

Optimization and Meaning in Aesthetic Experience

Introduction:

Task optimization is a necessary behavior that establishes a central structure to an aesthetic activity, allowing one to steadily gain the necessary competence required to participate in it, while creating tangible goals to fulfill. In the scope of this paper, optimization will be defined as *the goal-oriented behavior of a being toward a defined success criteria*. With this behavior, a sort of technical precision or quantification is required to direct the being toward this defined goal. Yet, this sort of behavior must not be misaligned as the central purpose in an aesthetic experience, as it would diminish the value in the experience and leave it devoid of meaning. Referencing the fields of sports, business, and music, two forms of optimization will be defined: *contextual* and *constitutive*. Next, the discovery of aesthetic meaning will be described, along with how it relates to the *function* and *purpose* of an activity. Finally, the relationship between *optimization* and *meaning* will be analyzed, where it will be argued that a singular focus on optimization does not lead to meaning, but may be required to establish technical competence in the task.

Contextual Optimization:

Contextual optimization describes the forms of optimization that are oriented toward success criteria that are distinct from the technical skill of the field itself. For example, in sports, a player may define the success criteria as winning the game. Thus, they must quantify steps that lead to this in terms of a certain metric to accurately reflect their ability to reach this goal. With many team sports, this metric may be the number of points scored per team. The team with the greatest number of points at the end of a game would win, reflecting their attainment of the

success criteria. In other performance sports, such as track, cross-country, or swimming, the time to complete a certain race may be measured with the same purpose of gauging who may win a certain event. In both of these contexts, the player's participation in the activity is for the purpose of pushing their team to score as many points as possible, or minimizing the amount of time that it takes to complete a certain event. Thus, they are behaving in a way to optimize for the contextual environment surrounding the success criteria of the sport. A tendency for contextual optimization in athletics can be further illustrated by the amount of athletes who are physically gifted, but lack the technical prowess for a team sport. These athletes may still be very effective at helping the team fulfill the success criteria of winning a game, but they may not actually be good *players* of the sport itself. However, they are included on these teams due to their ability to aid the team's pursuit of the success metrics, rather than for their beauty and skill as an aesthetic player.

The field of business also exhibits a strong tendency for contextual optimization. Executives define a certain success criteria which must be tied to some sort of numerical metric, so that they can measure if they have been effective in reaching their goal. Most of the time, this success criteria is defined in terms of the company valuation of stock price. From these metrics, the behavior of the entire organization is oriented toward increasing this value, and team directives are efficiently aligned with this goal. Underneath the hierarchy of the overall success criteria, specific teams within the organization may be assigned deliverables and metrics to fulfill. In a similar manner, a sports team may have an overall success criteria to win, but the different players on the team may look to fulfill certain metrics (such as points, assists, or blocked shots) that contribute to this overall goal.

Constitutive Optimization:

The second form of optimization, *constitutive optimization*, can be best exhibited in activities that do not have a clearly defined contextual success criteria like sports and business do. Art forms, like music, may lack an external success criteria such as a “win” or company valuation, but they can still exhibit optimizing behavior that is *constitutive of the technicalities of the art form itself*. Constitutive optimization occurs when one focuses on a success criteria that describes their technical prowess in the activity. With their attention on these technical aspects, an aspiring artist will perform or experience the art in a diminished manner.

First, let us consider the example of the musical *listener*. To have a greater understanding of what is involved in musical listening, we can turn to the philosophy of music discussed in *The Aesthetics of Music* by Roger Scruton. In this book, Scruton writes that “listening is a relation between a sensitive organism and a sound. But it can take at least two forms: listening for the sake of information, and listening for its own sake” (Scruton 218). Scruton believes that this first form of listening is what we share with animals. Listening for information enables us to perceive our surroundings and simply gain its information. We can identify the source, its location, and whether this sound is a predator or a prey. In this form of listening, we do not care about the sound itself, only the information it contains. Yet our ability to listen to a sound for its own sake is unique to our ability as *rational beings* to bring our full attention to this perception and attend to it. Through our experience of listening, we go through a natural progression by first “listening to the sound for the sake of information” like animals, then listening “to the sound for its own sake,” and finally summoning “information for the sake of the sound” (Scruton 218).

In this second state, when we draw an interest in the sound, our ability as rational beings is exhibited. At this moment, a birdwatcher may draw interest in the specific call of a curlew,

while a talented musician may be able to listen to a song, identifying the score by ear. In the third and final form, our experience is linked to the sound, resulting in it holding a special significance to the rational being. A birdwatcher may hear the sound of a curlew, summoning memories of their mother's favorite bird, producing strong emotional feelings due to this attachment. Similarly, a musician may understand the meaning that is expressed through the music, and the intrinsic value in their experience of it.

Constitutive optimization may occur in the second state for a given listener. In this state, one may focus their attention on the sound itself, attempting to accurately analyze what it entails. For a birdwatcher, this may include the act of listening to many different bird calls, accurately labeling which call corresponds to the specific type of bird. In this case, the success metric would be how accurately the birdwatcher labels the bird calls. Similarly, with music, a listener may be listening to a musical piece for its own sake. Yet, they may also be attempting to write down the score that the given piece is performed from. The success metric could be how accurately the listener was able to reflect the original score reference with their own written score. During this behavior, the focus of the listener's attention is on the quantified description of the sound, rather than the *intentional understanding* of the musical content. They would fall short in reaching the third and final state of musical understanding, expending their efforts on the constitutive analysis of the sound, rather than partaking in the musical experience itself.

A piano player may also exhibit a similar type of constitutive optimization when they are practicing to perform a piece. When referencing a score, a performer is "not merely producing the sounds specified in the score," but is instead "interpreting the score, and is animated by a musical intention that may either harmonize or compete with the intention of the composer" (Scruton 441). Scruton argues that "the aim of the performance is not *merely* to produce a

particular pattern of pitches, but to present those pitches as music, and therefore to make whatever additions and adjustments are required by a musical understanding” (Scruton 441). He goes on, saying that “performance is the art of translating instructions to produce certain *sounds* into the organization of *tones*” (Scruton 441). While this may describe the ideal, a player will not have this capacity when initially faced with the piece. They will have to start by simply trying to read and understand a score’s technical contents, discerning the composer’s initial intentions. To do this, they must have the technical ability to read the notes that the composer is describing, and the way that each of them should be played on the keys. As a prerequisite, a player must be able to follow the instructions of the score as accurately as possible and produce a similar pattern of pitches. Once they have established themselves at this level, they can start to exhibit their own musical understanding by making the proper additions and adjustments.

This stage of practice for the pianist is similar to the second stage of listening described previously. The pianist is playing music for its own sake, yet they are captivated by playing and hearing the technical details of the sound itself. They have yet to perform the piece as a musical experience, and are instead held to the behavior of accurately reflecting the details of the written score on the instrument. In this way, the behavior of the pianist is optimized to follow the details of the score as closely as possible. They must fulfill the technical competence required to produce the particular pattern of pitches that are described. In this secondary state, the focus of the pianist’s attention is on the technical details of the score, and they are not exhibiting an intentional understanding of its musical content. Like the listener, they would fall short of completely partaking in the musical experience when they are in this state of diminished analysis.

Similarly, an athlete may demonstrate a similar type of constitutive optimization when they are learning the technical skills of the sports itself. One may be attempting to learn the proper shooting or dribbling form, or how to properly run a certain play. When in this process, the player is playing the sport for its own sake, yet they are restricted to focusing their attention on the sport's dynamics. Similar to a pianist attempting to strictly follow the score's instructions, a player is not truly performing until they make whatever additions and adjustments to their instructions to play and experience the sport itself.

Aesthetic Meaning:

With both *contextual* and *constitutive optimization* defined and illustrated in different fields, we can now turn to the topic of *aesthetic meaning* and where it lies within the *function* and *purpose* of an aesthetic activity. These definitions can then be used to illustrate why optimizing behavior *cannot* lead to the discovery of aesthetic meaning. In music, meaning is tied to the value within the music itself, yet it can never be pursued or discovered directly. Scruton described its evasive nature in the following passage:

“Meaning lies in intrinsic value; we possess it by finding the thing that interests us for its own sake; and such an interest must be disinterested, in the manner of every activity where we are not ‘merely in earnest’. At the same time, intrinsic value, and the pursuit of it, are means to the highest human end: namely happiness - that elusive but abundant thing which we obtain only so long as we do not pursue it” (Scruton 458).

It is important to distinguish the difference between *function* and *purpose* here, and how they relate to *meaning*. A certain activity may fulfill certain advantages and needs, which makes it particularly useful to participate in it. But its purpose should remain distinct from its function,

as our meaning in the activity is found in its purpose. This can be best illustrated through the example of friendship. As Scruton writes, “friendship has a function: it binds people together, making communities strong and durable; it brings advantages to those who are joined by it, and fortifies them in all their enterprises” (Scruton 458). With this function, friendship is undeniably useful to a person, as it can provide them “support in times of trouble, and joy in times of good fortune” (Scruton 375). Despite this, meaning cannot be found in these functional benefits. In fact, when we wrap up these functions into our idea of an activity’s purpose, we end up destroying the meaning found in the activity itself. Friendship can definitely be a “means to advantage, but only when not treated as a means” (Scruton 458). When we formulate these advantages into the purpose of friendship, “friendship is gone” (Scruton 458).

Meaning can only be found by losing oneself in the value of the activity itself, without regard for its functional aspects. With friendship, “[one] must put another’s interest before [their] own; and [they] must treat him as an end in himself, not as a means to [their own] advantage” (Scruton 375). Only in this way can true friendship be found, and the meaning in its intrinsic value can be discovered. One must forget its benefits and functional payoffs, instead losing themselves in the empathetic care for the other person. At the same time, we cannot do this in the hopes that we will find meaning, being ‘merely in earnest’ like Scruton writes. If we are earnest to find the meaning in the activity, we will then understand meaning itself as a functional payoff of the activity. With this goal-oriented perspective, meaning will evade us in the task. A detached mindset that is goal-less in its pursuit is necessary, and the present attention in the experience itself is required.

Optimization and Meaning:

We have now defined the *two different forms of optimization* while also describing the *evasive nature of meaning* in the aesthetic experience. With these ideas in hand, we can now formulate an argument for why optimizing behavior cannot lead to the discovery of meaning in an aesthetic experience. Optimized behavior requires a goal, something to explicitly pursue and orient their behavior toward. With optimization, the steps leading up to this goal must be clearly defined and quantifiable in some regard, allowing one to understand how close they lie in their pursuit. With these constraints, optimized behavior is incompatible with meaning. Meaning is unquantifiable and non-pursuable. Its complete nature escapes our grasp, and any attempt to capture its exact essence in regards to an activity will ultimately result in failure.

In regards to *contextual optimization*, humans misconstrue the functional goal with its deeper purpose quite often. In sports, the success criteria of winning can be equated to its purpose, with players and teams blindly striving for this goal. With this superficial pursuit, humans lose sight of the value in the experience itself, becoming earnest to *win* rather than to *play*. They quantify how to reach this goal of winning, establishing the individual parts that would need to be contributed to reach this goal, thinking that meaning will be achieved through their directed actions. Likewise, the field of business can be guilty of a similar downfall. Humans equate meaning in business with the ideal of value creation and the various metrics associated with such an accomplishment. They strive to maximize these, creating an empty void in their hollow pursuit. At points, individuals will recognize the limitations in such optimizing behavior. In these moments, they will describe their sport as “more than a game”, or company as “more than a business”, exhibiting their internal battle with meaning and how it can be found in light of their organizational and personal goals.

Even music can be prone to falling short in its meaningful value due to a form of *contextual optimization* that is tied to the cultural perception of a musical piece. In these circumstances, a composer or performer may have an understanding of the emotional weight contained in a certain piece of music and attempt to maximize the emotional response of their listeners. Such behavior devolves the musical form into one of sentimental gestures, cliches, and banality that are commonplace in a lower form of music (Scruton 479). This sort of artistic behavior has “an effect of deadening, of making easy what should be difficult, and of canceling the possibilities of real emotion” (Scruton 480). Scruton argues that “it is not constant use that makes a cliché” and that “standard devices in the classical style are not in themselves clichés” (Scruton 480). Instead, they become this way when they are “borrowed, but not earned” (Scruton 482). A musical borrower is guilty of a similar tendency of conflating the function of music with its purpose. With their behavior, they are attempting to combine expressive musical phrases together with the functional goal to elicit the greatest response of the listeners. This goal creates an environment for contextual optimization that separates the musician from partaking in the musical experience itself. The borrower is simply using the musical functions for the goal of maximizing the emotional feeling. Thus, they cannot understand the *intrinsic value* in the piece itself, preventing them from finding its *meaning*. Scruton writes that, with this behavior, “the melodic line is no longer the free outpouring of musical feeling, but a concatenation of effects, each made real by Mozart, and each made unreal when used again, outside the context that led to its discovery” (Scruton 482). When the participation in the musical experience is not the sole focus of their attention, the player will ultimately fail to grasp the aesthetic meaning.

Similarly, methods of *constitutive optimization* will prevent one from discovering meaning through their activity. The purpose of fulfilling the specified success criteria will

saturate the attention of the individual, separating them from the experience itself. A musical listener who is captivated by producing a detailed description of the score will remain in a detached state of mind, objectively dissecting the components of the piece. This detached nature will restrict the listener to hearing the piece within the domain of pitches and sound, rather than musical tones. Without entering this tonal domain, they will be prevented from grasping the value and purposeful meaning in the piece. A pianist who is in a similar state, attempting to produce the pitches and sounds instructed by the score, will find themselves with the same predicament. They will have the ability to grasp the technical features of the musical sound, but will remain detached from the music itself. The value and meaning in the performance is found by *becoming one with the music*, allowing oneself to feel the experience and express themselves through the medium, requiring imperfect deviations from the instructional score to facilitate this.

But some forms of optimizing behavior can be useful to develop the necessary technical competence for an activity. A beginner may not have developed the technical prowess to have the capacity to successfully participate. This lack of skill may prevent them from becoming involved in a sports team, or being able to perform a musical piece. Without this, the individual cannot hope to understand the meaning of the experience, having never entered the field in the first place. Thus, it can be necessary to have a certain amount of optimizing behavior to pick up the skill necessary to participate. Most times, the sort of behavior will be constitutive optimization, where the individual is attempting to pick up the technicalities of the activity itself. In music, ear training is a necessary and essential part of education for a musician. During ear training, a musician will behave like an optimizing musical listener, attempting to write down the musical score since they are focusing their attention on its pitches and sounds. In a similar manner, beginning pianists will have to learn the skills to play complex works, understanding the

technicalities of reading music and physical performance. They must behave in a way that optimizes for this skill, pushing their own discovery of musical meaning to a time when they have successfully honed their technical aspects.

Conclusion:

Through this paper, we have discussed two different forms of behavioral optimization, *contextual* and *constitutive*, that orient the behavior and attention of the human on fulfilling certain success criteria. Next, we defined *aesthetic meaning*, analyzing its evasive nature and illustrating that it can only be discovered through the authentic engagement in the activity itself, without regard for its external functions. Finally, we discussed the relationship between optimization and meaning. We recognized that optimizing behavior may be a necessary intermediate stage of behavior that allows individuals to gain technical competence to find meaning. Yet, overall, it was argued that the directed goal-oriented nature of optimizing behavior cannot occur simultaneously with the attainment of meaning. Therefore, to find aesthetic meaning in an activity, one must genuinely commit themselves to becoming one with the experience itself, rather than orienting their behavior toward defined goals in an optimizing manner.