, distinctive, individuative phenomenology."[12] Within this view, all conscious intentional states contain representational

[10] Tye and Wright, 2012.
[11] Prinz, 2012.
[12] David Pitt, "The Phenomenology of Cognition, Or, What Is It like to Think That P?," 2004.

content, or are 'about' something, and the way each unique piece of representational content is experienced within a conscious state can be formulated as its own distinct phenomenology.

As I have mentioned intentionality in the above paragraph, I feel I should briefly address this term. Intentionality essentially is the property of a conscious state being 'about' something or being focused on some sort of content. Horgan and Tienson argue that any phenomenal conscious state must inherently also be an intentional one, an argument which can be used to reaffirm Pitt's view. All conscious states which are about something also have an associated phenomenal aspect to them.[13]

Charles Siewert, similarly to Pitt, asserts that many varied phenomenal conscious states exist, and he uses a method of appealing to hypothetical examples, from a first person perspective, of phenomenal conscious states which can be separated from a phenomenal experience of the sensory sort. For example, my hearing of a statement in Mandarin, when I do not speak or understand the language, differs cognitively from that of a Mandarin speaker hearing the same statement who is having the same exact sensory experience to me at that moment. These sorts of first person examples propel Siewert's assertion that a cognitive phenomenology which outstrips the senses not only exists but is central to our understanding of consciousness.[14]

Marta Jorba directly responds to both the sensory restrictivists and the accompanying states view simultaneously by appealing to the existence of unsymbolized thinking, or a cognitive experience devoid of any perceived sensory material.[15] Jorba's assertion works in tandem with Russell T. Hurlburt and Sarah A. Akhter's research on unsymbolized thinking

[13] Terence Horgan and John Tienson. "The Intentionality of Phenomenology and the Phenomenology of Intentionality," 2002.
[14] Charles Siewert, *The Significance of Consciousness*, 1998.
[15] Jorba, 2015.

whereby they use a surveying method called descriptive experience sampling (DES)[16] to ask participants to describe their subjective experiences of their cognition. They found five main descriptions of cognition to be reported, including one called unsymbolized thinking, which is described by patients as thinking without images, words, inner speech or sound, etc. and is characterized by a certain immediacy.[17]

Circling back to Pitt and Siewert, the immediacy of unsymbolized thinking present in the DES reports can be mapped onto Pitt's definition of acquaintance. Acquaintance is a form of knowledge which is characteristic of cognition, in which a subject is immediately aware or acquainted with their own thoughts or cognition. Separate from sensory observation, no aural or symbolic thought is perceived in the case of acquaintance and is rather underlied by introspection.[18] Siewert speaks also of one's warrant for first person knowledge, asserting that while others may rely on observation (sensory means) to know your mental states, one need not observe themself in this way to know their own mental states. First person knowledge is warranted by its pre-epistemological and nondiscursive nature.[19]

Though these arguments for expansionism are strong, Prinz' request for expansionists to provide evidence of an isolated cognitive phenomenology still lingers. In section 3.1, I will reject this loaded question by positing a cognitive phenomenology which is emergent from sensory experience rather than isolated from it. However, before asserting an expansionist view of cognitive phenomenology, I must go over the aesthetic experience debate, since my view of aesthetic experience is deeply intertwined with cognitive phenomenology.

[16] Russell T. Hurlburt and Sarah A. Akhter, "The Descriptive Experience Sampling Method," 2006.
[17] Russell T. Hurlburt and Sarah A. Akhter, "Unsymbolized Thinking," 2008.
[18] Pitt, 2004.
[19] Siewert, 1998.

CHAPTER TWO

The Aesthetic Experience Debate

2.1. Overview of Aesthetic Experience

When it comes to defining aesthetic experience, the effort is historically and practically complicated to say the least. Richard Shusterman documents the wide swaths of meanings and connotations ascribed to aesthetic experience throughout historical and contemporary debates,[20] which can be mapped along three different axes of meaning:[21]

1. Is aesthetic experience an honorific or neutral term?
2. Is aesthetic experience robustly phenomenological or simply semantic?
3. Does aesthetic experience transform and expand the field of aesthetics or does it seek to demarcate or delimit aesthetic boundaries and the status quo?

The first dimension seeks to understand if a definition of aesthetic experience ascribes inherent value to the experience or takes it to be a neutral experience. The second dimension seeks to understand if a definition of aesthetic experience takes affect and subjective intentionality to be necessary or if aesthetic experience is merely about a certain type of symbols and style being the object of one's experience. The third refers to a definition of aesthetic experience either seeking to demarcate what should be constituted as aesthetic or artistic and what should not or seeking to transform the field of aesthetics away from talking merely about art or what it has historically consisted of.

Either side of each of these three poles have been ascribed to aesthetic experience (henceforth called AE) at various points in the history of the term, though Shusterman sees the decline of the importance of AE in recent discussions of philosophy and art theory as a product

[20] Richard Shusterman, "Aesthetic Experience: From Analysis to Eros," 2006.
[21] Richard Shusterman, "The End of Aesthetic Experience," 1997.

of the shift from an experience-based to an information-based culture (a product of material and technological circumstance).[22] Before I go on to define my own view of AE, I will go over the current state of affairs in the definition of AE.

2.2. Value-Based Views

Similarly to Shusterman, Noël Carroll characterizes the definitions of AE within the contemporary debate under three categories, though rather than being axes of analysis they are groupings of views. For Carroll, we can think of AE as being defined in either value-based ways, content-based ways, or phenomenological ways.[23] The value-based definition of AE relies on some inherent value of such an experience which makes it, therefore, an aesthetic one.[24] Thinkers like Alan Goldman reject the valuing view on its easy dismissability. One may have an experience which is intrinsically valuable or pleasurable which we would not consider to be an aesthetic one, such as enjoying the taste of a candy or the experience of a massage.[25] On the flip side of this, one could have an AE which is not intrinsically valuable or pleasurable to them at all. Accounts of AE which appeal to beauty, sublimity, or sophistication can also be rejected by this same argument. AE may not include an experience of beauty or sublimity, etc. while some beautiful experiences may not be aesthetic ones. An evaluative approach to defining AE also has the pitfall, as Noël Carroll points out, of not including negative AEs within its definition.[26]

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[22] Ibid.
[23] Noël Carroll, "Defending the Content Approach to Aesthetic Experience," 2015.
[24] Carroll places Jesse Prinz' view of AE under the value-based camp, though I have placed him in the phenomenological camp. This is because his underlying framework relies on a specific phenomenology of AE while the value, to me, is related to AE secondarily for Prinz. However, I think that either way works for sorting his view since his view seems to sit somewhere between the two camps.
[25] Alan H. Goldman, "The Experiential Account of Aesthetic Value," 2006.
[26] Carroll, 2015.

2.3. Content-Based Views

The content-based view, or the objective view, seeks to define AE according to the content it includes, taking AE to be a specific type of experience *about* a specific set of things. This view has multiple manifestations, the strictest of which is formalism. Formalism asserts that AE is defined as the experience of attending to the formal aspects of a work of art, such as its scale, material, color, etc. Such a limited view does not intuitively map onto what we may want to call aesthetic experiences, so the view has been greatly expanded in recent years. Noël Carroll's content-based view of AE (in regards to experiencing art specifically) includes attending to the formal content, aesthetic content, and expressive content of a work of art, as well as the reflexive content of attending to the interplay between these contents. Attention to these properties must be done so with a baseline understanding of these properties. Carroll's content approach is a disjunctive account, since attending to any one of these contents can be classified as AE.[27]

The content-based definition indeed does a better job than the value-based definition at demarcating art from other types of experience since 'bad art' or works which evoke a negative reaction can still be included within AE as long as it has formal, aesthetic, or expressive content to attend to. However, the major flaw of the content-based view is its removal of 'experience' from defining aesthetic experience. In other words, content-based views completely forego the experiential aspect of AE to instead define AE according to the semantic details of the *objects* of experience. Shusterman's cyborg thought experiment[28] offers the most provocative critique of such views, questioning how it can be so that a conscious human being and a mechanistic cyborg could provide equal attention, observation, and interpretation to a work of art and yet we would

[27] Ibid.
[28] Shusterman, 1997.

still probably dismiss the cyborg as having no AE whatsoever. Such critiques showcase how a content-based view is remiss without explaining the subjective aspects of AE.

2.4. Phenomenological Views

When it comes to the phenomenological, subjective, or experience-based view of AE, Jesse Prinz represents the strictest of the subjective views. For him, the affective dimension of AE is most significant to understanding just what AE is. The phenomenological experience of the emotion of wonder or awe is what underlies AE for Prinz.[29] However, I should clarify how he relates wonder and awe to AE, since he does not specifically define the entirety of AE under this framework. For Prinz, the more relevant concept is aesthetic appreciation, which he asserts is underlied by wonder. The taking in of a novel, perplexing, or reverent work of art may be accompanied by an experience of wonder which directly correlates with one's aesthetic appreciation of the work. Prinz' wonder view of aesthetic appreciation accounts for three experiential dimensions, cognitive, perceptual, and spiritual. Within the cognitive aspect, a work of art which is worthy of aesthetic appreciation is one which challenges one's own conceptual frameworks and requires some active cognitive processing in order to make sense of it. Within the perceptual aspect, one may experience a work of art as particularly complex or stimulating, and within the spiritual aspect, one may experience the work as worthy of reverence and respect. These three experiential dimensions are all subsumed under the emotion of wonder, according to Prinz, and these experiences are what define aesthetic appreciation.

Distinguishing between aesthetic appreciation and AE is crucial here, since the distinction becomes confused under Prinz' view of AE. The problem with turning a view of aesthetic appreciation into a definition of AE is that it inherently carries an evaluative property

[29] Jesse Prinz, "Emotion and Aesthetic Value," 2011.

with it. Because appreciation inherently regards evaluation in its framework, the move to a view of AE does not work, and certainly can not be characterized as a purely phenomenological view. While it is true that phenomenology, particularly an affective phenomenology, is central to Prinz' view, this definition of AE sits on the fence between a phenomenological view and a value-based view. While Prinz' descriptions of the cognitive dimension and the perceptual dimension of AE are arguably sound, it is his characterization of the spiritual dimension that takes the view into the territory of evaluation. With the spiritual dimension, Prinz bakes into his view of AE an experience of viewing the work as worthy of reverence or respect, which leaves Prinz' view open to all of the same critiques that can be levied at the other value-based views.

It may be the case that Prinz would note that AE can be broken down into two parts, the initial response followed by the appraisal, which may or may not be one of appreciation. It may be the case that a range of emotions is present in the initial response while wonder is central to the appraisal (appreciation) aspect of the experience, which is the more direct or intentional stage of the experience. However, Goldman refutes Prinz' view by asserting that no one emotion is ever-present within AE, or even aesthetic appraisal, and searching for one omnipresent emotion within AE is needlessly limiting.[30]

Goldman defends a broader subjective view,[31] more akin to John Dewey[32] and Monroe Beardsley.[33] The mark of AE, to Goldman, is the engagement of all of our mental faculties at once including perception, imagination, affect (or emotion), cognition, and even volition. Goldman specifies the objects of cognition during AE can be moral, insightful, and can also include truth.[34] [35] The full mental engagement of a person, and even a movement away from

[30] Alan H. Goldman, "What is Aesthetic Experience?" 2020.
[31] Alan H. Goldman, "The Broad View of Aesthetic Experience," 2013.
[32] John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 1958.
[33] Monroe C. Beardsley, "Aesthetic Experience Regained," 1969.
[34] Goldman, 2020.
[35] Goldman, 2006.

physical engagement and experience is characteristic of AE for Goldman. This view has been called the *inseparability thesis*,[36] describing the way in which the engagement of all of these faculties at once create an experience which goes beyond the mere sum of its parts, with some new, entangled mental experience emerging being phenomenologically significant to AE.

At the same time, Goldman's view is meant to demarcate between aesthetic and non-aesthetic objects by referring to the aesthetic value of an object of experience. However, when Goldman refers to aesthetic value, this is not in reference to the evaluative dimension of AE.[37] Properties of an artwork which are disharmonious, unattractive, or offensive may very well provide aesthetic value to the experience in that these properties engage the mental faculties of imagination, cognition, affect, etc. Thus, Goldman's appeal to aesthetic value within AE is not meant to provide a positive or negative value judgement but rather to refer to the ability to effectively invoke AE.

A view such as Goldman's does a fair job of remaining evaluatively neutral while still focusing on the subjective experience of the viewer of a work of art. Within Shusterman's framework, Goldman's view can be explained as an evaluatively neutral, phenomenological, demarcational view of AE. While I do believe that these first two descriptors are within the proper framework of a useful definition of AE, it also is the case that Goldman's view is subject to some of the same critiques that his predecessors, Dewey and Beardsley,[38] faced. For one, the individuation and identification of works of art can not be ascertained from Goldman's view, since his version of AE could theoretically be evoked by a myriad of objects of experience, not merely art objects. Conversely, it may very well be the case that there exist art objects which do not evoke an AE as described by Goldman. Despite this flaw, Goldman still wishes to assert that

[36] Carroll, 2015, p. 176. Carroll is the one who titles Goldman's view the Inseparability Thesis.
[37] Alan H. Goldman, *Aesthetic Value*, 1995.
[38] Shusterman, 1997.

AE of artworks is in fact distinct from whatever other experiences we could call AEs.[39] Despite the strength of his inseparability thesis, Goldman's clinging onto a demarcational view of AE is what I most take issue with. Thus, we are at an impasse for now. In section 4.1, I will take Goldman's view of AE and update it to address these critiques, by turning it from a demarcational view to a transformative one. First, however, I must give my input on the cognitive phenomenology debate, since the existence of cognitive phenomenology is central to my view of AE.

CHAPTER THREE

Defending the Existence of Cognitive Phenomenology

3.1. Extrapolating Ray Jackendoff's View

In order to argue against the restrictivist camp for a cognitive phenomenology that outstrips sensory phenomenology, I will first address Prinz' version of restrictivism before examining the underlying framework of his predecessor Jackendoff. I will then use Goldman's view of aesthetic experience as an example within my propping up of a cognitive phenomenology in section 4.1. Ultimately, I argue that there exists a faculty of understanding within cognition which outstrips sensory modality. My claim here is not that the sensory is absent from cognitive phenomenological experience (it, in fact, may be necessary). However, either way, the sensory is not sufficient for describing the conscious experiences which are produced by the faculty of understanding.

While mulling over the arguments for and against restrictivism, I found Jesse Prinz' ideas particularly compelling due to the basis in Ray Jackendoff's three-level program of mental

[39] Goldman 2013, p. 332.

computation.[40] While Jackendoff's schema may cover the three levels of mental computation and assign awareness only to the intermediate of the three levels, I believe that the boundary of conscious experience is not relegated merely to what Jackendoff calls *awareness*.

For Jackendoff, *awareness* refers to what is experienced at a sensory level.[41] Prinz does indeed take Jackendoff's *awareness* and translate it into the term *consciousness*, though this jump is not a justified one. For example, when Jackendoff addresses the example of one seeing a stick as bent in a cup of water, he makes the distinction between one who attends to their sensory awareness *without* understanding and one who attends to their sensory awareness *with* understanding. One who sees the stick bent in the water and does not also have the conceptual structures of what the stick looked like before it was in the water or of a basic knowledge of optics, etc. will see this event and report that the stick is bent in the middle. One who sees the same event and does have the conceptual structures listed above will report that although the stick looks bent, it is not in fact bent.[42] While Jackendoff uses this case to show that visual awareness is always experienced in the intermediate level (or as he puts it, quoting Marr and Nishihara)[43] encoded as a 2½D sketch, the distinction between the phenomenological experiences of the understanding subject and the non-understanding subject do in fact differ despite their visual awareness being the exact same. I believe that it would be fair to say that the understanding subject is conscious of their conceptualization despite not experiencing it within the faculty of visual awareness. Their experience of their own conceptualization is rather conscious within a faculty of understanding.

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[40] Prinz, 2012.
[41] Jackendoff, 1987.
[42] Ibid, p. 295.
[43] David Marr and H. K. Nishihara, "Representation and Recognition of the Spatial Organization of Three-Dimensional Shapes," 1978.

This dichotomy (I will call it a dichotomy for now) of sensory awareness and conceptual understanding brings us back to the example of Siewert,[44] who uses similar cases as the one above to assert the existence of cognitive phenomenology beyond the senses. The case of the English speaker hearing a sentence in Mandarin, for example, showcases a sensory awareness which would apparently be the same as a Mandarin speaker's hearing of the sentence despite the conceptual understandings of the two differing. Jackendoff does actually address this and points out a flaw in the example, as outlined in the quote below:

> The first part of the argument is simple: nonsense syllables like *zup* and *riz*[45] present themselves to awareness as some kind of linguistic form, even though they are patently meaningless. So do utterances in a language we do not understand, where we cannot map from phonology to meaning. In the latter case phonological structure will probably be fragmentary, because there is no holistic and top-down feedback in its derivation. But there is still a form we are *aware of*, and it is doubtless language, even if totally incomprehensible.[46]

Jackendoff's notable change to the way he phrases Siewert's Mandarin case is that he points out that the Mandarin speaker's hearing of the sentence *would* in fact be formally distinct, contrary to Siewert's framing of the case. He points out that one who understands the language would hear the sounds themselves more clearly, with clearer bounds and derivations, whereas one who does not understand the language would hear the same sounds as more fragmentary and unclear, we could even use the word *blurry*. I suspect this is where Prinz would highlight Jackendoff's formulation of the case in order to assert that the higher level processing manifests itself at the

[44] Siewert, 1998.
[45] Christian Joseph would disagree with Goldman's characterization of *riz* as a nonsense syllable, now.
[46] Jackendoff, 1987, p. 289.

intermediate level, providing phenomenological difference to the sensory experience rather than creating a cognitive one.

However, Jackendoff's very own program can be used to debunk this retort. According to Jackendoff, each level of mental computation is composed of primitives and principles of combination, which are then communicated to and processed by the next highest level of computation. For example, within a retinal array the primitives may consist of position, light intensity, and color while the principles of combination may consist of identifying a position as encoding a particular intensity and color at a given time or identifying the spatial relation of two adjacent positions.[47] In this case, at this level of computation, something like the distinction between an edge and nonedge of a bounded visible object is not present. It requires the movement up a level of computation in order to process an edge vs nonedge. The level described above does not contain information about any regularities amongst the information contained in it.

It is at the intermediate level of mental computation that we can ascertain the edges, nonedges, color and shadows of an object, turning this abstract array of unordered sensory data into an experience of a bounded object. However, the visual experience of a tree is more than just experiencing a mere bounded object amongst other bounded objects on a backdrop. When one sees a tree, presuming they've learned what a tree is and to call it *tree*. They experience the concept of tree as associated with the bounded object before them.

3.2. The Phenomenology of Conceptual Understanding

If we take it to be the case that the intermediate level of computation, what Jackendoff calls *awareness*, is the only level that we are conscious of, how can it be that I experience

[47] Ibid, p. 48.

bounded objects as tied to a conceptual meaning, given that the conceptual meaning is not housed as a primitive in the intermediate level? In order to answer this question, it must be the case that the conceptual content is stored at some level of mental computation which can be accessed by the mind and applied to the *awareness* experienced at the intermediate level. I argue that such concepts are housed in the next level of mental computation. However, if, in the case of the visual, bounded objects (objects) and non-bounded objects (backdrops/context) are the primitives of the intermediate level of mental computation and the encoding of relative distances across three spatial dimensions (or 2½) is the principle of combination, the jump to state that regularities found at the next highest level are concepts is a very big one. This raises the question of how bounded objects can possibly combine with one another to form a concept at the next level, since the meanings and associations of concept are nowhere to be found in the stated primitives or principle of combination. The principle of combination that can achieve such a task is unclear at this point, so I will explain this discrepancy with a very basic *theory of concept formation through combination* after I go through the next example.

In this same way, we can take the example of the sentence in Mandarin heard by two separate subjects. Both are sensorily aware of the individual sounds within the sentence, which places us already within the intermediate level of mental computation. However, it is only one of the subjects (the one who understands Mandarin) who can attend to these bounded words with understanding, constituting a cognitive phenomenology separate and distinct from the non-understanding subject. At the lower level of mental computation, when it comes to the faculty of hearing, the primitives are pitch, volume, and tones while the principles of combination are the encoding of volume or tone to specific pitches and (limited by a singular temporal dimension) the sequencing of these three into a certain sequential order. At the

intermediate level, these sounds can be parsed out into bounded sounds. However, yet again, this level of mental computation does not describe the full extent of our own experience of phonetic language. How is it that bounded *sounds* can be experienced as meaningful or conceptual *words*, when they could merely be experienced as sounds like the English-speaker hearing Mandarin?

I argue that, if we are utilizing Jackendoff's hierarchical model of mental computation, conscious experience of an additional level of mental activity just above the level I've described is necessary for accurately mapping our phenomenological experience. There must exist a level of mental computation which 1.) can account for the conceptual understanding which gives meaning to the seeing of mere bounded objects or hearing of mere bounded sounds and 2.) is phenomenologically experienced.

The intermediate level, which makes up the entirety of awareness (or consciousness, for Prinz) can not meet the former of the two requirements above. Therefore, we must examine the level of mental computation which is just above the intermediate. In order to explain how this higher level of mental computation works, I will put forth a theory of concept formation through combination.[48] It may be the case that the following theory has already been articulated in a more descriptive and fleshed out way in some other literature,[49] but for the sake of this paper I will explain it in a brief manner here and apply a more rigorous theoretical framework in a later work.

If we think of the intermediate level of mental computation, where it exists within multiple different faculties of perception, as a bank of bounded experiences (of objects, sounds, smells, feelings, etc) then we can think of the lower levels as being restricted to their corresponding intermediate level (see figure 1).[50] For example, there is no reason to think that in

[48] For the sake of this paper, I will stick to a very broad theory of concept formation.
[49] For more in-depth views of concept formation, see Wittgenstein (1953), Glaun and Rosenthal (1987), and Carey (2011). These three sources are listed in the bibliography for reader reference.
[50] I've created this figure representing Jackendoff's three levels of mental computation in order to assist in explaining how the framework functions. Notice, all of the arrows move in an upward direction, from lower levels of computation to higher ones.

a regular case one would utilize the primitives of a retinal array in order to piece together a bounded sound. The principles of combination for a perceptual faculty at the lower level of mental computation only apply to the primitives of that faculty.

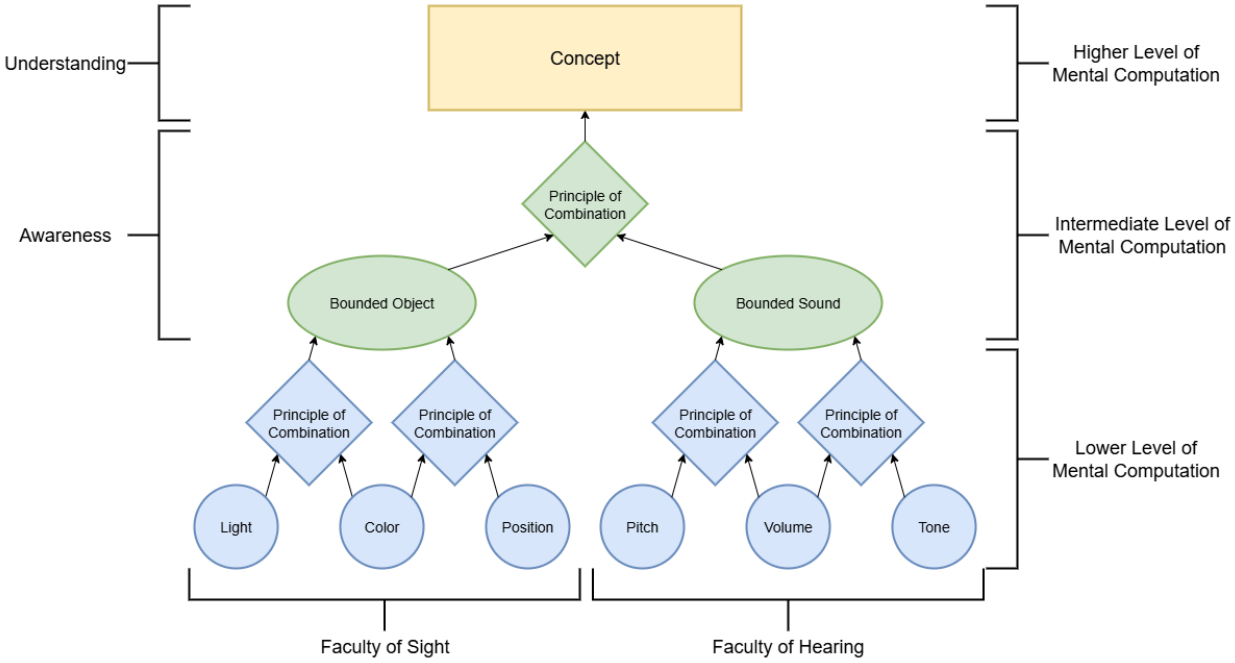

Figure 1

However, it may be the case that the intermediate level represents the beginning of where inter-faculty combination occurs, as Jackendoff himself stipulates.[51] Though Jackendoff cuts off the higher levels of mental computation from awareness and relegates them to the "unconscious understanding,"[52] there is no justification for why conceptualization would occur by way of mere linkages (existing also within the intermediate level) between the bounded objects of various faculties. Here, Jackendoff is attempting to have it both ways. Jackendoff has already established the framework where movement is entirely upwards, where primitives, through a principle of

[51] Jackendoff, 1987, p. 300.
[52] Ibid, p. 301.

combination, arrive at the next highest level of mental computation processed further. However, when introducing the idea of inter-faculty combination, he makes no mention of a principle of combination. He has not established how it would be the case that conceptualizations from higher levels of mental computation could possibly reach back down to change the very character of sensory awareness. It is my view that we need not find an explanation for a 'reaching back down,' but rather appeal to the idea that the next highest level provides a phenomenology of its own in addition to sensory awareness.

If we are to stick to the previously established framework which has thus far worked well, we can ascribe a principle of combination for the intermediate level which is able to take the primitives which result from regularities in various perceptual faculties and combine them. This principle of combination encodes two or more bounded objects of experience as occurring within the same given time or place. Through multiple repeated instances (or perhaps one or two prolific instances) of the same combination being encoded, the next higher level of mental computation can pick up on a regularity which exists as an association between the two bounded objects of experience, despite them both arising from different perceptual faculties. This combination is the basis of concept-formation.

Returning to the Mandarin example, the level of mental computation which differentiates the understanding of the Mandarin-speaker and the English-speaker must also be the level of mental computation which parses meaning from the words and sentences, by finding regularities within the spoken words, sentences, and the semantic bank of meanings which is also stored at this more conceptual level of computation. The fact that these regularities (meanings) are consciously experienced by the understanding listener means that this level of mental computation is also housed within the awareness of the subject despite being a level beyond the

intermediate. For sake of clarity, we should maintain the term (sensory) *awareness* to refer to what is consciously experienced at the intermediate level and (conceptual) *understanding* to refer to what is consciously experienced at the next highest level. Under the view I have described, supported by the theory of concept formation through combination, conscious experience includes not only sensory awareness but conceptual understanding as well. If we assume that every conscious state contains an associated phenomenology and that conscious states differ in their phenomenologies, then we can ascribe sensory phenomenology to sensory awareness and cognitive phenomenology to conceptual understanding.

3.3. Addressing Critiques

There are two responses that I must address stemming from this framework that I would anticipate a restrictivist of cognitive phenomenology would have. The first is as follows: I imagine a restrictivist would respond to my argumentation by pointing out the necessity of sensory awareness in experiencing what I call conceptual understanding. Prinz' claim that all phenomenology must be filtered through the sensory still lingers over my assertion. However, I believe the framework described in section 3.2 can answer to this refutation quite nicely. When considering the framework of levels of mental computation, Jackendoff's system of each level being constituted by primitives and principles of combination in itself refutes Prinz' claim that the higher levels of computation come back down into the intermediate in order to present themselves. In order to attend to the experience of a tree with understanding or to hear a sentence in Mandarin with understanding, there is no way for conceptual understanding of a language or an integrated definition such as *tree* to seemingly reach back down into the intermediate level to make itself a primitive which can constitute sensory awareness. Concepts (experiential,

linguistic, or otherwise) arise as regularities of various experiences that we gain sensory awareness of; there is no way for concepts to enter into the intermediate level of mental computation from above.

Prinz gives multiple examples of concepts from the higher levels of mental computation which he asserts must present themselves within the framework of the intermediate level of awareness, such as a chair which one must always imagine from a specific perspective (it is impossible to imagine the abstract concept of chair without visualizing it from one limited perspective). This refutation gives rise to the second concern which I must address, which I will state in Prinz' own words: "in the end, the expansionists' case may depend on their ability to come up with a clear example of a cognitive experience that occurs without any sensory experiences, or at least without sensory experiences that are related to the cognitive act… I have encountered no compelling example of an imageless, dispassionate, languageless, conscious thought."[53]

In order to answer to this concern, the task Prinz poses to expansionists must be problematized. Prinz is correct about the fact that there are no compelling examples of conscious thought which lacks imagery, emotion, or language. However, the existence of such a thing is not at all the mark of the existence of cognitive phenomenology. Asking the expansionist to produce an example of a conscious experience which is purely cognitive and has no sensory qualities would be like asking one to produce an example of a visual experience which consists of pure awareness without any of the combined primitives of light, intensity, color, or distance. In other words, unified sensory phenomenologies are integral to cognitive phenomenology in the same way that raw input/perceptions are integral to unified sensory phenomenology. There is no cognitive phenomenology without sensory phenomenology; the two are always intertwined with

[53] Prinz, 2012, p. 22.

one another. This may very well be the reason why restrictivism is such a compelling school of thought. Sensory phenomenology is always a part of conscious experience as we know it, but this does not disqualify the cognitive phenomenology which also is ever-present in conscious experience.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Cognitive Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience

4.1. Cognitive Phenomenology is Central to Aesthetic Experience

Now that a working view of cognitive phenomenology has been established, I will argue for one practical example of an experience in which cognitive phenomenology is not only present but significant to the experience, this being aesthetic experience. Simultaneously, by rooting a view of aesthetic experience in cognitive phenomenology, I will address the issues which have beset the definition of aesthetic experience in analytic philosophy.

It is my belief that the value-based view and the content-based view are both inadequate for defining AE due to the critiques I've explained in sections 2.2-2.3. Therefore, I will extrapolate a definition of AE that can withstand the critiques that the value-based and content-based views can not. In order to do so, it must be the case that what we are searching for is a definition of AE which is evaluatively neutral, robustly phenomenological, and transformative to the field of aesthetics. It can not be the case that a view of AE is evaluatively honorific since this would open up a swath of critiques about AE's definition being too narrow. AEs of 'bad' artworks or AEs which do not involve beauty must be included within the definition. Additionally, our definition can not be a simply semantic one since the experience itself (and not merely its semantic content) is what we are seeking to define. As such, the

subjective intentionality and affect must be central to the definition, rather than focusing on the mere objects of experience. Finally, our definition must be one which is transformative to the field of aesthetics in a way which moves away from the impossible task of artistic demarcation.

As mentioned in section 2.4, Goldman's definition of AE was the closest to accomplishing the task I've just described. Picking up where Goldman left off, I will briefly formulate an updated version of his view of AE which moves away from demarcation and towards transformation and which holds cognitive phenomenology as central to AE.

> Goldman's inseparability thesis: An aesthetic experience is one which is evoked by art objects and engages at least the faculties of perception, cognition, affect, and imagination at once such that none of these aspects of experience can be separated out from one another.

It is my belief that the inseparability thesis could stand on its own as the most basic definition of AE, as long as the demarcational aspects of Goldman's view do not make their way into our new formulation of the definition. Thus, to clarify this position, I have restated it as the *value-neutral inseparability thesis*.

> Value-neutral inseparability thesis: An aesthetic experience is one which evokes conceptual understandings from at least the faculties of perception, memory, affect, and imagination at once such that they are experienced in a simultaneous, unified, inseparable manner.

As explained in section 3.2, what we can refer to as conceptual understanding comes about as a means of the combination of the objects of sensory experience. Aesthetic experience, which as we've established must be described in a robustly phenomenological manner, must involve some level of sensory phenomenology. Further, cognition must be involved in AE since

the objects of experience themselves are not adequate to make up AE entirely. Therefore, AE must also involve some level of cognitive phenomenology.

However, one could argue that nearly all conscious experiences can be described this way, since there doesn't seem to be any conscious experience whatsoever which lacks intentionality, and thus all conscious experiences involve some level of sensory awareness combined with cognition or conceptualization. A definition of AE must go further than this, describing a very specific interplay between sensory and cognitive phenomenologies and the mental faculties. While all experiences may be intentional, not all experiences are structured in the same way that aesthetic experiences are structured. The distinguishing structure can be described as follows:

An aesthetic experience is one in which the faculties of perception, affect, memory, and imagination are actively being engaged such that they are inherently entangled while being processed by the conceptual understanding of the experiencing subject, producing a phenomenological experience of the intermingling of concepts stemming from differing faculties. To state this more clearly, AE includes the following:

1. Engagement of the mental faculties of perception, affect, memory, and imagination
2. Evocation of a conceptual understanding from each of these faculties
3. Linking or ascription of the various conceptual understandings to one another such that they are evoked in tandem and experienced as one

To further elucidate this definition, I will provide an example. Let's imagine an art gallery visitor walking up to painter Ambera Wellmann's *Blood's Hot Walls*[54] within the gallery setting. The viewer could simply look at the work and understand it to be a painting and then move on to the next thing within the gallery. However, in order to have an aesthetic experience of the

[54] Ambera Wellmann, *Blood's Hot Walls*, 2024.

painting, much more must be done. We can imagine the viewer taking in perceptual aspects of the work: red apples in a red bowl, some sort of flame providing contrast in the center of the composition, and the implication of nude figures amidst the rest of the obscured still life. At the same time, semantic associations of these concepts may come up from the memory, or the semantic bank of meanings in a linguistic sense, such as the association of red with blood or violence or passion. The affect may come up as well with feelings of fear or intimidation or lust being evoked respectively by the depictions of flames, the glossy red table spread, and the abstracted flesh. At this point, the viewer may wonder what the abstracted figures are doing in this image, if they are in danger, or if the depiction of food and the female body on a dining table is meant to imply a commentary on the objectification of women in the western painting tradition or some other sphere of life. Any number of conceptual associations could arise within the viewer's experience of the work.

What makes this experience an aesthetic one is the entanglement of conceptual understandings from various aspects of sensory awareness into a unified cognitive phenomenology. The experience goes beyond mere recognition of bounded objects of perception or the evocation of memories and emotions by said objects of experience. The viewer of the Wellmann painting is able to phenomenologically experience a color as a felt emotion, an abstracted shape as a nostalgic memory, or a textural pattern as a narrative assertion regarding a political power struggle. These associations go beyond any straightforward conceptual experience we may talk about, such as understanding a tree one sees in the distance as being an oak or imagining the backside of a house despite it not being in sight.

With this definition of AE, the evaluative dimension remains neutral, since there is nothing inherently positive or negative, beautiful or ugly about such experiences. Additionally,

this view avoids a content-based approach by entirely negating the requirement for any particular contents or properties for an experience to qualify as AE. The intentional, active, entangled interplay between the faculties of perception, affect, memory, and imagination within sensory awareness into the conceptual understanding is the characterizing factor of AE, a strictly phenomenological and experiential definition. The lack of specific contents or properties also leads my view to becoming a transformational rather than demarcational definition.

It may be the case that listening to a new music album can constitute an AE, and it also may be the case that reading a philosophical text also can constitute an AE, or even meeting your baby nephew for the first time. This view of AE does not relegate it strictly to the realm of art but takes AE to be a nondiscriminating, universal human experience which can occur within any number of contexts and can include many types of objects of experience. The move away from attempting to demarcate what art is and isn't is admittedly the most radical aspect of the value-neutral inseparability thesis. This move will require some exposition to justify.

4.2. Addressing Critiques

My view of AE is driven by an effort to maintain a distance from the value-based views and content-based views which have failed to provide adequately descriptive and pragmatic definitions of AE (see sections 2.2-2.3). The value-based views which take AE to be something divine or sublime rely heavily on a mystification of art which has become largely outdated in contemporary aesthetics. Under my view, art objects can and do become the objects of AE frequently. Though art objects are not innately special, it may be the case that art objects evoke AE more frequently than other sorts of mundane objects or situations since many artists imbue rich symbologies, histories, archetypes, and narratives within their works in a complex

presentation of material, composition, and intentionality which lend themselves quite nicely to the sort of entangled, active viewing[55] required of AE. Content-based views also fall into the trap of taking art objects to be especially unique in their ability to evoke AE, not for a mystical reason, but for a categorical one. Content-based views of AE often (though not always) take art objects to be within a certain category of object worthy of its own experiential descriptions and semantic investigations. Though I, as an artist, do agree that many art objects deserve the levels of scrutiny and significance we ascribe to them, it is not my view that art is unique in its ability to evoke AE. Art creation and viewing is a human process guided by human interests in much the same way that scientific engagement, spiritual engagement, and relationships are. It is my belief that AE can be found in any or all of these and that art should continue to be de-institutionalized such that we can continue creating art not as an object-worshipping practice but as a part of our everyday lives which can evoke aesthetic experiences throughout. It is already the case that AEs of non-art objects are discussed within the field of aesthetics, such as the AE of beautiful math equations,[56] the AE of scientific discovery,[57] or the AE of nature.[58] My view allows for all of these to be explained within the same framework without a need to somehow carve out art objects as mystically or semantically separate from these other objects of experience.

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[55] One could point to a thinker such as Walter Benjamin (1935) to argue that new media such as film and television take an opposite approach to the character of their viewing. Benjamin notes the shift from the active, focused viewing of a painting to the passive, stimulating viewing of a film which may not require such an active effort to cognize or conceptualize. More contemporarily, Claire Bishop (2024) has said much the same about questioning the methods of attention and focus we give to various art experiences, pointing out more disjointed, prolonged, or even group-based attention and viewing methods as being more characteristic of contemporary audiences. This would present a question to my view, which relies on an active process of cognition, whether the sorts of experiences described by Benjamin or Bishop could even qualify as AE. I'm afraid I will have to set this point aside for the purposes of this paper.

[56] Carlo Cellucci, "Mathematical Beauty, Understanding, and Discovery," 2014.

[57] Bridget Ritz and Brandon Vaidyanathan. "The Beauty of Understanding: Scientific Understanding as Aesthetic Experience," 2023.

[58] Allen Carlson, "Appreciation and the Natural Environment," 1979.

On the flip side of this, the move away from demarcation in the value-neutral inseparability thesis also implies that not all art objects evoke AE. This is a bullet that I am more than willing to bite. There is no need to describe all art objects as always evoking AE. It may be the case that a displayed ceramic jug at an art museum which provides a rich, evocative AE for a friend of mine also, at the same time, does not get even a second glance from me. My view of AE can adequately account for why the same art object provides different experiences (or lack thereof) to different experiencing subjects. It may be the case that a particular art object will never produce an AE in any experiencing subject, and this is the natural implication of a view of AE which is not concerned with the semantic objects of experience but rather with the structure of the experience itself.[59]

One critique that could be levied against the value-neutral inseparability thesis is that the associated faculties are arbitrarily chosen. It must be the case that if AE requires the engagement of the mental faculties of perception, affect, memory, imagination, and conceptual understanding that these five faculties are each significant for a particular reason. I've already explained the purpose of the conceptual understanding being present within AE, since this aspect relates most heavily with the cognitive phenomenology of AE. However, there are sound explanations for the other four listed faculties as well.

Perception is most easily explained, since initial perceptions are required for there to be any objects of experience at all. This isn't to say that the particular objects of experience are significant per se, though there is no experience whatsoever without an object of experience, or intentionality. Therefore, perception must be present within AE. Memory may be just as

[59] A result of this view is that the demarcation of art objects from other objects is not the job of AE, and this seems a completely fine situation to me. It could be the job of the art world, or the viewer, or the artist to determine what an art object is; I'm unsure whose job it is. However, AE has not ever provided an adequate demarcational program without also compromising the utility of its own definition, which is why my view moves away from the task of demarcation.

necessary as perception when it comes to AE since cognitive phenomenologies of conceptual understanding are central to the subjective experience. There is no conceptual understanding without the faculty of memory since the relations between various bounded objects of experience necessary for conceptualization can not occur without the ability to recall prior experiences and concepts or to access a semantic bank of meanings. Therefore, memory must be present within AE. Affect is less easily explained since one could imagine the viewing of a particularly stimulating work of art which engages the viewer in cognitive ways while the viewer remains affectively or emotionally neutral in regards to the work. However, my reason for including affect is to combat just this interpretation, AKA Shusterman's cyborg thought experiment.[60] AE seems to be the kind of thing which is felt, not merely mechanistically processed within the mind. Oftentimes, AE evokes a response within the experiencing subject or some sort of interest (though this interest need not be strictly evaluatively positive) which guides the subject through various conceptual understandings which feel significant to the subject.[61] The affect is what contributes to the unique experience of the experiencing subject and what guides various conceptual understandings to become entangled. Therefore, affect must be present within AE. The imagination is included within my view of AE to account for the 'active' part of the experience. The imagination, guided by the affect, is what searches for conceptual linkages between perceptions and memories in order to produce an aesthetically entangled cognitive phenomenology. If the affect is what drives AE to occur, then the imagination is what does the

[60] Shusterman, 1997.

[61] This is a good time to note that a 'correct' way of having AE does not exist. AE is entirely dependent on the interests and affect of the experiencing subject. Two separate individuals could view the same sculpture in a park and experience AE simultaneously, under the same conditions. Though it may also be the case that each of the viewers creates differing interpretations of the artwork and finds differing conceptual understandings to link to the perceptions provided by the sculpture. It is the structure of the cognitive phenomenology of the experience which is significant to AE. The affect of the experiencing subject may lead to many different conceptual understandings coming into play which are unique to them.

work of finding and piecing together the conceptual understandings. Therefore, imagination must be present within AE.

Admittedly, the inclusion of these four faculties also has also to do with the preservation of the historical definitions of AE generated by Dewey, followed by Beardsley, followed by Goldman.[62] Goldman's inseparability thesis already made reference to these mental faculties, though I have extrapolated further what the roles of these faculties could be within AE.

CONCLUSION

The pursuit of an evaluatively neutral, robustly phenomenological, and transformational definition of aesthetic experience which takes cognitive phenomenology to be central to it is only the first step in transforming the field of contemporary aesthetics. The implications of such a definition for the field of aesthetics and the art world are numerous, though I do hope that one particular implication will be present. The examination of the overlaps between philosophy of mind and philosophy of aesthetics is a crucial task in that art and aesthetics represent a part of human experience which has historically been riddled with mysticism and contradiction. At the same time, philosophy of mind and consciousness have, in part, taken a mechanistic and scientific approach to understanding the human experience.

However, human experience can and should be understood not just mechanistically but as an integrally subjective, robustly phenomenological experience which we seek to map from the inside out rather than the outside in. By combining Ray Jackendoff's view of the computational mind, which had previously been used by Jesse Prinz to support restrictivism, and Alan Goldman's inseparability thesis, I have done two things:

[62] Goldman, 2013.

I have asserted the existence of a cognitive phenomenology which outstrips the sensory, characterized by conceptual understanding; and I have provided a definition of aesthetic experience (the value-neutral inseparability thesis) which not only addresses the critiques of many other contemporary definitions but also works as an example of why cognitive phenomenology is significant for understanding our subjective experience. The value-neutral inseparability thesis asserts that aesthetic experience is an experience characterized by the simultaneous, entangled engagement of conceptual understandings from the faculties of perception, memory, affect, and imagination. Whether the view of aesthetic experience I put forth in this paper sticks or there is a more useful updated definition to come, I do wish to push the fields of aesthetics and mind closer to one another in hopes that the strengths and weaknesses of each field can fill in the gaps of one another, as I have done here with cognitive phenomenology and aesthetic experience.

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