

The Virtue of Subtlety and the Vice of a Heavy Hand¹

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Abstract. Subtlety is a concept as deeply intertwined with aesthetic judgments as virtually any other. But it is not clear what makes subtlety a good property of an artwork, or indeed if it is one. In this paper, I explore this under-discussed issue. First, I spend some time setting out hallmarks of subtlety and discussing different ways in which subtlety might be valuable. I then go on to defend a particular view about why subtlety is aesthetically valuable, by thinking through why heavy-handedness is aesthetically bad. In essence, subtlety is valuable because it promotes active engagement with the artwork, and heavy-handedness is bad because it forces us into too passive a role. I connect this to the role of agency and autonomy in artistic experience. Finally, I discuss some related aesthetic concepts, and expand the view of subtlety to cover borderline art forms, nature, and people themselves.

Subtlety is a concept as deeply intertwined with aesthetic judgments as virtually any other. We praise art not only for its subtle symbols or allusions, but for its subtle use of light or colour. We conversely disapprove of art for lacking sufficient subtlety. This extends to every medium, and even beyond artistic media altogether, as we praise the subtle beauty of nature or admire a friend's subtle kindness.

It is important at the outset, though, to acknowledge that subtlety may not always be valuable. It is easy to get the sense, especially reinforced by certain modes of art criticism, that the ability to recognize subtle things separates the cultured from the uncultured, the smart from the stupid. 'The difference between stupid and intelligent people,' says Neal Stephenson, '— and this is true whether or not they are well-educated — is that intelligent people can handle subtlety.'² In a backlash against this tendency, many people write off such in-depth artistic investigations entirely. An essay that analyses in excruciating detail seemingly straightforward *New Yorker*

¹ I have presented this work to audiences at Wheaton College (Norton, MA), Victoria University at Wellington, and Massey University. I am grateful to them and especially to Nic Bommarito, Yuriko Saito, two anonymous referees for this journal, and a college friend who raised this question in the first place.

² Neal Stephenson, *The Diamond Age: Or, a Young Lady's Illustrated Primer* (New York: Bantam Spectra, 1995), 283.

cartoons can look like an exercise in confabulation, rather than an exploration and development of their subtleties. One may also doubt whether, even if present, such subtleties are really worth the effort it takes to figure them out. There is, in short, a worry that subtlety isn't genuinely valuable, arising from cynicism about its use as a mere social marker. The task of justifying subtlety and explaining what makes it good therefore presents itself.

It is with this in mind that I will offer an account of what makes subtlety valuable, when it is. A few initial remarks about the account: First, I will presume that sometimes, subtlety is indeed good.³ Crucially, though, I won't assume that subtlety is always or necessarily good. Second, I won't assume or provide a definition of subtlety, but since it will be important to get clear on the subject matter of the investigation, the first section will offer some of subtlety's hallmarks. I will then, in Section 2, discuss what kind of value is at issue. I am here most interested in what makes subtlety *aesthetically* valuable as opposed to, e.g., morally valuable. In this section, some candidate views about the value of subtlety will be rejected because they do not meet this condition. The positive account is provided in Section 3. In essence, subtlety is valuable because it promotes active engagement with the artwork. The fourth section contrasts subtlety with some related concepts: ambiguity, depth, richness, and complexity, and explores the extent to which subtlety overlaps with each, and so the extent to which the present account of value translates. In Section 5, I present two advantages of this account. First, it offers ways in which we can think of some subtleties as more valuable than others; second, it can justify the common thought that good art rewards revisiting. The sixth and final section broadens the view to subtlety in non-paradigmatic art (like video games, food, and design), subtlety in nature, and subtlety as we find it in people themselves.

³ Strictly speaking, however, an account of what makes subtlety valuable, when it is, could be vacuously true even if nothing subtle were valuable.

1. The Nature of Subtlety

Subtlety enjoys an incredibly wide domain of application, both within and outside of art. We apply it variously to works and parts of works, artists, and audiences; as well as to concrete and abstract objects (subtle poisons, subtle distinctions), actions (subtle hints), agents (subtle thinkers), and other classes of phenomena (subtle racism, marketing, or revenge). It might be that some uses derive from others. A subtle thinker, for example, might be one who has subtle thoughts; and subtle thoughts might be thoughts about subtle things (e.g., distinctions or arguments). Though this is probably not true generally, it is natural to think of the artistic domain this way. The artwork is subtle, and a subtle artist is someone who tends to make such works. Because of this, I will focus primarily on subtleties in the work rather than the subtle artists that create them or the subtle audiences that engage with them.

Even within art, we call a strikingly diverse features subtle: brushstrokes, crescendos, lights and shadows, texture, rhyme, and symbols can all be subtle. Virtually anything we find in artworks can be subtle, even things seemingly opposed to subtlety, so that we can understand what someone means by, say, a subtle boldness. In the remainder of this section, I'll offer two hallmarks of subtlety, epistemic demandingness and (limited) relativity, without pretending that those constitute necessary and sufficient conditions. Hallmarks will be enough to get clear about the concept, so that we can then ask why subtlety is a good thing, if and when it is.

The central feature of subtlety is that it is epistemically demanding. Something that is subtle is not obvious or straightforward, existing instead below the surface.⁴ Subtle cues are not available to cursory involvement. They require our attention and our insight. They demand that we dig below the surface and draw connections, but also that we be receptive and sensitive. It is usually difficult to notice, requiring our effort and sometimes information external to the work itself. A subtle hue may require some effort to see, but not any extra information; a subtle allusion requires both. It's not difficulty alone, though, that's required. Lots of things are hard to notice or figure out. It was extraordinarily difficult to read parts of the Rosetta Stone, but that wasn't

⁴ Compare the etymology of 'subtle' in this regard. The first half is *sub-*, below. The second and less obvious half comes from text and textile (and originally the Ancient Greek *technē*). So we could think of something subtle as in a way below the text or behind the warp and weft of what we see.

because it was an especially subtle text. Barely legible handwriting, too, takes plenty of effort to read, but students with sloppy penmanship don't thereby become subtle writers. So the difficulty associated with subtlety doesn't result from the mere need to put in effort or the need for obscure, external facts (e.g., linguistic facts about hieroglyphics). These clearly play some role, but there must be more to the way in which subtlety is epistemically demanding. I won't attempt a full account here, but Section 3 will offer a bit more by way of fleshing out examples of the demandingness involved.

The other notable feature of subtlety is its relativity to different audiences and contexts.⁵ A Western audience may well find an allusion in Indian drama to the *Mahabharata* quite subtle, while an Indian audience might find it straightforward or even painfully obvious. Context, too, is important. The standards for subtlety in television shows created for mass distribution differ from the standards for subtlety in Renaissance painting, which may yet differ from the standards for subtlety in children's books and military marches. These examples suggest that relativity to audience and context are connected. One may even be reducible to the other, though I won't take any stand on that here.

There are, in any case, limits to its relativity. Some things simply are not subtle, regardless of the audience or context. For something to be subtle, it's not enough that there be some audience that would have to put in effort or know extra facts. Sometimes, a feature of an artwork is so apparent that it doesn't count as subtle, regardless of the observers. Take, for instance, the skulls in *vanitas* paintings. These are not subtle symbols of transience, nor is Eliza Doolittle's family name a subtle indication of her family's tendencies. Such cues are too overt to count as subtle. At the other end of the spectrum, cues can be too obscure to be subtle. Though we sometimes talk of subtly out of tune notes, a note that is so faintly out of tune that it is noticeable only on an oscilloscope is not subtly out of tune.

⁵ Eileen John also notes this feature in 'Subtlety and Moral Vision in Fiction', *Philosophy and Literature* 19 (1995), 308-319, at 310. She also defends a related hallmark that she calls fragility, according to which explicitly recognizing something can destroy its subtlety. Cases of fragility are better explained either as borderline cases of subtlety, or else in terms of relativity. For a seventh-grade art class, something may be perfectly stably subtle, while for an *Artforum* audience, it may be thoroughly and stably unsubtle. Understood in the latter way, then, fragility may simply be how we experience the move from one audience group to another.

These features make sense once we consider different audiences or contexts to which subtlety is relativized. When we make judgments about which things are subtle, we have in mind a range of relevant audiences or contexts. If something doesn't count as subtle for any of those, then it doesn't count as subtle. Thus, the reason the faintly out of tune note doesn't count as subtly out of tune is because no (unaided) human audience could detect it or because there is no relevant context in which it would make a difference. Similarly, the relevant audiences and contexts for *vanitas* paintings don't include people who would find the skulls subtle.

There are, then, two hallmarks of subtlety: its special epistemic demandingness, and its relativity to audiences and contexts. Having set these out, we can proceed to asking what kind of value subtlety might have.

2. Valuable Distinctions

Things are valuable in different ways and for different reasons. Moral goodness is always and necessarily morally valuable. A low interest rate is financially valuable, though not necessarily. (It might turn out, say, that having a high interest rate for a certain account is financially advantageous for other reasons.) It's worth elaborating a bit more on the question at hand. We want to know when subtlety is valuable, but the current question I'd like to focus on is more specific. When is subtlety *aesthetically* valuable?

Aesthetic, moral, political, prudential, ... value.

In *Love's Knowledge*, Martha Nussbaum offers a picture on which the value of subtle fiction is that it mimics our real-world experiences.⁶ By training our sensitivity, subtle narratives better equip us to understand the nuances of moral character and behaviour when we encounter them in the world. Because we read subtle fiction like Dickens, we are better able to understand situations from others' points of view. We know better what to look for (a slightly sour facial expression, a faintly quavering voice), and we are better able to understand what those

⁶ Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge* (Oxford: OUP, 1990).

signs reveal. Because subtle fiction increases our perceptive faculties, it promises to make us morally better people.

Such an account may very well be right, as far as it goes, but there are two respects in which it doesn't go far enough. First, it only captures the value of subtlety in narrative artworks, and only some of those. It will have a difficult time explaining what is good about, for example, subtle symbolism in abstract painting. It also fails to explain why subtle allusions (even those in narratives) that *don't* contribute to our moral sensitivity are valuable.

Second, and more to the present point, Nussbaum's account explains the *moral* value of subtlety as well as perhaps its prudential value: we'll be better at getting along in the world if we are better at reading people and situations. Surely there is a different question, though, namely whether subtlety is *aesthetically* valuable. It might get us to be morally better people, but is the artwork better as an aesthetic object for being subtle? To this question, Nussbaum's account offers no answer. We can refine the view to avoid these objections, but doing so will reveal a further problem.

A natural modification of Nussbaum's view retains the thought that it is valuable to train ourselves as perceivers, interpreters, and agents, but replaces the moral value with aesthetic value. Aesthetically valuable subtlety develops our sensitivity to aesthetically relevant features, rather than morally relevant ones. In this way, subtlety offers an aesthetic payoff in that it improves our aesthetic perception and promises to enhance our future aesthetic encounters. This refinement both goes beyond narrative art (since any subtle work can train us in this way) and can capture the specifically aesthetic value of subtlety. And as before, this may be correct as far as it goes, but it still isn't far enough. While subtlety surely is valuable in this respect, it's not clear that we should actually call this aesthetic value. The subtlety looks instead like something that is prudentially or instrumentally valuable for an aesthetically valuable end. Thus conceived, subtle art isn't *itself* aesthetically valuable at all.

Compare the way we might speak of an art history class as being valuable. It helps us access aesthetic value. But the aesthetic goods that an art history class helps us access are not themselves the aesthetic goods of the art history class. They are the goods of the artworks discussed in the class or of entirely separate artworks.

The aesthetic value of the art class *as such* would involve, say, whether it is elegantly structured, or whether the content is beautifully presented. So there is an obvious sense in which the class itself is not aesthetically valuable. Thus, though we might be able to explain what's good about artworks by recourse to a modified version of Nussbaum's view, that won't explain why the artworks themselves are better for being subtle.

Necessary and contingent value.

There is also a familiar distinction between necessary and contingent value. It may be that subtlety is necessarily valuable, that we haven't understood the concept correctly if we think it isn't valuable. It might instead turn out that subtlety is only contingently valuable, in which case maybe it admits of exceptions (subtlety that isn't good), or maybe it doesn't, but only as a matter of (contingent) fact. Although nothing in the eventual view will hang on how we come down on this, it is an interesting question in its own right. It may also colour the way we understand certain examples, so it's worth looking at, even if only briefly.

A different way of framing this question involves thinking about thick normative terms. In the same way we might ask whether, say, generosity is a thick ethical term, we could ask whether subtlety is a thick aesthetic term.⁷ If so, it is necessarily aesthetically good. I won't pretend to resolve the issue of thick terms here (aesthetic or otherwise), but there are reasons to think that, even if there are such terms, subtlety is not one of them.

In general, there seems nothing conceptually confused about thinking that subtlety could, other things equal, make a work worse – perhaps by undermining other virtues, or perhaps by being opposed to the work's aesthetic goals. Imagine a gallery show full of bold and assertive pieces. One might single out of one of the works and say that it is 'a bit subtle' and mean this as a criticism. Or one might say that a children's picture book had a subtle message, but that it would have been better had it not been so subtle. In keeping with this

⁷ For discussion, see Nick Zangwill's 'The Beautiful, the Dainty and the Dumpy', *BJA* 35 (1995), 317-329, and 'Moral Metaphor and Thick Concepts: What Moral Philosophy Can Learn from Aesthetics', in Simon Kirchin (ed.), *Thick Concepts* (Oxford: OUP, 2013), 197-207, and Roman Bonzon, 'Thick Aesthetic Concepts', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 67 (2009), 191-199.

line of thought, Moby, an electronic music DJ, says, ‘When playing big festivals, I tend to play big, over the top techno tracks, like hands in the air songs that make sense being played in front of 30,000 people. I steer away from subtlety in the interests of big bombastic dance music.’⁸ These are examples where, at least *prima facie*, subtlety isn’t a good thing, and so support the conclusion that subtlety isn’t always or necessarily valuable.

On the other hand, we can imagine saying similar things about generosity (that someone was too generous or that someone would have been better for being less generous). This similarly suggests, at first glance, that generosity isn’t necessarily morally good. But there are natural responses to this. Maybe we speak loosely when we say that someone was too generous, and what we really mean is that someone wasn’t *really* generous, but instead gave away too much. Likewise, maybe we speak loosely when we say that a piece is too subtle, and what we mean is that it’s inappropriately inaccessible. After all, calling a work or a feature of a work subtle does, in general, seem like praising it. It is good for something to be subtle, otherwise we would call it obscure or impenetrable. I am myself not convinced by such a response, at least in the case of subtlety, but again, nothing will hang on the answer to this question. Understood as contingent, the question I am asking can be framed as: What makes subtlety valuable *when it is*? Thus I want to remain agnostic about whether my account of subtlety applies when it isn’t a virtue of an artwork, or whether my account could also explain why it isn’t, when it isn’t. Understood as necessary, though, the question I am asking is simply: What makes subtlety valuable?

Regardless of whether we think subtlety’s aesthetic value is necessary or contingent, the point of this section has been to get clear on the nature of subtlety’s value, with special attention to its aesthetic (as opposed to, e.g., moral) value. This way of framing the question, maybe surprisingly, rules out some accounts straightaway. In the next section, I hope to provide an account of subtlety that does justice to these considerations.

⁸ Tristan Swanwick, ‘Moby Turns Teetotaler’, *Courier Mail* (published online December 2011) <<http://www.courier-mail.com.au/ipad/moby-turns-teetotaler/story-fn6ck51p-1226219373868>> accessed 1 Nov 2015.

3. Heavy-Handedness and The Value of Subtlety

Heavy-Handedness

‘The rat symbolizes obviousness,’ says Ralph Wiggum, taking part in *The Simpsons*’ allusive complaint about Martin Scorsese’s film *The Departed*.⁹ (The fact that it’s Ralph who offers this complaint, rather than, say, Lisa, adds extra sting to the barb.) Obvious or heavy-handed works are often frustrating or even insulting. It is instructive, in wondering what’s good about subtlety, to look at what’s bad about this corresponding vice. Of course, not all things that lack subtlety are bad. Some artworks are bold, simple, or straightforward, and those things will often (at least in the respects in which they are bold, simple, or straightforward) lack subtlety. That need not be a strike against them. But if we think of subtlety as an aesthetic virtue on an Aristotelian model, we can see obscurity as its excess, and heavy-handedness as its deficiency. More about obscurity later; for now, let us think about what is wrong with heavy-handed works.

What’s bad can’t just be that heavy-handed works make the audience feel frustrated or insulted. If that were true, then an audience would have to *in fact* feel that way for a heavy-handed work to be bad. But an audience might not in fact feel frustrated or insulted for any number of reasons. More promising is a tack that ties the badness to the features of the artwork that warrant these feelings. When and why would an audience be warranted in feeling insulted? I suspect this has to do with the feeling of being underestimated. The artist thinks we, the audience, aren’t smart enough to get the point without some serious assistance. We need to be guided very carefully along the right path, lest our feeble minds get distracted or confused.

One option is to say that the warranted feeling of insult is a response to something the author *intended*. But this won’t work, not least because it’s an implausible view of what is insulting. A slight need not be intentional to be insulting. Moreover, if the artist is simply a bad one, and doesn’t intend the heavy-handedness, it’s not obvious that we would be warranted in feeling insulted. Nevertheless, it may still be objectionably heavy-handed. Such a view would also suggest that the corresponding value of subtlety lies in its similarly being

⁹ ‘The Debarted’, *The Simpsons* (2 Mar 2008, Fox).

intended: the artist doesn't underestimate her audience, and is more skilled for being able to encode subtleties this way. But a subtlety certainly need not be intended to be good, nor does an artist need to intend it to be skilled. In fact, the naturalness with which the subtleties appear in an artist's work may reveal all the more clearly the depth of her artistic skill.

More plausibly, it is a response to an insult that is not necessarily intentional. Then, we must ask in what way, exactly, we are insulted. Here, I think, we find an interesting and possibly surprising answer. It is connected to the 'show-don't-tell' rule. Though she doesn't mention this rule, Cora Diamond raises this issue when she writes, 'Dickens does not say: 'Look at this: children do this and that, see thus and so, feel such-and-such, and these facts must be taken to be morally relevant'. Rather his descriptions (not only *what* is described but the language in which it is) show an attention which *engages* us.'¹⁰ The 'show-don't-tell' rule is not absolute. Sometimes, an artist can 'tell' in provocative or interesting ways that deepen the work; or in ways that are not heavy-handed, but simply straightforward. But the rule gives us a useful heuristic and a way to see what *is* wrong with heavy-handedness. Violations of the rule tell the audience how to see things and how to feel. They force the audience to take a passive role in engaging with the work, and this is what makes heavy-handedness bad. (Though I don't have to space to argue it here, I suspect that violations of the rule that *aren't* heavy-handed do not similarly force passivity onto its audience.) This connection to passive and active engagement with art forms the core of what follows. After elaborating a bit more on this, I will argue that we can ultimately understand what's bad about heavy-handedness in terms of a basic affront to our agency.

In the third *Critique*, Kant warns that 'academic form must not show through' in artworks because that would counteract purposiveness without purpose by revealing the purpose.¹¹ Whether or not Kant is right about purposiveness, he's surely right that, if we are clearly being manipulated, we cease to be able to fully engage with the artwork. Heavy-handedness does precisely this. It clearly manipulates its audience and in doing so, forces them into a passive role. To many, this might seem well and good. Isn't all aesthetic experience

¹⁰ 'Anything but Argument', *Philosophical Investigations* 5 (1982), 23-41, at 33.

¹¹ *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 307.

necessarily or at least typically passive anyway? It is a mistake to think this way, though many have,¹² and heavy-handedness highlights one respect in which it is mistaken. Artworks are participatory in a variety of ways. Audiences actively engage with artworks by clearing their minds, focusing their attention, and opening themselves to what the work has to say. In many cases, audience members also take an active role in forming an interpretation.¹³ These are invisible actions in that they don't manifest in any obvious behavioural way (unlike, say, the raising of one's arm), but they are varieties of what we might call mental actions. Attempting to remember a certain fact or directing one's attention involves features we associate with paradigm actions (belief-desire structures, if one likes; special relationships to intention; and so on). So aesthetic engagement is not necessarily passive, and many paradigm cases of aesthetic engagement will involve a collection of aesthetically relevant actions. But heavy-handed works either render unnecessary or completely foreclose upon these actions. Such works make sensitivity and openness unnecessary, and force their audiences to a particular interpretation, rather than letting them come to one on their own. As Diamond might put it, heavy-handed works explicitly direct us to 'see thus-and-so, feel such-and-such'.¹⁴

It is here that we see the truth at the core of our insulted feelings. By imposing passivity on us, such a work reduces our autonomy as participants in an aesthetic endeavour. When we are forced to a certain interpretation, for example, we cease to experience our agency as interpreters. When we are told what to think, we no longer need to be receptive or attentive, nor do we need to draw connections and think through implications of the work ourselves. There is at the heart of this, truth to the feeling of being underestimated – but it isn't

¹² This is most evident when philosophers draw a distinction between morality and aesthetics according to which the former concerns action and the latter, merely observation or appreciation. This problematically assumes that the latter do not themselves concern action. See, e.g., Gilbert Harman, *The Nature of Morality* (New York: OUP, 1977); Caj Strandberg, 'A Structural Disanalogy Between Aesthetic and Ethical Value Judgements', *BJA* 51 (2011), 51-67, and Daniel Came, 'Moral and Aesthetic Judgments Reconsidered', *Journal of Value Inquiry* 46 (2012), 159-171.

¹³ This is to ignore the completely unambiguous cases of interactive art, where the audience physically contributes to the work, as well as things like video games and *Choose Your Own Adventure* novels. These works clearly involve active participation on the audience's part, and so make more evident the misalignment of passivity and aesthetic engagement as such.

¹⁴ Admittedly, some works do direct us, fairly obviously, in just this way (think of James Bond movies or romantic comedies). First, recall that straightforwardness is not the same as heavy-handedness. Furthermore, the extent to which these works are successful in emotional appeals to their audience is the extent to which the audience isn't attending to and groaning at the heavy-handedness. If, despite these remarks, one wants to maintain that these works are heavy-handed, this could be a context, like children's books, in which subtlety isn't good. I suspect, however, that to the extent that heavy-handedness exists in such works, it is still bad, but is just (in the best cases) outweighed by the strength of the emotional appeal.

the audience's intelligence that is underestimated, it is the audience's agency. We might think of the insult, then, as a kind of literal indignation: heavy-handed works undermine their audience's dignity.

Subtlety and Active Engagement

If this is what is bad about heavy-handedness, then what is good about subtlety is that it respects the audience's agency by encouraging active engagement. In being epistemically demanding, subtle art provides an opportunity to act in all of the ways outlined above. Audiences need to clear their minds, focus their attention, and so on. Subtle art also facilitates the exercise of audiences' interpretive capacities. In these ways, we exert our agency as participants in a joint aesthetic endeavour.

Ultimately, these lofty remarks about agency mean that subtlety is valuable when it fosters active engagement. We can see this in many types of subtlety, but subtle humour provides a particularly compelling illustration. Subtle humour offers its audience the opportunity to get more engaged than they would otherwise be. The audience has to pay attention to tone and gestures, as well as to narrative arcs and timing. Very commonly, too, subtle humour will rely on lots of external information: other jokes or tropes, or historical and political facts. Why does explaining a joke often destroy it? At least in part because the explanation violates the 'show-don't-tell' rule. It leaves the audience with nothing to get, nothing to contribute. Straightforward humour can, of course, be thoroughly enjoyable. But heavy-handed humour, unless presented with a wink and a nod, is bad in exactly this way. The audience's work is done for them, and in such cases, the humour is hard to enjoy.

By active engagement, I mean something like what Noël Carroll suggests when he writes of 'the intuition that what is valuable about our experiences of art is the way in which artworks absorb our attention and command our interest.'¹⁵ I take active engagement to indicate a state that necessarily involves heightened perceptual attentiveness and cognitive activity. Among the former are things like an increased likelihood of noticing fine visual¹⁶ details, relationships, or patterns. In some media, heightened perceptual activity may be largely

¹⁵ 'Moderate Moralism', *BJA* 36 (1996), 223-238, at 225.

¹⁶ Or auditory, gustatory, etc.

replaced by heightened imaginative activity, as with a novel, where we more vividly imagine the described scene, the evoked emotions, and so forth, rather than pay closer attention to the typesetting. It also involves heightened cognitive activity, among which I have in mind memory, deployment of concepts and categories (when necessary, as with written or mimetic works). Such cognitive activity may also, but need not, include the attempt to understand propositional content of a work (its ‘message’), to follow its allusions, to understand its role in the history of the genre, and so on. Here, we can begin to get a sense of the sort of epistemic demandingness involved in appreciating subtleties.

Active engagement is also similar to what Dewey describes as aesthetic perception. He contrasts it with recognition, in which ‘we fall back, as upon a stereotype, upon some previously formed scheme.’ Recognition involves ‘bare identification’ of, say, a painting as a Monet or as impressionist. It is typically made for utilitarian reasons or while distracted. Perception, in his sense, involves much more. ‘Receptivity is not passivity. It, too, is a process consisting of *a series of responsive acts* that accumulate toward objective fulfilment’ (italics mine).¹⁷ He later elaborates that ‘Perception is an act of the going-out of energy in order to receive [...] We must summon energy and pitch it at a responsive key in order to *take in*.’¹⁸ These broad and metaphorical remarks, as I understand them, hint at what I’ve characterized above as heightened perceptual attentiveness and cognitive activity.

Though Deweyan in that it emphasizes active engagement and audience participation, my view of active engagement does not require the kind of full aesthetic absorption emphasized by Dewey and his followers. Dewey writes that ‘no such distinction of self and object exists in [aesthetic experience],’¹⁹ and Deweyan psychologist Ciarán Benson describes aesthetic experience as having ‘a high quality of self-transcendence.’²⁰ In active engagement, one may retain a sense of one’s own contribution and self, as an aesthetic participant.

Furthermore, this engagement may, but need not, *feel* active, conscious, or deliberate. It doesn’t require that we act in the fullest sense, i.e., that we intentionally attend to and seek relevant features of the work, or

¹⁷ *Art as Experience* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1958), 52.

¹⁸ Dewey, 53.

¹⁹ Dewey, 249.

²⁰ *Cultural Psychology of Self: Place, Morality and Art in Human Worlds* (London: Routledge, 2001), 176.

that we physically act out particular movements. Arnold Berleant's view of art as engagement at times characterizes engagement in the latter way. In discussing painting, for example, he writes that they 'require a beholder, and the mode of the viewer's bodily perception, multi-sensory and kinesthetic, is the pivotal factor in the experience of engagement.'²¹ Though he often emphasizes the physicality of engagement, he elsewhere suggests that engagement should be understood more broadly. Jasper Johns' number paintings 'intrigue one into deciphering the forms of the figures,'²² and that detective novels 'that must be read and solved at a computer are only a more explicit use of the reader participation that all novels require.'²³ So, while I want to distance myself from an understanding of engagement that requires a physical or behavioural component – or even an intentional component, I am very much in agreement about the rest.

Three Worries

I will now elaborate on the view by addressing three worries. One, this view makes the value of subtlety instrumental in a way previously argued objectionable; two, it doesn't offer us aesthetic value; and three, it over-intellectualizes subtlety.

Regarding the first, if subtlety is valuable because it promotes active engagement, it sounds like subtlety is not *itself* valuable, but valuable only as a means to some other end. (We saw this sort of problem in didactic views above.) This involves a slight misunderstanding of the view. It is not that subtlety, when it is valuable, is so because it is a *means* to active engagement. Instead, it partly *constitutes* the engaging experience. Compare the way that going for a bike ride contributes to a fun day. It's not right to say that the bike ride is a means to having a fun day. It, in part, constitutes what it *is* to have a fun day. Of course, this is not to say that all fun days have to include bike rides, any more than all valuable aesthetic experiences must be sparked by subtlety. But we miss something we understand this as a merely instrumental relationship. The subtlety, as a property of the work

²¹ *Art and Engagement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 73.

²² Berleant, 27.

²³ Berleant, 28.

that is experienced and thus *itself* part of the object with which one thereby becomes engaged, is not merely instrumental valuable.

There may well also be a kind of expressive value present, once we accept the audience's agency as underlying this picture.²⁴ Insofar as subtlety is an expression of respect for agency, it has value that is not merely instrumental. That is, respect for agency is not instrumentally valuable for some other end, e.g., a good outcome (like a fine aesthetic experience). To repeat, this need not be consciously intended on the part of the artist, any more than, on a Kantian moral view, respect for persons must be consciously intended at each instance of truth-telling.

This is a good opportunity to move to the second worry, that this view reduces the value of subtlety to a kind of moral value rather than aesthetic value, i.e., respect for agency or autonomy. It's worth noting that the first way in which subtlety is valuable, as a constituting part of the engaging experience, is not vulnerable to this concern. (I am here taking it for granted that an engaging or engrossing aesthetic experience is aesthetically valuable.) The second way in which subtlety is valuable, as expressing respect for agency, sounds morally loaded. But here we have respect for a kind of aesthetic agency – our agency as an audience member and aesthetically sensitive creature. If this sounds strange, compare it to Kantian respect, often described as respect for our *moral* agency, that is, respect for our agency as rational creatures who are beholden to the moral law and worthy of moral consideration.²⁵

Finally, regarding the over-intellectualization challenge, let me repeat that active engagement need not be active in the sense that it is consciously or deliberately entered into. To elaborate more on this, and to offer a few more examples of how this analysis of subtlety's value works, I would like to introduce a distinction between two categories of subtleties. There are, on the one hand, subtleties that we cannot respond to without recognizing. In such cases, we have to be aware of the subtle cue to get anything out of it. On the other hand, there are subtleties for which this isn't true, i.e., to which we can respond without being aware that we are doing

²⁴ I thank an anonymous referee for this suggestion.

²⁵ I am not committing myself to a Kantian moral view. I only want to indicate that the idea of aesthetic agency is not as odd as it might at first appear.

so. It might seem that the former class is more amenable to the account I've given, but in fact both are, and it's helpful to think about why.

In the first category, we can place certain allusions. In their song 'How Soon Is Now?' the pop-rock band The Smiths alludes to *Middlemarch*. Their line 'I am the son and the heir/Of a shyness that is criminally vulgar,/I am the son and the heir/Of nothing in particular,' alludes to a line from *Middlemarch* describing Fred Vincy: 'To be born the son of a Middlemarch manufacturer, and inevitable heir to nothing in particular.' The song, like many of their songs, concerns the human condition, especially as it regards status, love, and loneliness. The allusion to *Middlemarch*, a novel that, among other things, concerns the nature of and connection between love and marriage, adds an interesting dimension to the song. We can, for example, hear the song as voicing Fred's thoughts. 'You shut your mouth./How can you say/I go about things the wrong way?' is a question he might well have directed at anyone in Middlemarch, particularly Mr. Featherstone and the Garths, toward whom he (very reluctantly) behaves obsequiously in the hopes of garnering favour. 'I am human and I need to be loved/Just like everybody else does,' too, is something we can hear coming from poor, petulant Fred. But it's not an allusion one can respond to if one doesn't recognize it. In order to appreciate this subtlety, one must listen carefully to the lyrics, understand their literal meaning, remember *Middlemarch*, and have understood its literal meaning. One must also have understood their respective themes (itself no small task, involving understanding at the very least Fred Vincy, Mary Garth, and their relationship), and connect these themes to each other. Here, we can begin to see the ways in which subtlety is epistemically demanding, requiring a great deal of perceptual, cognitive, and imaginative activity.

We can think, too, of certain kinds of poetic analysis. For a five-hundred-and-thirty-seven-line poem, for example, it might matter what happens on the 269th line (its middle line). But without searching for the line specifically, presumably on those grounds, one would likely miss its special significance. Certainly, one could not respond to its significance *as the middle line of the poem*, whatever else one managed to get out of it. In these cases, the active engagement is clear: one has to be especially sensitive to these cues, or else be explicitly seeking them, to reap any aesthetic rewards.

There are, on the other hand, subtleties that we can respond to without noticing. A reader may, for example, find himself regarding with suspicion Elizabeth Bennet's change of heart for Mr. Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice*. In the novel, Elizabeth presents explicit justification for this shift, but Austen very subtly depicts her as dazzled by Darcy's wealth and hints at other reasons for her newly discovered love. We read that, upon first seeing his estate, 'she had never seen a place for which nature had done more, or where natural beauty had been so little counteracted by an awkward taste. They were all of them warm in their admiration; and at that moment she felt that to be mistress of Pemberley might be something!' Late in the novel, too, when her sister Jane asks when she fell in love with Darcy, she responds, 'It has been coming on so gradually, that I hardly know when it began. But I believe I must date it from my first seeing his beautiful grounds at Pemberley.' These passages make Elizabeth's justification look like mere rationalization of a match that, once sweetened with an opulent lifestyle, turns from repulsive to irresistible. The reader does not have to intentionally seek out these subtleties, but may respond completely unwittingly, unable to point out passages that support his attitude.²⁶ He nevertheless exercises considerable perceptive, cognitive, and imaginative activity. Again, literal understanding is required, but more to the point, because the passages are so brief, perception and cognitive processing need to be unusually sharp; because they are far apart, memory plays an especially important role; and because this interpretation makes more sense against the backdrop of the socio-historical scene Austen depicts, a broader understanding of the world of the novel is required. Here, too, the epistemic demandingness and the need for active engagement are very real. What this case highlights is that, though a reader may unwittingly respond to these cues, they remain unavailable to a reader who only engages superficially with the work.

We can find a related class of examples in Carolyn Korsmeyer's discussion of disgust in aesthetics. Having mostly 'focus[ed] on the type of disgust that is an extreme emotion that discloses extreme insights,' she offers as a 'corrective observation' that the experience of disgust 'can come in small and subtle doses – little indignities, wry insights, furtive curiosities, comic interruptions.' These may prompt 'only a slight intake of breath, a squirm, a hesitation, a queasy little – oh'.²⁷ Of course, the extreme cases have their merits (they need

²⁶ We do this all the time with real people. We find ourselves disliking someone for reasons we can't quite put a finger on, maybe only later realizing that it was a vaguely fake smile or an ever-so-slightly dismissive tone.

²⁷ *Savoring Disgust* (Oxford: OUP, 2011), 135.

not be thought heavy-handed because they elicit extreme emotion). But whatever those merits, the subtler cases offer us something else: they stir us quietly. We may not be aware that this is happening, but this doesn't mean that we aren't stirred, nor does it mean that we would have been stirred no matter how cursory our involvement. Surely subtler uses of disgust require us to attend more carefully to the works in which they appear, and their presence thus encourages us to engage with such works.²⁸

Both species of subtlety illustrate how a work can draw us in and encourage active participation. In the former case, we may have to perform paradigmatic actions, like doing a bit of math and hunting down a certain line of a poem. In the latter, we may still engage with the artwork actively by focusing our attention and readying ourselves to respond to what's presented. Subtle works facilitate this style of engagement, even if they do so in different ways.

In this section, I've argued that heavy-handedness is bad because it forces its audience to receive the work in a certain way, and makes clear that it's doing so. Subtlety instead encourages its audience to actively engage with the work, and this can happen through subtleties that we are or are not aware of. Furthermore, if heavy-handedness is a vice of deficiency, where there is insufficient subtlety, we might ask what is bad about obscurity, the vice of an excess of subtlety. (Here I remain agnostic about whether or not we should call these cases of genuine subtlety.) Obscurity, too, precludes active engagement, though differently than heavy-handedness does. Art exhibits this vice when, for example, its audience is too far removed from the esoteric facts needed to decode the subtle cues, or the interpretive demands are too great (say, if the fourth letter of every seventeenth word in the fifth chapter yields a crucial anagram, without which the work makes little sense). Obscurity, to the extent that it is present, thus blocks active engagement by making the work so impenetrable that the audience cannot get a foothold on engagement at all.

²⁸ I won't address a related question regarding whether there is something valuable about smaller, quieter (and in that sense subtle) emotions as opposed to extreme, loud ones, since it lies outside the scope of the present paper.

4. Subtlety and Related Concepts

We have so far seen what's good about subtlety, when it is in fact good. It's natural to ask a further question, namely whether subtlety is unique in this regard. The value of related aesthetic concepts like ambiguity, depth, richness, and complexity appear to be grounded in similar features. In this section, I'll argue that each of these is substantially different from subtlety, and conclude that the value of the first three looks related to that of subtlety only because they frequently dovetail; but that the last, complexity, admits overlap.

Ambiguity seems to promote active engagement in much the same way as subtlety, but if we examine the situation more carefully, we will find that this isn't so. We can see this through two cases of unsubtle ambiguity. Sidney Nolan writes of his painting *Landscape*, 'I put a fire or a setting sun on the horizon... I wanted a clear ambiguity.'²⁹ The final scene, too, of Christopher Nolan's film *Inception* contains an obvious ambiguity, where it's left open whether or not the preceding sequence has been a dream. In neither case does noticing this ambiguity require any especially active engagement (i.e., any engagement beyond that required to recognize a sky, horizon, forest, and so on). If the ambiguity is subtle, though, the audience has to put in some work to figure out whether the apparent ambiguity is actually an ambiguity, or if there are clues to its resolution. In such cases, the subtlety does the work, rather than the ambiguity itself.

Depth and richness, too, are related to subtlety. There are a variety of things we might have in mind with such terms, but it's clear that an aphorism, for example, can be deep without being particularly subtle. It might pithily and even wittily offer a poignant insight into human emotions or trenchant social criticism without being at all subtle in doing so. The adage that 'it is better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to speak and remove all doubt' offers a deep insight (at least for some), but it doesn't require any special focus or attention to appreciate. Its insight, while not superficial in the usual sense, lies on its surface. Likewise, a description in a novel might be very rich without being subtle, in that it might offer a wealth of descriptive information

²⁹ From the description plaque for Nolan, *Landscape* (Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 1947, available at: <http://artsearch.nga.gov.au/Detail.cfm?IRN=28925>) accessed 1 Nov 2015).

(say, by offering a thorough historical, economic, and visual description of a building). But this does not promote any active engagement beyond that normally required to parse language and synthesize information. It doesn't encourage our participation in forming interpretations, nor does it require us to be especially receptive or sensitive. We should think, as with ambiguity, that active engagement occurs when depth or richness overlap with subtlety, and then the best explanation will be that the subtlety is the stimulus to active engagement, rather than these other features.

Complexity is the trickiest case. There are different ways that art can be complex. One etching is more complex than another if it demonstrates more delicate and skilful technique or if it is more visually intricate. An artwork might also have emotional complexity or complex symbolism, a kind of complexity of content. We might think of this distinction as one between form and matter, and thus call the former, formal complexity, and the latter, material complexity. We might thus call Ellsworth Kelly paintings formally simple but materially complex (since they have a conceptually intricate role in the history of modern art). On the other hand, some portraiture is materially simple (straightforward representative paintings of moneyed people) while being formally very complex. The distinction between form and matter is not perfect, but we can use this rough distinction to see something interesting about the ways in which complexity and subtlety overlap.

Both can promote active engagement, although the ways in which they do are somewhat different. Material complexity works in much the way that I've already described subtlety. Complex content, as an intricate plot one has to unravel, certainly does demand that the audience work at figuring out what's going on, that they be sensitive to clues about the narrative, and so on. This does not require subtlety. A plot that is intricate but obviously so is complex without being subtle. Adding subtlety, in this case, will increase the extent of active engagement demanded by the work, but complexity can promote engagement all on its own.

Formal complexity sometimes promotes active engagement, but need not. Portraiture of the kind mentioned above is formally complex, but this formal complexity does not demand active engagement from the audience. One can look at the portrait, note the period clothing, the facial expression, and the props, and do all this without being especially engaged. Compare stunningly formally complex CGI graphics: these feature in some of the most unengaging films around. Music, too, is often very formally complex. The way that different

instruments' lines come together to form a whole is complicated (harmonies and keys and countermelodies are the stuff of music theory). The resulting sound may, but does not always, demand its listener's active engagement. Formal complexity is present in plenty of music that is unengaging, as well as in plenty that is deeply engaging. Thus some, though not all, formal complexity promotes active engagement through its presence.

Each of these concepts, therefore, is related to but distinct from subtlety. Ambiguity, depth, and richness clearly come apart from subtlety, and may be good without promoting any special active engagement. Complexity, both formal and material, is also distinct from subtlety, but material complexity does promote active engagement, and in this way at least, is much closer to subtlety than the other three.³⁰

Subtlety, then, is not indispensable to active engagement and is not unique in its promotion of it. There are other means, complexity among them. But of course we may also actively engage by consciously directing ourselves and our attention in certain ways. Art critics and art students do this all the time, regardless of how subtle or complex the art is. Sound engineers spend huge amounts of time actively engaged with music, speech, and sound effects. The list goes on. Unlike, however, the independent motivation of the sound engineer, subtlety is a feature internal to the work, and, unlike at least central cases of complexity, can affect us without our even being aware of it. Subtlety thus may not be uniquely or indispensably valuable, but it is nevertheless especially well-positioned to promote active engagement.

5. Two Bonuses of This Analysis

In addition to explaining what is good about subtlety, when it's good, this analysis can capture two features of subtlety that seem important. First, it's intuitive that some subtleties are more valuable than others. Second, it's sometimes said that good works of art are ones that reward revisiting. We can explain why this is so.

In essence, the view suggests that a subtlety that promotes more active engagement than another will (other things equal) be more valuable than it. One manifestation of this will be in interpretation. A subtlety that

³⁰ Complex works may also, like subtle ones, possess corresponding vices. They too seem to run the risk of overwhelming and alienating the audience in excess, or boring the audience when deficient.

offers more of the same interpretive resources is less valuable than one that offers new interpretive resources. So, for example, if the subtle cues in *Pride and Prejudice* reinforced rather than undercut the superficial romantic interpretation of Elizabeth and Darcy's relationship, they would be less valuable. This is not to say that the most valuable subtleties need to undercut what's on the surface, but a symbol that merely underscores what's already there, rather than adding a new perspective or nuance is less valuable. These subtleties remain valuable because they still promote the audience's active engagement, but they aren't as valuable as their alternatives because the audience doesn't take as active or as decisive a role in the formation of their interpretation.

Subtlety also offers an interesting explanation for the special enjoyment we experience when revisiting an artwork. There are many reasons that good artworks reward revisiting. It is satisfying to revisit a beautiful piece of music solely to repeat the enjoyable experience of listening to it. Repeat encounters with a profound story can also remind us of the lessons therein. But what is good about revisiting some artworks isn't that we have another experience that is more or less the same as before, but that we get more out of them by going back again. The audience's second experience of a narrative is often radically different, not least because knowing how it ends changes the light in which everything else is viewed. Even non-narrative works that saturate our attention the first time we experience them may then offer more upon revisiting. A previously unseen symbol or a new sinister undertone can reveal itself in these situations. So it's not that the first experience is simply worth repeating, but that there is so much to experience in the work that we have to go back to appreciate it all. The present view of subtlety can capture this, once we recognize that revisiting a work of art is nothing but engaging actively with it over a longer period of time. Indeed, there is a special pleasure we experience when we enrich and deepen our familiarity with the world that an artwork offers, a pleasure that is not afforded by becoming decently well acquainted with many different works. Because of this, a work that we recognize as having more to offer us than we can take in at once promises us this special species of enjoyment.

6. Subtlety At the Edges and Outside of Art

We have been focusing on artistic subtlety, but we are now in position to think about how other instances of subtlety work. I will discuss this in the cases of non-paradigmatic art forms, like video games, food, and architecture; the subtle beauty of nature and natural objects; and people and personalities.

It is not difficult to extend this account of subtlety to non-paradigmatic art forms. Video games, for example, promote active engagement in much the same way as narrative art. In fact, as an interactive medium, video games emphasize the difference that subtlety can make to the degree of one's engagement. Subtlety makes a video game more realistic and immersive, and encourages players to explore different paths, strategies, and so on. Subtlety in food can have the same effect. Subtle flavours urge us to attend to the food and in doing so heighten our aesthetic experience of it. In architecture and design, too, subtlety facilitates active engagement. A subtle building reveals design nuances over time that were not apparent at first, from the changes in light across the seasons and details in hinges to sound insulation and thoughtful attention to wear and tear. I don't mean to suggest that active engagement is always better, or that promoting attention to these things is always better. It might turn out that, as some say, good design goes unnoticed. I am only claiming that, when subtlety is good in these domains, its goodness is explained in this way. But, as with children's books or bombastic dance music, subtlety may just not be a desirable feature in some aesthetic contexts.

In broadening the view past art, it's also worth taking special note of subtlety in nature since in this case, barring a theistic view, we cannot refer to an artist behind the 'work'. It might seem like talk of subtlety is out of place in discussions of nature. Maybe we have some rough idea of what a subtle landscape would be, but a subtle tree or a subtle rock? It's not clear what these phrases even mean. I will come at subtlety in nature by examining subtle beauty as a distinct way of something's being beautiful. As beauty is not restricted to art alone, this will help us identify the value of subtlety to our aesthetic experience of nature.

In his influential work *In Praise of Shadows*, Jun'ichirō Tanizaki writes of something that resembles subtlety, though he only sparingly uses that word. He defends a Japanese aesthetic that values the soft and simple, the understated, the shadowy and even the dirty, over a modern Western aesthetic that values the clean, bright,

and ornamental. ‘As a general matter,’ he writes, ‘we find it hard to be really at home with things that shine and glitter.’³¹ He goes on to praise the ‘dark, smoky patina’ of tarnished silver, associating it with the beauty of jade: ‘its faintly muddy light’ being more admirable than ‘the brightness of a ruby or an emerald or the glitter of a diamond.’ There is something resembling subtlety here. Tanizaki, it seems, would accuse rubies, emeralds, and diamonds of being garish in their beauty. Interestingly, he is not concerned with distinguishing between diamonds and jade *as man-made ornaments* and diamonds and jade *as natural objects*. He appears to defend the value of subtle *objects*, and more generally the value of subtle *beauty*, over the unsubtle. (He may even be sceptical that obvious beauty really is beauty.)

Subtle beauty and subtle objects, understood this way, promote our active engagement. Diamonds are beautiful in a way that doesn’t demand anything from us. Their beauty is clear and straightforward. To appreciate the beauty of jade, on the other hand, we need to be more thoughtful. Tarnished silver conjures up ideas of tradition, history, and transience. Kintsugi, the Japanese art of reassembling broken pottery in beautiful and unhidden ways, evokes death and rebirth. This sort of subtle beauty is less apparent, but not for that less present. Extending this to other natural objects, we can see subtlety in the beauty of a plain or even misshapen tree and in decaying ruins of old castles. (Here, we can see similarities between what Tanizaki defends as the Japanese aesthetic and the early modern concept of the picturesque.) Subtlety in nature is thus valuable because it, too, promotes active engagement with the object of our experience.

Thus, for Tanizaki, there might be another, albeit instrumental, benefit conferred by subtle beauty: if we become too accustomed to unsubtle beauty like diamonds and Versailles, we’d cease to respond to subtle beauty at all. Section 2 suggested that subtlety might be important for aesthetic training and development. Here, there would be one very precise way to support such a view. Some kinds of beauty and thus value could become inaccessible to us if we are exposed to only unsubtle, easy beauty. So while the beauty of a diamond need not be of a lesser kind than the beauty of jade, we should be careful not to undervalue or ignore these subtleties by becoming unable to recognize them.

³¹ Jun’ichirō Tanizaki, *In Praise of Shadows* (Stony Creek, CT: Leete’s Island Books, Inc., 1977), 10. All following quotes are from this page.

A natural further question, once we realize how broad its reach is, is whether some media better facilitate subtlety than others. Jade may have a subtle beauty, but the degree of active engagement that it promotes is not *as active* an engagement as that promoted by, say, *Pride and Prejudice*. I am hesitant to draw any conclusions, however, when it comes to different artistic media more generally. Subtle allusions may, for example, appear more frequently in literature than in design, but this is itself no reason to draw conclusions about the capacity for subtlety that different media, as such, enjoy.

Finally, we also attribute subtlety to people themselves. We often talk of a subtle glance or subtle word choice, subtle sexiness or a subtle personality. Such subtlety is admittedly desirable if something needs to be covert, but that's not always what we like about it. At times, we talk admiringly of a person's subtle glances or gestures even when nothing clandestine is involved. A subtle conversational cue, I want to suggest, supports the active engagement of the audience – here, an interlocutor. The audience must pay attention and be sensitive to slight fluctuations in tone, minor movements, and the like. In this way, the audience participates more actively in the discussion, and appreciating this sort of subtlety seems to be an aesthetic way of appreciating the person. In some communication, of course, the standards for active participation are different – one expects to participate more actively than in, e.g., artistic interpretation. There is, however, still value in increased engagement. Such interactions are more engrossing and foster a fuller exchange of feelings, ideas, and outlooks. They, too, foreground and accentuate our status as agents in a (literal) interaction with other agents.

These comments blend our appreciation of the person and the gesture, the expresser and the expression, in a way we can see as analogous to the artist and the artwork. This is unsurprising, given that both exemplify expression and communication. Above, I characterized the artist as exhibiting respect for the audience's agency through subtlety. The subtle conversant does this, too, by not presenting everything explicitly. Such a person doesn't underestimate us. There is some truth, after all, to the earlier claim that subtlety reveals something important and good about the artist. It's not that intentionally crafting a subtle interaction makes the artist seem like a better artist – or, in this context, the conversant seem like a better conversant. It need not be intentional at all. But a subtle interaction facilitates our understanding of ourselves as agents in an interaction. By not holding our hands through this experience, by not forcing us to obvious conclusions, such a person

respects her interlocutors' agency. In thus not underestimating her audience, a subtle person encourages others not to underestimate themselves. As such, we appreciate subtle people not only (and perhaps not at all) because we admire them as intelligent or clever crafters of interactions, but because they help us believe in ourselves and take ourselves more seriously.