# Aesthetic Blame

ABSTRACT: *One influential tradition holds that blame is a moral attitude: blame is appropriate only when the target of blame has violated a moral norm without excuse or justification. Against this, some have recently argued that agents can be blameworthy for their violation of epistemic norms even when no moral norms are thereby violated. This paper defends the appropriateness of aesthetic blame: agents can be blameworthy for their violation of aesthetic norms as such, where aesthetic norms are the norms of social practices that aim at aesthetic values. I adapt a generic account of blame as protest, which can take variable forms, and then argue that aesthetic distortion cases—cases in which an existing artwork is distorted in its presentation—most clearly warrant blame even in the absence of violations of moral norms.*

KEYWORDS: aesthetics, blame, blameworthiness, aesthetic norms, aesthetic practices

We often take agents to merit praise for their aesthetic achievements. When we favorably evaluate artists' works, friends' sartorial decisions, and neighbors' design choices, we are often not merely making positive evaluations of their aesthetic products, but praising *them* for their good judgment or skill. We think that they deserve credit for their actions and that their achievements reflect well on them as agents.

At the same time, it has seemed to many that whatever conditions make an agent eligible for praise in general thereby, or at least also, make them eligible for blame. Perhaps an agent needs to be able to act with knowledge of what they are doing or needs to have the right kind of control over their actions or needs to possess the freedom to have chosen otherwise. I do not intend to defend any substantive account of what those conditions are, but simply observe that the conditions for an agent's praiseworthiness in general are often taken to be conditions for their blameworthiness, too. The very phrase 'praise and blame', after all, appears in Mill, Smith, and Hume, and, in translation, in Aquinas (*laus et vituperatio*) and Aristotle (*epainos kai psogos*).

From these first two claims, it follows prima facie that agents can merit blame for their aesthetic failures. Sometimes, we merely make negative evaluations of agents'

aesthetic products, as when we visit an art gallery and judge some works as bad without any thought to the artists who created them. Yet, at other times we know or believe something about the agents in question and blame them for their poor judgment or lack of skill. We hold them responsible, in some sense, for their aesthetic failures over and above negatively evaluating their aesthetic products.

This third claim raises a challenge: either identify some feature that makes blame inappropriate in the aesthetic domain or vindicate the prima facie case for aesthetic blameworthiness. In this paper, I will take the latter approach and argue that an agent can be blameworthy for their violation of aesthetic norms as such.

One way to take the former approach is to hold that all blame is moral blame, where this is understood as the claim that blame is appropriately targeted only at violations of moral norms. Bernard Williams famously claims that 'blame is the characteristic reaction of the morality system' (1985: 177). For Williams, blame is necessarily bound up with our failure to live up to moral obligations, and the 'obscurity' of blame—the unknowableness of the motivational state of the person being blamed—forms part of a case for rejecting the 'peculiar institution' of morality. Stephen Darwall, while ultimately aiming to defend the authority of morality, agrees with Williams's characterization of blame itself: 'It is common to blame and other second-personal reactive attitudes through which we hold one another responsible that they presuppose not just that the person shouldn't have done what he did "morally speaking", but that he shouldn't have done it period' (2006: 28). Darwall's position appears to imply not only that blame for non-moral failures would be inappropriate but, even more strongly, that non-moral blame strictly speaking does not exist, because blame as an attitude presupposes a moral failure in the target of blame.

Recently, this kind of position has come under attack, if not directly then by implication, by a growing literature defending the existence and appropriateness of epistemic blame: blame for the violation of (non-moral) epistemic norms. Motivating examples here include cases of allegedly blameworthy epistemic failures such as dogmatic belief, wishful thinking, and hasty reasoning. A statement of the existence claim comes from Jessica Brown: 'When a subject is blameworthy for her beliefs, it's far from clear that we morally blame her' (2020: 389). Brown uses the classic case of Maud, the reliable clairvoyant who believes against her evidence, to argue that not all blame is blame for moral failures. A statement of the appropriateness claim comes from Adam Piovarchy: 'Agents can be *epistemically* blameworthy . . . for violating epistemic norms *qua* epistemic norms' (2021: 791). Piovarchy holds that epistemic blame can be warranted when an agent fails to be sensitive to their epistemic reasons. Both Brown and Piovarchy employ a twofold argumentative strategy. First, they show that there is a viable account of blame that can cover epistemic blame. Second, they argue that blame for the violation of epistemic norms can be appropriate even when no moral norms are thereby violated. (For other defenses of epistemic blame, see Tollefsen 2017; Rettler 2018; Nelkin 2020; Boult 2021a, 2021b.)

My aim in this paper is to use this argumentative strategy to defend a parallel claim about aesthetic blame: an agent can be blameworthy for their violation of aesthetic norms as such. In section 1, I show that there is a viable account of

blame in general that can make sense of the possibility of blame targeted at aesthetic failures. In section 2, I argue, through the consideration of cases, that blame can be the appropriate response to violations of aesthetic norms even when no moral norms are thereby violated. Section 3 briefly concludes.

Though epistemic blame is the species of non-moral blame that has attracted the most attention, there have been a handful of recent discussions of aesthetic blame, which I consider below (Archer and Ware 2018; Hills 2018; Nelkin 2020 and forthcoming). One problem with these discussions is that their motivating examples are too readily reanalyzed as cases of blame for the violation of moral norms. As such, one of the contributions of this paper is to offer a class of cases that can more uncontroversially warrant aesthetic blame, which I call aesthetic distortion cases: cases in which an existing artwork is distorted in its presentation. (Other discussions of non-moral blame can be found in Hazlett 2012; Shoemaker 2015; Smith 2015; Dorsey 2020; Matheson and Milam 2021; Shoemaker and Vargas 2021; and Portmore 2022.) A second contribution is to explain more fully the context in which aesthetic blame is appropriate. In claiming that aesthetic norms are the norms of social practices, this account belongs to what we might call aesthetics' recent social turn, which emphasizes the embeddedness of aesthetic norms within social practices whose point or rationale is some shared understanding of aesthetic value (Lopes 2018; Nguyen 2020; Rohrbaugh 2020; Kubala 2021; Riggle 2022).

These two features also enable me to engage with an important recent challenge, raised by Benjamin Matheson and Per-Erik Milam (2021), to the appropriateness and moral permissibility of any non-moral blame. Matheson and Milam's argument essentially consists in a putative dilemma: either blame is permissible but directed at an agent's moral violation, or blame is directed at an agent's non-moral violation but impermissible. Aesthetic distortion cases, I will claim, allow us to avoid the first horn of reducing aesthetic blame to moral blame; the account of the nature of blame and its social context may allow us to avoid the second horn of rendering all aesthetic blame impermissible. While my immediate goal is to defend the appropriateness of aesthetic blame, my larger goal is to deepen our understanding of what blame is as a response to agential failures.

## 1. An Account of (Aesthetic) Blame

To claim that an agent is blameworthy for some norm-violation is to claim that blame is a fitting response to that norm-violation: blame, as a psychological attitude or attitude-complex, fits or is merited by or is appropriate to its target. (For the purposes of this paper, I take 'fittingness', 'merit', and 'appropriateness' to be synonymous.) The fact that some agent is blameworthy does not entail that we all-things-considered ought to blame them, let alone that we all-things-considered ought to express our blame. There might well be moral or prudential or other considerations that count against blaming or expressing blame. A defense of the appropriateness of aesthetic blame, therefore, does not amount to a defense of the claim that blame is morally permissible even when appropriate. While it is not strictly necessary to establishing the fittingness of

aesthetic blame, I will offer some reasons, at the end of section 2, to think that aesthetic blame is sometimes morally permissible.

It is also necessary to clarify that talk of aesthetic blameworthiness is not meant to imply that there is a distinctive attitude or attitude-complex—a specifically *aesthetic* blame—that is merited by the violation of aesthetic norms. Rather, the claim is that there is a generic attitude-complex of blame, one which can be merited both by and other than by the violation of moral norms. In other words, my claim is not that there is irreducibly aesthetic blame, but irreducibly aesthetic blameworthiness. The aim of this section is to explain what this attitude-complex is.

In the large literature on blame, there are two desiderata that are the subject of an overlapping consensus (Sher 2006; Scanlon 2008; Darwall 2010; Coates and Tognazzini 2013; Smith 2013; Brown 2020; Boult 2021a; Shoemaker and Vargas 2021; Portmore 2022). First, whatever blame is, it need not be outwardly expressed.[1] One reason to distinguish between blame and its expression is to account for the phenomena of private blame, such that we can detect another person's blame some time after its onset. You might discover that your friend continued to blame you for some transgression that took place years ago. Another reason is to allow for the possibility of subpersonal blame. You might discover, perhaps with the help of a therapist, that you in fact blame your parents for some aspect of your childhood. Second, to blame someone is to do more than merely judge them blameworthy, where to judge someone blameworthy is to hold that they did something bad or wrong without an exculpatory excuse or justification. You might judge your beloved adult child blameworthy without actually blaming them. Or you might recognize that your friend's gratuitous attack on your political rival is blameworthy while privately praising them. In such cases, you can at least understand why others' blame of the target is fitting even without blaming that target yourself.

Therefore, blame consists, first, in some kind of representation of an agent as blameworthy and, second, in some kind of further attitude-adjustment that nevertheless need not be outwardly expressed. The account I adapt attempts to capture this core of blame while allowing that blame can take variable forms. The defenders of epistemic blame take it as dialectically necessary merely to show that *a* viable account of moral blame—one that even the skeptic can recognize as capturing the phenomenon of blame—can cover epistemic blame as well. Similarly, my goal here is not to defend one particular account of blame against all reasonable objections, but merely to establish that a viable account of moral blame can cover aesthetic blame, too. In their accounts of epistemic blame, Brown (2020) adapts the variable-form account of moral blame proposed by George Sher (2006), for whom blame consists in the belief that someone has acted badly and the desire that they not have, and Boult (2021a) adapts the variable-form account defended by T. M. Scanlon (2008), for whom blame consists in judging that someone reveals intentions or attitudes that are flawed by relationship standards

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[1] Evidence for this point from linguistics comes from a classic paper by Charles Fillmore (1969), who notes that whereas to criticize someone is to perform an illocutionary act, blame can be private, a wholly inner experience. According to Fillmore, this also accounts for self-blame.

and modifying thereby the expectations and other attitudes that are constitutive of the relationship. While a Sherian or Scanlonian account of aesthetic blame may ultimately be more plausible, in this paper I adapt Angela Smith's (2013) view of blame as protest.

You blame S for φ-ing if and only if:

(1) your mental states assertorically represent S as, in φ-ing, having violated a legitimate norm without exculpatory excuse or justification, and

(2) your attitudes toward S are modified in such a way that you protest S's having done so.

This account preserves our desiderata by allowing for the possibility of private blame, because your attitudes can be modified without others, or yourself, being aware that they have been. At the same time this account goes beyond a mere assertoric representation of blameworthiness because your attitudes are modified in response to the representation of blameworthiness in such a way that you protest S's norm violation. 'Attitudes' here should be understood broadly to encompass cognitive judgments, practical intentions, and feelings; I intend to remain neutral between cognitive, conative, and emotional accounts of the nature of blame. Thus blame can, but need not, be angry or indignant or resentful, and blame can, but need not, involve a desire that the target be sanctioned or punished. The remainder of this section elaborates the concepts introduced in this account and begins to apply them to the aesthetic domain.

I adapt the notion of 'protest' from Smith (2013), whose account of moral blame holds that the attitude-modifications that are characteristic of blame are those that 'register and challenge' the claim implicit in an agent's conduct (see also Hieronymi 2001, Talbert 2012, and Pereboom 2017).[2] Protest can take various forms, a fact that partially explains the variable forms of blame itself: ways of protesting the target of blame including verbally calling them to account or complaining about them to others or forming the intention to avoid them in the future. On Smith's view, blame is always at least incipiently communicative because to protest is to seek some kind of acknowledgement, whether on the part of the agent who is blamed or on the part of a third party, that the agent has violated a legitimate norm.

I should emphasize that the protest account is not without its shortcomings. While blame can be private or subpersonal, some have wondered whether we can really make sense of unexpressed protest (e.g., Tognazzini and Coates 2018: §1.4). Eugene Chislenko (2019) has argued that a broader notion of protest that includes 'inner protest' can be made intelligible, but only at the cost of being unable to capture what is distinctive about blame. As my goal is not to defend the protest

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[2] Smith's account of blame officially states that to blame another person entails protesting the *moral* claim implicit in their conduct (2013: 43). Aesthetic blame, on my view, entails protesting the *aesthetic* judgment implicit in an agent's conduct. Elsewhere, however, Smith (2015) grants that we can hold others responsible for violations of non-moral norms.

view in general, but to use it for illustrative purposes, I will avoid some of these complications by considering cases of expressed protest. If you reject the protest view, you should feel free to substitute another account of blame that meets our two desiderata.

That said, one attraction of the protest view in the aesthetic domain is that protest is recognizably a feature of our aesthetic practices: consider the crowds who rioted at the opening of Stravinsky's ballet *The Rite of Spring* or the fans who send strongly worded letters when creators botch the endings of beloved television shows or film franchises (Hick and Derksen 2012; Neufeld 2015; Harold 2023). Such responses are plausibly analyzed as forms of registering and challenging the aesthetic judgment implicit in an agent's work or performance. Again, though, my argument for irreducibly aesthetic blameworthiness does not depend on the truth of the protest account.

What makes a norm an aesthetic norm? On the approach I favor, norms are individuated in terms of something having to do with the content or context of the norm. Thus, an aesthetic norm is one that makes reference to distinctively aesthetic values, whether in the content of the norm itself or by arising from an aesthetic practice (Lopes 2018; McGonigal 2018). A practice—a shared form of activity partially constituted by norms that govern roles, actions, and attitudes—is aesthetic just when it attributes aesthetic values to the objects it concerns and aims at some particular aesthetic value. The norms of a practice help to make it the practice that it is, as distinguished from other practices. It is worth noting that norms need not be fully articulable or consist in strict permissions and forbiddings, as in a codified legal system; they might supervene on a looser collection of favorings and disfavorings. As Jack Woods emphasizes, practice norms can even be 'entirely particularistic, having no explicit rules or aims, but where we have a sense of which things are favored, disfavored, forbidden, and permitted' (2018: 211).

Some aesthetic norms—call them evaluative norms—make reference to aesthetic values in their very content. Classical ballet dancers are subject to a norm to move elegantly. German Expressionist filmmakers are subject to a norm to light their films garishly. Japanese manga artists are subject to a norm to draw their characters dynamically. Each of these norms, in its content, makes reference to an aesthetic value property: elegance, garishness, dynamism. (More precisely, the norms refer to determinate aesthetic value properties. Just as being cerise and being scarlet are two determinate ways of being red, so are the elegance of a ballet move and the elegance of a crossword puzzle clue two determinate ways of being elegant.) And each of these terms—classical ballet, German Expressionism, Japanese manga—picks out an aesthetic practice.

Other aesthetic norms—call them constitutive norms—are nonevaluative, but arise in the context of aesthetic practices. Baroque harpsichord performers are subject to a norm to comply with musical scores, rather than improvising on their own themes, however beautiful. Visual art curators are subject to a norm against hanging paintings upside down in the gallery, no matter how much better the work would look. Agents who fail to comply well enough with these norms are not really engaged in the practice at all, whereas agents can fail to comply well

enough with evaluative norms while remaining engaged in the practice of which those norms are a part. Although these constitutive norms are nonevaluative, they retain their connection to value and derive their rationality by facilitating whatever aesthetic value the practice aims at. For example, the norm of score compliance may facilitate the value of deeper appreciation of works through repeated hearings and the value of subtly different interpretations of those works (Rohrbaugh 2020). Importantly, neither evaluative nor constitutive aesthetic norms are moral norms—morality does not tell us how to hang a painting or what kind of film lighting to use—so there are at least some paradigmatic aesthetic norms that are non-moral in content.

What makes an aesthetic norm a legitimate norm? As norms of existing social practices, aesthetic norms possess more than merely formal normativity, the normativity associated with any arbitrary standard of correctness. Rather, they are 'in force', as Woods (2018) puts it, meaning that those who are part of the practice in question treat them as attitude- and action-guiding. Spelling out the engagement conditions for a particular practice is a tricky task, and there is likely to be ineliminable vagueness in any such conditions. One way to move forward is to note that agents can 'opt in' to social practices, whether by explicit commitment or merely by ongoing voluntary participation in the activities that constitute the practice, and thereby become bound by these practices' norms (Lopes 2018; Dorsey 2020; Nelkin 2020; Kubala 2021). If I can show that those agents who have opted in can sometimes be blameworthy when they violate aesthetic norms, then that is sufficient to establish the appropriateness of at least some aesthetic blame. As the cases in the next section will suggest, recognized experts in a practice are those who have most clearly opted in and are hence least controversial as targets of fitting aesthetic blame.

## 2. The Appropriateness of Aesthetic Blame

In the previous section, I argued that there is a viable account of blame that is workable in the aesthetic domain. My argument for aesthetic blameworthiness will turn on the discussion of a number of cases. I propose three conditions that these cases need to meet in order to be dialectically satisfying as examples of pure aesthetic blame, where the latter two are the crucial conditions for establishing the appropriateness of aesthetic blame:

> *Blame Condition*: S is the target of blame.
> *Blameworthiness Condition*: S actually has violated a legitimate norm without exculpatory excuse or justification.
> *Non-Moral Condition*: The norm S has violated is aesthetic as opposed to moral.

Many cases of blame concerning aesthetic matters are clear instances of moral blame, where that is understood as blame for the violation of moral norms. If Woody Allen is blameworthy for the misogynistic attitudes his films endorse or if Taylor Swift is blameworthy for cultural appropriation in her music, then that is

due to the fact that they have violated legitimate moral norms. Certainly, agents can be morally blameworthy for their aesthetic products. The skeptic about aesthetic blame, however, will hold that this is the only way in which an agent can be blameworthy for their aesthetic products, a position my cases aim to challenge.

Only a handful of philosophers to date have discussed the possibility of aesthetic blame. Alex King briefly suggests that judges and coaches on competitive television singing, dancing, and cooking shows 'routinely critique as well as blame contestants who fail to perform up to standards' (2018: 650). David Shoemaker (2015: 78–82) also uses the example of a singing competition in order to motivate the claim that an agent's answerability—the kind of responsibility they bear for their quality of judgment—warrants the same range of responses in moral and non-moral cases alike. But many of these cases are discussed only briefly and can readily be reanalyzed by the skeptic.

Alison Hills discusses the norm against critical 'backscratching', when a critic writes favorably about someone who has reviewed their own work favorably or about a book published by their own press: 'readers are quite rightly indignant and blame the critic when they discover what she has done' (2018: 261). The norm against backscratching, however, is most plausibly a moral norm, one that derives its legitimacy from the norm against deception. That this is not a distinctively aesthetic norm can be seen from the fact that even if the critic happens to be promoting work of the highest aesthetic quality, they could still be blameworthy for not disclosing their conflict of interest.

Dana Nelkin (2020 and forthcoming) discusses the case of Walter Keane, who was (inaccurately, it turns out) credited for a large-scale painting of big-eyed children that was commissioned for the 1964 New York World's Fair and panned by a reviewer for 'grinding out formula pictures of wide-eyed children of such appalling sentimentality that his product has become synonymous among critics with the very definition of tasteless hack work' (Canady 1964, quoted in Nelkin 2020: 204). This is a promising case; I agree with Nelkin that the review goes beyond criticism of the painting to blame of Keane, that Keane did not breach his professional contract, and that being a hack does not harm others' interests. But Nelkin does not consider whether at least some hacks are not violating the moral norm, familiar from the Kantian tradition, to cultivate their own talents. The reviewer's mention of 'grinding out', and indeed the very metaphor of a 'hack' as someone who does rough, inelegant work, suggests the skeptical possibility that the blame in question is directed, in part, at Keane's failure to live up to his potential.

Finally, Alfred Archer and Lauren Ware offer as their central case the example of vandalism of a site of natural beauty, writing of 'a distinct and severe aesthetic criticism being levelled here, that we will call aesthetic blame' (2018: 118). Archer and Ware grant that this is a case of moral wrongdoing because the norm against destroying beautiful natural landscapes is plausibly grounded, at least in part, in the fact that such destruction harms the interests of all those who enjoy beauty. Yet, their claim that this is also an instance of aesthetic blame is not supported, at least not without a story about which non-moral norms have been violated and what makes those norms aesthetic. Archer and Ware suggest that 'vandals are not just criticized for being immoral but for having *ugly minds*' (2018: 118). But it is not clear that the

term 'ugliness' here picks out an aesthetic property; the 'ugliness' of a mind is wholly explicable in terms of a particularly egregious kind of moral wrongdoing.

In general, the skeptic about aesthetic blame can appeal to whatever welfare benefits the appreciation of beauty brings in order to argue that the norm against destroying beauty is a moral one. This strategy can cover vandalism cases as well as the unfortunate class of botched restorations. Failed likeness cases are another promising avenue, but I will argue that these, too, should not count as pure aesthetic blame. In the early 1950s, the modernist painter John Sutherland was commissioned by the Joint Houses of Parliament to paint a portrait for Prime Minister Winston Churchill's eightieth birthday. Churchill and others were horrified by the painting, which they thought failed to capture his likeness. Mary Soames, the biographer and daughter of Churchill's wife Clementine, wrote of her father, 'he felt he had been betrayed by the artist . . . and he found in the portrait causes for mortal affront' (2002: 488). In fact, Clementine Churchill eventually destroyed the painting, itself an act of dubious legality and moral worth.

It seems clear that this meets the Blame Condition: Churchill protested Sutherland for his painting, with whom he had been friendly, and seems to have severed ties with Sutherland. Yet, it is not at all obvious that Sutherland meets the Blameworthy Condition. Although Sutherland intended to paint the portrait in the way he did, such that it reflects his best judgment and skill, many would argue that, as evaluated by the standards of modernist portraiture, the painting is a success and, further, that the painting is correctly evaluated by such standards, especially given the artist's intentions. In order to defend Sutherland's blameworthiness, then, one would have to argue that he ought to have painted it by the standards of heroic realist portraiture. But the most plausible argument would take the ought in question to be moral and not aesthetic: in painting Churchill in this unconventional way, the thought goes, Sutherland failed to respect him, especially in the context of a commission, which implies honor and favorable moral regard. In other words, the best defense of Sutherland's blameworthiness runs afoul of the Non-Moral Condition. Nelkin (2020 and forthcoming) has a second example of aesthetic blame, that of a sculpture of the comedian Lucille Ball commissioned by her hometown of Celeron, NY. (See Stack [2016] for reporting, including pictures.) But as with the Churchill portrait, 'Scary Lucy' is a failed likeness case and faces the same skeptical objections.

The class of cases that most clearly warrants aesthetic blame is what I call *aesthetic distortion* cases. I borrow the term from Alan Tormey, who theorizes the phenomenon of 'our awareness of an aesthetic distortion *of* the work *in* the performance' (1973: 165). Tormey describes our response to such distortions as one of aesthetic *pain*, but I want to focus instead on our *blame* responses to such aesthetic distortions. Consider:

> *Brahms*: *V*, a professional violinist, performs Brahms's Violin Concerto with an orchestra. In the third movement, *V* inserts halting, jerky pauses into the main theme. *A*, an audience member, is aware of *V*'s aesthetic distortion of the work and is disposed to protest *V* for *V's* performance. *A* has in the past found *V* to be a thoughtful and

sensitive interpreter of the Romantic repertoire but now judges firmly
that this is not the correct way to perform the Brahms concerto and
that the performance reflects poorly on *V*.

We can fill out this case in a way that clearly meets the Blame Condition: we can
imagine that *A* feels frustrated with *V*, forms the intention to avoid *V*'s performances
and recordings, and warns other audience members and appreciators against future
performances, even if *A* does not communicate their blame directly to *V*. This case
also meets the Blameworthy Condition and the Non-Moral Condition. Arguing
that it does so requires, first, filling out the case such that *V*'s performance reflects
their own best judgment and skill—at the time of performance, *V* reflectively
endorses their performance of the work—and, second, explaining what norm has
been violated. I will suggest six possibilities, where the first four might be
suggested by the skeptic, the fifth is a distinct kind of aesthetic norm-violation,
and only the sixth fits the bill for pure aesthetic blame in this case.

First, it is not the case that *V* has harmed *A*'s welfare, even unintentionally, and
certainly not to a blameworthy extent. Although I noted that Tormey describes
these as pain cases, he rightly denies that the pain caused is physical. Some
musicians may intend to cause their audiences physical discomfort—think of some
types of noise metal or avant-garde performance—but be aesthetically
praiseworthy in doing so. And much art that is painful in virtue of warranting
painful emotions is similarly meritorious. Although 'pain' has a different sense,
other than the physical or emotional, in these aesthetic distortion cases, any harm
the performer causes the audience would be so minor that it fails to merit blame
on that account. It would surely be an overly sensitive aesthete who complained
that *they* were harmed by a distorting performance of a work.

Second, it is not the case that *V* has paid *A* insufficient regard as an audience
member. It is certainly possibly for a performer to pay their audience insufficient
regard, for instance, by failing to practice or by walking out halfway through a
performance for no good reason. But that is not the case with *Brahms*, which is an
instance of an artist voluntarily and knowingly attempting a novel interpretation of
a work. Cases of laziness or failure of effort are more plausibly analyzed as failures
of an agent's moral character rather than failures of their aesthetic judgment.

Third, it is not the case that *V* disrespects Brahms in performing his concerto in
this way. Not all novel interpretations, however aesthetically bad, are
disrespectful, and even if we grant that a deceased composer can be disrespected
or otherwise morally wronged, an artists' interests regarding the performance of
their work are not absolute. As James Harold (2023) argues, drawing an analogy
with copyright, deceased artists' rights tend to diminish over time. Thus, not all
cases of aesthetic distortion can be analyzed as instances of disrespect.

Fourth, it is not the case that *V*'s blameworthiness is grounded in violating *A*'s
expectations. It is true that *A*'s expectations are violated in becoming aware of the
distortion of the work, but the mere fact that one's expectations are violated is not in
itself grounds for blame, whether moral, epistemic, or aesthetic. After all, not all
expectations are appropriate: particularly in engaging the arts, sometimes an
appreciator should be delighted to have their expectations confounded. The question

is which expectations it would be aesthetically bad to violate, and answering that question requires identifying the aesthetic norms that should not be violated.

Fifth, it is not the case that *V* has failed to comply with the musical score. The defender of aesthetic blame might agree in rejecting the four 'moral' interpretations of the case and claim instead that what is blameworthy is the violation of the constitutive aesthetic norm of score compliance. Certainly such a norm is in force for performers although there is latitude in what counts as meeting the norm: even expert performers blamelessly make small mistakes all the time. And if a performer fails so egregiously to comply with the score, it is questionable whether they have succeeded in producing a performance of the *work* such that *it* has been distorted. In *Brahms*, however, we can fill out the case such that there is full score compliance: it is not that *V* fails to play all the notes but rather that their interpretation of the score is otherwise aesthetically deficient. A performer could in principle be blameworthy for a failure of score compliance, but such failures are much more likely to be accidental, implying that they were not done voluntarily and, in cases where that is the result of inadequate preparation, to be thereby morally blameworthy if blameworthy at all. The more interesting and plausible cases are those that concern an agent's evaluative choices for the performance of works, choices that they make voluntarily and knowingly.

Sixth, and finally, I suggest that *V*'s blameworthiness is grounded in violating the evaluative aesthetic norm to play the piece well by the standards of *V*'s own aesthetic practice. *V* attempted an aesthetically valuable novel interpretation of the violin concerto but in the case as I have described it, failed: in fact there is an aesthetic distortion of the work in *V*'s performance. *V* ought to have performed the work differently, and unlike the Churchill case, the ought in question is aesthetic as opposed to moral.

It is open to a performer to dispute such a claim and hence deny their blameworthiness by insisting that their novel interpretation was aesthetically successful. The question of whether and how such a dispute can be adjudicated is one of the oldest in philosophical aesthetics, and I prefer to remain as neutral as possible on the metaphysics of aesthetic value here. My argument requires only the claim that the performer's defense cannot always be valid, which entails that radical subjectivism about aesthetic value is false: there are at least some intersubjectively valid aesthetic standards. Notice that 'distortion' here is therefore being used factively. Not every novel interpretation of a work is a distortion, particularly as a practice's aesthetic norms—which, to echo a point made earlier, may be inarticulable and particularistic—may permit a wide range of variation in performance consistent with presenting the work's artistic merits. The *Brahms* case is a distortion because, as Tormey puts it, 'an art work of value has been *treated* in such a way as to marr [*sic*], mask, or distort its aesthetic merits' (1973: 167)—the merits the work in fact possesses.

Although I have discussed *Brahms* at length, it is meant to be exemplary of a wider class of blameworthy aesthetic failures. Works of art can be distorted not only in performance, but in translation, staging, adaptation, and other forms of what we can generically call 'presentation'. The critic Gary Morson (2010) argues that the literary translators Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, in their renditions of canonical Russian novels, 'take glorious works and reduce them to awkward and

unsightly muddles'. Morson suggests that, given their linguistic expertise, these translators could and should have done better. The violation here is notably not any harm or disrespect to Tolstoy or his readers, but rather the distortion of the literary values of *Anna Karenina* in a clunky, nonidiomatic English version.

Similarly, imagine that in a nearby possible world 'Emily Dickinson', in later life, publishes a new edition of her poetry that replaces the famous em-dashes with exclamation points instead:

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|---|---|
| 'Hope' is the thing with feathers — | 'Hope' is the thing with feathers! |
| That perches in the soul — | That perches in the soul! |
| And sings the tune without the words— | And sings the tune without the words! |
| And never stops — at all — | And never stops! at all! |

Certainly 'Dickinson' would not have disrespected or harmed *herself* in reprinting her work in this way; yet, many readers will (correctly) find these to be aesthetically worse poems and judge that 'Dickinson' lacks justification for distorting her work in this way.

Given the diversity of aesthetic practices with which readers will be familiar, my point is not to insist on any particular example. My hope is that the structure of these cases, if not their content, is recognizable in your own aesthetic experience. Indeed, I can suggest something like a formula for generating aesthetic distortion cases. Identify an existing work of aesthetic value and an egregiously aesthetically bad presentation thereof. Then identify the agent or agents causally responsible for that distorted presentation and determine whether they had an exculpatory excuse or justification for the aesthetic judgment implicit in their presentation. If they lack such an excuse or justification, then they are aesthetically blameworthy even if you do not blame them yourself.

To be clear, I do not believe that aesthetic distortion cases are the only cases of pure aesthetic blame. They are not even the only cases of appropriate aesthetic blame; they are simply the cleanest cases, the ones most likely to be dialectically effective against the skeptic who holds that only moral norm violations can be blameworthy.

To bring this portion of the argument to a close, I offer three final observations about my cases. First, to emphasize, the targets of blame act voluntarily and knowingly. They are not making their aesthetic choices at random or accidentally, but are experts within a practice whose presentations of artworks reflect their best aesthetic judgment. As such, we can imagine them coming to feel regret or even stronger negative emotions like guilt and shame for their choices, such that some kind of aesthetic repair or apology is warranted. (These are the aesthetic analogues of cases in which an agent only later comes to realize they have done something morally wrong.) Although I noted that it is not a case of pure aesthetic blame, one example is the failed likeness case of 'Scary Lucy', discussed by Nelkin (2020 and forthcoming), in which the sculptor later seemed to recognize his blameworthiness: 'Unfortunately, at the point in my life when I created the Lucille Ball sculpture, now over 10 years ago, I came up short and was not able to rise to the challenge' (quoted in Stack 2016). A cleaner example comes from the critic Diana Burgwyn (2006), who notes that the opera tenor Luciano Pavarotti, after a

poor performance of an aria of Verdi's *Don Carlo* at La Scala, 'gracefully apologized and said the audience had been right to criticize him'.[3]

Second, these are cases of blaming agents for what they have done, as opposed to merely criticizing their aesthetic products. Although blame takes variable forms, among its possible manifestations are the reactive attitudes. An audience member may *resent V* for his aesthetic distortion of the Brahms. Morson expresses *indignation* at what Pevear and Volokhonsky do to Russian literature. My account rightly predicts that these reactive attitudes, along with other forms of blame, will tend to be diminished in light of new information. If I listen to a recording of the Brahms that is perceptually indistinguishable from *V*'s performance but learn that it was produced by a computer program, that would, and should, tend to inhibit my blame even though I might still negatively evaluate the recording. Further, there seems to be no consensus on how best to draw the criticism-blame distinction; indeed, Daniela Dover observes that criticism and blame are 'often treated as more or less equivalent in the literature on blame and the reactive attitudes' (2019: 33). On one recent account (Kelp and Simion 2017), an agent is criticizable but blameless for violating a norm if and only if (a) they act in order to comply with an overriding norm, (b) their action was out of their control, or (c) they were blamelessly ignorant of violating the norm in question. The agents in my cases meet none of those conditions and hence are presumptively blameworthy on that account.

Third, those who blame in these cases have the appropriate 'standing' to protest. The agents in question are familiar with the relevant norms, are not themselves in violation of them—there is no hypocrisy—and have a stake in how the targets of blame act because they take themselves to be members of the same aesthetic practice. Indeed, some of the targets of aesthetic blame explicitly recognize the standing of their blamers; as Pavarotti said in an interview, 'if you do something wrong, the *loggionisti* [those sitting in the upper balconies of La Scala] can protest —they can boo you, . . . and if you want to know my opinion, they are right' (quoted in Shaw Roberts 2021).

This concludes my argument for the fittingness of aesthetic blame. In making this argument, I have addressed the first horn of Matheson and Milam's (2021) dilemma, namely, that all fitting aesthetic blame is actually directed at moral violations in the aesthetic domain. In the remainder of this section, I turn to the other horn, which is that blame for aesthetic violations is, even if fitting, morally impermissible.

Matheson and Milam write that their case against non-moral blame 'takes the ethics of blame seriously in that it assumes that blame can be morally impermissible,' where this entails, among other things, a commitment to the claim 'that blame is morally bad because it is potentially harmful' (2021: 201). I agree that blame can be morally impermissible; the protest account leaves open that in blaming one's attitudes can be modified in a morally impermissible way. But Matheson and Milam's commitment, as phrased, cannot be correct. The fact that some action or attitude is potentially harmful does not suffice to make it 'morally

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[3] I first learned of Burgwyn's essay from Jonathan Neufeld (2015), who cites it in his insightful discussion of 'aesthetic disobedience', a phenomenon that I believe is often, though not necessarily, a response to the aesthetically blameworthy.

bad': a risky medical intervention is not necessarily morally bad (or wrong or impermissible). The fact that blame is potentially harmful merely makes blame potentially morally bad. In fact, the target of blame can potentially benefit from the claim that blame expresses. While being the target of blame may be unpleasant, that does not suffice for harm, and it is not clear that being the target of blame must be any more unpleasant than being judged negatively or otherwise criticized. And even if blame were *characteristically*, though not necessarily, harmful, that would not in itself imply that it is impermissible. (I note also that the topic of blame's harms is absent from the literature on epistemic blame [e.g., Tollefsen 2017; Rettler 2018; Brown 2020; Piovarchy 2021; and Boult 2021a]. If the potential harms of blame are not an objection to epistemic blame, then they should not be an objection to aesthetic blame, either.)[4]

Still, there are other worries for the permissibility of blame beyond its potential harms. Matheson and Milam identify four further conditions, besides fittingness, on all-things-considered permissible blame, each of which, they argue, non-moral blame often fails to meet. The first is (epistemic) warrant: we must be justified in believing the target is blameworthy (Coates 2016). In their view, we often lack such epistemic warrant; they write, 'A purportedly substandard performance might be part of a group action or attempt to which the agent's contribution is difficult to discern, as when a team loses a game or an orchestra gives a bad performance' (Matheson and Milam 2021: 208). Of course this is true, but to claim that aesthetic blame can never meet the warrant condition would be to insist, implausibly, that we could never be justified in an aesthetic judgment about another agent's work or performance. The second condition is standing, which, as I argued above, aesthetic blame can meet. The third is fairness: permissible blame cannot be arbitrary or disproportionate (Telech and Tierney 2019). Certainly we should not blame agents differently for similar failures, but even two individuals who violate the same norm in the same way might permissibly be treated differently by a blamer if only one individual is known to them, or if only one stands in a relationship to them. The fourth condition is outcome: blame is permissible only if it produces good enough outcomes. But note that ruling out ineffective blame appears to have the unpalatable consequence that it is impermissible to blame the dead or living figures distant from us.

I believe these observations at least show that the case against the permissibility of non-moral blame requires further defense. And when it comes to the fittingness of aesthetic blame, which has been my main concern, being able to provide more plausible candidates for pure non-moral cases, as Nelkin (2020: 216, fn. 16) puts it, 'neutralizes' the burden of proof placed by Matheson and Milam on the defender of non-moral blameworthiness.

## 3. Conclusion

I have argued that an agent can be blameworthy for their violation of aesthetic norms as such even when no moral norms are thereby violated. Blame, as a response to

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[4] Thanks to an anonymous referee for helpful suggestions concerning this paragraph.

agential failures, can be appropriately directed at aesthetic failures. In closing, I note some remaining issues. There is more to be said about the scope of aesthetic blame and about whether agents could be aesthetically blameworthy for poor aesthetic judgments in cases other than those of aesthetic distortion. The question of aesthetic blame's function is also worth attention, particularly given the ongoing debate about the function of moral blame (McKenna 2012; Bennett 2013; Coates and Tognazzini 2013; Vargas 2013; Fricker 2016; Shoemaker and Vargas 2021). Closely related to the question of blame's function is the topic of our interest in aesthetic blame; within an aesthetic practice, what is our interest in holding others responsible for their aesthetic failures? These questions deserve further attention elsewhere.

In an insightful discussion, Alexander Nehamas writes that, in contrast to the alleged universality of the moral community, 'Beauty creates smaller societies, no less important or serious because they are partial, and, from the point of view of its members, each one is orthodox—orthodox, however, without thinking of all others as heresies' (2007: 81). The word 'all' is telling: the fact that we do not think of all other aesthetic practices as heresies does not entail that we do not think of some agents within our own communities as heretics and thus as appropriate targets of blame. After all, the apostates we worry most about are the ones closest to home. So while we may have reason to be cautious about certain expressions of blame in order not to stifle innovation and dynamism in the arts, it is ultimately on aesthetic, and not moral, grounds that we should be hesitant.

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