

ARTICLE

The Perniciousness of Higher-Order Evidence on Aesthetic Appreciation

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Abstract

We demonstrate that many philosophers accept the following claim: When an aesthetic object is apprehended correctly, taking pleasure in said object is a reliable sign that the object is aesthetically successful. We undermine this position by showing that what grounds our pleasurable experience is opaque: In many cases, the experienced pleasure is attributable to factors that have little to do with the aesthetic object. The evidence appealed to is a form of Higher-Order Evidence (HOE) and we consider attempts to overcome said evidence. We argue they are unsuccessful. We conclude by considering what this means for our practice of making aesthetic judgements.

Résumé

Nous démontrons que de nombreux philosophes acceptent l'affirmation suivante : lorsqu'un objet esthétique est appréhendé correctement, prendre plaisir à cet objet est un signe fiable que l'objet est esthétiquement réussi. Nous minons cette position en montrant que les bases sur lesquelles repose notre expérience de plaisir sont opaques : dans de nombreux cas, le plaisir éprouvé est attribuable à des facteurs qui n'ont que peu à voir avec l'objet esthétique. La preuve invoquée est une forme de preuve d'ordre supérieur et nous considérons les tentatives de surmonter ladite preuve. Nous soutenons que ces tentatives sont infructueuses. Nous concluons en examinant ce que cela signifie pour notre pratique du jugement esthétique.

Keywords: aesthetic appreciation; aesthetic judgement; higher-order evidence; scepticism; taste

1. Introduction

Alexander Payne's comedy-drama, *Sideways* (Payne, 2004), portrays the odyssey of two middle-aged men venturing through the backroads of Santa Barbara wine country. In one of the more memorable scenes from the movie, the protagonist, Miles Raymond (played by Paul Giamatti), is in the middle of a conversation with his date when she asks him, "Why are you so into Pinot?". Miles chuckles, seemingly uncomfortable, as if an answer requires him to spill his heart, before he delivers a compelling case for why one should never consider anything but Pinot Noir when browsing the wine shelves:

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It's a hard grape to grow, as you know, right? It's thin skinned. Temperamental. Ripens early. You know, it's not a survivor like Cabernet, which can just grow anywhere, and thrive even when it's neglected. No, Pinot needs constant care and attention. In fact, it can only grow in these really specific tucked away corners of the world. And only the most patient and nurturing of growers can do it, really. Only somebody who really takes the time to understand Pinot's potential can then coax it into its fullest expression. And, I mean, its flavors, they are just the most haunting and brilliant, thrilling and subtle, ancient on the planet. (Payne, 2004)

Whether one is a wine expert or a layperson, there is an intuitive appeal of the *form of argument* that Miles gives when making his case for Pinot Noir. He is giving us reasons for why Pinot Noir makes the most aesthetically pleasing wines; and we take these reasons as being subject to factual verification. That is, we legitimately think of them as either right or wrong reasons for liking Pinots. And, for what it's worth, it seems like many took Giamatti's performance as a compelling argument: According to a National Public Radio report, California wine producers saw a 170% increase in demand for Pinot Noir in the years immediately following the release of *Sideways* (Hartke, 2017).

In the field of aesthetics, we find a similarly broad acceptance of this form of argument, namely, that there is something called "proper" or "correct" aesthetic appreciation of an object, which is usually grounded in a further belief that this appreciation of the object must be based in the *right* kind of reasons. Contemporary philosophers who have voiced support for some basic version of this idea include Kendall Walton (1970), Allen Carlson (1981), Douglas Burnham and Ole Skilleås (2012, 2014), Matthew Kieran (2010, 2011), Aaron Meskin et al. (2013), Stephen Davies (2006), Roger Scruton (2009), Barry C. Smith (2007), and Cain Todd (2011), to name a few.

A common philosophical corollary of this position is that one can aesthetically appreciate something on the *wrong* basis (e.g., Kieran, 2010, 2011). For example, Walton (1970) argues that to *correctly* appreciate a work of art, we must view it within the proper category; so, we must appreciate a Pinot Noir *as* a Pinot Noir; or an impressionist painting *as* an impressionist painting, in order to perceive and appreciate it correctly. Furthermore, Walton adds that, "the correct way of perceiving a work is likely to be the way in which it comes off best" (Walton, 1970, p. 357).

This remark from Walton indicates an additional commitment within portions of the aesthetics community: When we correctly perceive an aesthetic object, we get the most out of the experience, which many take to mean something like "gain the most pleasure from our experience of it."¹ If we accept something like Walton's categories

¹ We here leave out what exactly aesthetic appreciation consists in. However, many theorists have posited that aesthetic appreciation has *something* to do with pleasure: We can interpret Kant as taking pleasure to be a constituent element of aesthetic judgement (Budd, 1999; Zangwill, 2021); Davies holds that the distinctive function of art is to "provide an aesthetically (or artistically) pleasurable experience when contemplated for its own sake" (Davies, 2006, p. 228) Walton (1970) seems to endorse such a view when he explicitly argues that we should aim to appreciate a work in the category that allows it to come off best; although Lopes (2018) gives an account of aesthetic appreciation that does not depend on pleasure, in

of appreciation — which many theorists do² — his view leaves a clear role for the critic: The critic or expert might help us come to perceive a work in its correct categories, thereby helping us to properly appreciate it and get the most out of the work (Walton, 1970, p. 366). And perhaps this is exactly what we find Miles doing in his ode to the Pinot Noir grape: As an expert in California wines, Miles is drawing our attention to the significant qualities of his favourite grape.

We find Kieran maintaining a similar position concerning the role of the critic/expert as Walton (Kieran, 2011, p. 33), and then Kieran makes the following point:

We take it as a mark or indeed constitutive of something's being aesthetically valuable that, at least under certain conditions, an object gives rise to pleasure in our appreciation of it. Thus *where we derive pleasure from our appreciative engagement with a work we have defeasible reason to judge it to be good as art.* (Kieran, 2011, p. 33, our emphasis)

Putting the points discussed thus far together, we can formulate a rough statement of a Standard Position concerning aesthetic appreciation held within the aesthetics community:

The Standard Position on Aesthetic Appreciation: If someone is properly perceiving an aesthetic object *z*, taking pleasure in *z* is a reliable sign that *z* is a successful or good instance of the kind of thing of which *z* is a category member (abstract art, wine, impressionist painting, photograph, song, etc.).

Here we aim to raise a pressing challenge to the Standard Position, namely, that taking pleasure in one's experience of an aesthetic object is a reliable sign that the object is aesthetically good. We challenge the Standard Position by questioning the human ability to reliably know what exactly is causing our appreciation. If we cannot be sure what causes our appreciation, we propose, then we cannot take (the feeling of) pleasure as a reliable indicator of aesthetic quality. Furthermore, if we cannot be sure what is grounding our aesthetic appreciation, then, by extension, we cannot be sure that we have attended to the aesthetic object/event in the "correct" way, or what even

his survey of theories of aesthetic value, he comes to the conclusion that, historically, philosophers have almost uniformly identified aesthetic value with pleasure; Prinz (2011) identifies aesthetic experience with a kind of pleasurable awe; Larsen and Sackris (2020) identify positive aesthetic experience with positively valenced emotions (although no particular emotion); for Gorodeisky and Marcus (2018) to judge something aesthetically good is to judge it worthy of being liked. See also Kieran (2010, 2011); Nanay (2017); Sackris (2018). Modern interpreters seem to take Hume to have advocated a position on which the ideal critic gets more pleasure out their appreciative experience than the ordinary judge. See, for example, Levinson (2010).

² According to the Oxford *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics* entry on Walton (Friend, 2014), it states that "few thinkers are as influential in as many areas of aesthetics," and of Walton's 1970 *Categories of Art*, they write that it "remains enormously influential." A study by Naukkarinen and Bragge (2016) analyzed publication and citation patterns in philosophy of aesthetics, where Walton was rated the 14th most cited author in the field, surpassed by only a few contemporaries. According to Google Scholar, Walton's 1970 article has garnered a total of 1,119 citations (May 2, 2023), making it one of the most cited articles in aesthetics (e.g., compare to Levinson's influential 1980 article, "What a Musical Work Is," with 546 citations).

constitutes the “correct” way, since the standards themselves might be influenced by factors of which we are unaware and would otherwise reject if made conscious of those factors.

In other words, to correctly appreciate an art object, many philosophers hold that we must attend to certain relevant features of the object in question and have certain knowledge while doing so. However, if extraneous factors to the artwork are (unknownst to us) impacting our perception, we cannot be (epistemically) certain that we really are attending to the relevant features, nor that it is those relevant features that are really informing our judgement. As an example, it may be that to fully appreciate an early painting by Pablo Picasso, we need to know about the cubist movement and Picasso’s role in that movement. However, it may be that, for some individuals, simply being informed that the work is a “Picasso” influences and swamps their sensory perception: They like it simply because it is a “Picasso” and they form a positive judgement because they are excited to view a work by the famous master, Picasso. Their sensual input about the work’s properties might only be playing a minor role in their judgement formation.

This article proceeds as follows: First, we show that our aesthetic appreciation and subsequent judgements are influenced by a myriad of contextual factors, some of which we might be aware, and many more of which we are unconscious. Second, we demonstrate that the evidence under consideration is a form of “Higher-Order Evidence” (HOE) and such evidence undermines the basis of our initial judgements concerning aesthetic quality.³ Third, we argue that there is no reasonable way to mitigate the influence of this kind of evidence. In establishing this claim, we shall argue that there is no such thing as an aesthetic judgement that *has not* been influenced by contextual factors, or what some might call an “unbiased” aesthetic judgement. Finally, we consider what this means for our practice of making aesthetic judgements.

2. Empirical Research on Aesthetic Appreciation and Judgement

Over the past 20 years or so, numerous published studies have demonstrated that it is often completely opaque to perceivers what exactly their aesthetic appreciation is founded upon.⁴ We propose that this evidence raises a serious challenge to the Standard Position, insofar as it shows how context, surroundings, memory, information, expectations, etc. deeply influence our experience in both conscious and unconscious ways. If factors that are merely tangentially related to the aesthetic object/event can influence the pleasure we experience from engaging with the work, then the very experience of such pleasure cannot be taken as sufficient evidence that we have correctly or successfully engaged with the object/event. Even if we are confident that we are perceiving a work in all the “correct” ways — and convinced that our pleasure is the result of attending to a cubist painting *as* a cubist work of art — the trouble is that we cannot be sure that this “correct” way of perceiving the work is really what

³ This concept is explained subsequently.

⁴ See, for example, Brochet (2001); Cutting (2003); Malfeito-Ferreira (2021); Salganik et al. (2006); Salganik and Watts (2009); Wansink et al. (2007). For discussion of this evidence as it relates to philosophical aesthetics, see Kieran (2010, 2011); Meskin et al. (2018); Sackris (2018, 2020).

constitutes the basis of the pleasure that accompanies or arises from the judgement. We begin by reviewing the research on the experience of food and drink, and then turn to studies focused on the experience of art.

First consider the research conducted on wine appreciation. Wine drinkers, even experienced, critical wine drinkers, cannot reliably ascertain what is causing their aesthetic appreciation or grounding their judgements. For example, a study by Frédéric Brochet (2001) demonstrated that experienced wine drinkers could not distinguish between white wine that has been dyed red from actual red wine; that is, because they believed the wine was red, they used stereotypical red wine descriptors to describe their experience, suggesting that their experience was primarily moderated by the perceived colour of the wine, and not its taste attributes. A closely related finding is that merely telling a wine drinker that two wines differ will lead them to describe them differently even when they are actually the same wine (Brochet, 2001; Plassmann et al., 2008; Robinson, 1997; Wansink et al., 2007). Furthermore, judgements of wine quality are deeply influenced by what price information the subject is given about the wine (Brochet, 2001; Plassmann et al., 2008) and by what information the subject is given about the wine's origin (Robinson, 1997; Tabor, 2006; Wansink et al., 2007). Simply being told that one is drinking an expensive wine will lead individuals to judge that they are having a pleasurable, high-quality aesthetic experience.

Now consider market research on the effect of the perceived attractiveness of restaurant servers on the perception of food quality. When food is delivered by a server perceived to be attractive, the food delivered receives a higher rating of quality. When food is delivered by a server perceived as unattractive, the food delivered receives a lower rating for quality. Why should this be? Lily Lin et al. (2018) found that “the presence of physically attractive individuals can affect consumers’ expectations about their consumption experience which then influences taste perceptions” (Lin et al., 2018, p. 297).

When we enter a roadside diner, we expect a certain quality of food based on our perception of the environment and our past experiences with diners; when we enter a white-linen restaurant, we expect a certain quality of food based on those same factors. Those expectations directly influence our experience. We will perceive diner food as especially poor if it is served in a white-linen restaurant; however, we would be blown away by white-linen restaurant quality food served in a diner. The research of Lin et al. indicates that the quality of our experience is typically assimilated to meet our expectations. They state that there is

either an assimilation or contrast effect. If the discrepancy [between expectations and actual experience] is minimal, consumers will make adjustments in the direction of assimilation so that the evaluations of their experience are more aligned with their expectations. (Lin et al., 2018, p. 298)

That our expectations influence our experience may explain why it is apparently so easy to “trick,” for lack of a better word, wine experts. When we see that a wine is red (or when we categorize it as red), we expect it to taste like red wine, and so it apparently does. When we are told we are drinking a \$100 (or a Grand Cru) bottle

of wine, we expect it to be of fitting quality, and we will typically experience it as having such a quality because that is what we expect.⁵

It is hard to see why we should think such prior experiences and contextual cues wouldn't deeply influence our aesthetic experience and subsequent judgements in the world of art as well. Consider how contextual information shapes our aesthetic appreciation of the works of the famous art forger, Hans van Meegeren, who successfully passed several of his works off as Johannes Vermeer's. As David Sackris (2020) points out, once van Meegeren's *Christ and the Disciples at Emmaus* was taken to be an authentic Vermeer, it was viewed as a great masterpiece — one of Vermeer's finest works.⁶ Even after van Meegeren admitted to his forgeries in open court, some of his contemporaries refused to believe that his *Christ and the Disciples at Emmaus* was not an authentic Vermeer, having once seen and judged it in that light. However, the art historian, Hope Werness, working 50 years later and who was never taken in by the original ruse, states: "[I]t seems astonishing today that anyone could mistake [van Meegeren's work] for a Vermeer [...]" (Werness, 1983, p. 29).⁷

Why was it so easy for Werness to see that van Meegeren's *Christ and the Disciples at Emmaus* was the work of an inferior artist while van Meegeren's contemporaries viewed it as a true masterpiece? One possible answer stands out: Werness was writing 50 years after the event and therefore could not resist viewing *Christ and the Disciples at Emmaus* under the (factually correct) assumption that it was the forger van Meegeren himself who painted it; while van Meegeren's contemporaries viewed it under the assumption that Vermeer was the originator (i.e., after the authentication was made public by Abraham Bredius, a Vermeer expert [Werness, 1983]). When we expect to see a Vermeer, we expect to experience a masterpiece; however, when we expect to see a van Meegeren, we do not expect to experience a masterpiece.⁸ If merely believing that one is viewing a work by a master painter increases one's aesthetic appreciation, whether or not the painting was actually executed by said master painter, this gives us reason for pause. If the same work can be viewed as both the finest product of Vermeer's illustrious painting career and as obviously the product of an inferior artist, it is unclear what role the aesthetic properties of *Christ and the Disciples at Emmaus* are playing in its appreciation.

Another line of research that challenges the Standard Position is experiments that track how the aesthetic appreciation of art objects is readily open to manipulation. For example, James Cutting (2003) has shown that merely being repeatedly exposed to an artwork increases our liking of it. Albert Flexas et al. (2013) have shown that priming subjects with a happy or sad facial expression influences their judgement of abstract art. Matthew Salganik et al. (2006, 2009) have conducted research on what drives

⁵ As long as it hasn't turned to vinegar, which is universally disliked by all human wine drinkers. See Lukacs (2013).

⁶ van Meegeren also managed to trick Göring into trading 137 other paintings for one of his forgeries, under the impression that it was an authentic Vermeer. See Dolnick (2008).

⁷ Robson (2018) also discussed the phenomenon of so many art critics being duped by van Meegeren. He attributes this to echo chambers in the art world. Whether it was due to the expectation effect, or the echo chamber effect, it seems clear that aesthetic judgements were being influenced by what we would typically consider to be non-aesthetic factors.

⁸ Sackris (2020) makes a similar point.

music popularity using “artificial cultural markets.” Salganik et al. created distinct online environments involving over 14,000 participants where individuals could listen to, download, and rate songs. There were two study conditions: One in which participants were completely in the dark about the behaviour of other study participants, and the other, dubbed the “social influence world,” in which they could observe the rates at which each song was downloaded by other participants. Within the study, there were eight “influence worlds,” which contained the same songs, but with different participants. Since the different “worlds” contained different participants, the songs were downloaded at different rates in each of the worlds.

Salganik et al. used the independent condition (or world) as a gauge of song quality. In this cohort of participants, downloads and song ratings were *not* influenced by the information concerning the judgement of other study participants (i.e., this information was not shared). In the eight social influence worlds, whether a song topped the charts and received the greatest number of downloads was not correlated with song quality as determined by the independent condition: In each of the eight worlds, different songs topped the charts and lined the bottom. Salganik et al. concluded that:

Although, on average, quality is positively related to success, songs of any given quality can experience a wide range of outcomes. In general, the “best” songs never do very badly, and the “worst” songs never do extremely well, but almost any other result is possible. (Salganik et al., 2006, p. 855)

One of the strongest influences on (or predictors of) song success is the observed behaviour of other study participants. Salganik et al. interprets their findings in two distinct ways: On the surface, when participants in a cultural market have information about the choices and judgements of others in the market, a kind of consensus appears to form which may suggest to outside observers that the market is convening around a common recognition of quality: Since so many people are attracted to that song, it must be good. However, “looking across different realizations of the same process, we see that as social influence increases [...], which particular products turn out to be regarded as good or bad becomes increasingly unpredictable [...]” (Salganik et al., 2006, p. 856). This point is crucial: a song becomes popular precisely because participants in the market realize that it is “trending” and as a result they are more inclined to download that specific song, listen to it, and rate it highly. In each of the different influence worlds, different songs topped the chart precisely because different songs generated different “cascade effects”: Once some song *s* obtained a few initial downloads, this signalled to other participants that *s* is a good song, and they as a result also downloaded the song and also thought it was good, likely because they expected it to be good based on the behaviour of other individuals in the market.

Salganik et al.’s studies indicate that when a consensus forms concerning the quality of an aesthetic object that consensus becomes a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy: Once an aesthetic object is signalled as being worthy of appreciation (be it by critics, advertising, mere exposure, or whatever), it will be appreciated almost regardless of its inherent properties, as long as it meets a minimum threshold of quality. Salganik et al.

give us reason to believe that simply knowing that others like a song is a good reason for us to like it as well.

What these studies show is that it is excruciatingly difficult to determine what exactly is contributing to or causing aesthetic appreciation. Do we take pleasure in object *x* for its intrinsic properties? Or do we like it for some of its intrinsic properties *plus* the context in which we experience *x*? Or maybe we appreciate the object for reasons entirely independent of the object itself? If it wasn't the case that the context, surroundings, memory, information, expectations, etc. in which we experience an aesthetic object/event influenced our judgements, it would be difficult to make sense of the examples discussed above.

3. Higher-Order Evidence

The empirical evidence reviewed here indicates that a myriad of factors likely influence the appreciation and judgement of an aesthetic object/event. We see this evidence as undermining the Standard Position in two ways: (1) by raising doubt about whether liking an aesthetic object should be taken as a reliable sign of aesthetic goodness; and (2) by raising doubts about the relationship between engaging with an aesthetic object “correctly” and appreciating said object. Not only is it difficult to ascertain if it was the “correctness” of the perception that caused the appreciation, but we also cannot be sure that the experts themselves — those who set the standards of “correctness” — are not equally influenced by factors external to the aesthetic object/event (i.e., “correct” engagement may itself turn out to involve opaque, unknown, and “irrelevant” grounds for appreciating an aesthetic object).

The doubts raised about the bases of our aesthetic appreciation is an instance of a more generalized phenomenon recently discussed in epistemological circles and referred to as “HOE.” Here is how Richard Feldman defines HOE:

Higher-order evidence [is] [e]vidence about the existence, merits, or significance of a body of evidence. (Feldman, 2009, p. 304)

Daniel Whiting distinguishes between first-order evidence and HOE like this:

Call evidence which bears on whether a proposition is true, that is, which indicates or makes it likely that a proposition is (or is not) true, *first-order evidence*. Call evidence which bears on whether one is able to assess or respond to one's evidence concerning a proposition, *higher-order evidence*. (Whiting, 2019, p. 246)

In light of this definition, we can characterize the situation for those who accept the Standard Position in the following way: The pleasure we take in an aesthetic object is first-order evidence for thinking that the object is aesthetically good/successful.⁹

⁹ We could also say here: The pleasure we take in an aesthetic object when we take ourselves to be viewing it correctly is first-order evidence for thinking that the object is aesthetically good/successful. The idea here is we can't be sure what role “correct” perception plays in the formation of our judgement.

However, the fact that our aesthetic appreciation is influenced by what many theorists would likely call “external” or “irrelevant” factors (e.g., context, surroundings, memory, information, expectations, etc.) gives us reason to question the significance of our first-order evidence (i.e., the pleasure caused by the experience of the object in question). Therefore, we might consider the recent evidence from empirical investigations to be a kind of HOE that raises a sceptical challenge for taking aesthetic appreciation as an appropriate indicator of aesthetic quality (as posited in the Standard Position).¹⁰

To explain the difference between first-order evidence and HOE when it comes to the aesthetic realm, it may be best to consider an illustrative example. Suppose Susan goes to the Princeton Art Museum because she knows that there are several of Monet’s paintings of the water lilies there. Once inside the museum, she goes straight to Monet’s work, views the paintings, and thoroughly enjoys her experience. However, after her museum experience, she is assigned Cutting’s (2003) work on the “mere exposure effect” by her philosophy instructor, and learns how simply being exposed to an image over and over again leads to an increase in the liking of said image regardless of its content.¹¹ She then reflects on how Monet’s water lilies are one of the most reproduced images in the modern era, and that she must have been exposed, consciously and unconsciously, to hundreds of prints and pictures of the water lilies over the course of her short 20-year lifespan. We might think the following: Susan has gained some HOE (i.e., information about the “mere exposure effect”) that raises questions about the basis of her initial judgement: Does Susan like Monet’s water lilies because they are artistic masterpieces, or because she has been repeatedly exposed to them over her lifetime, or does she like the painting as a result of some inseparable combination of the exposure effect and artistic quality?

The significance of HOE, at least for the epistemological community, is whether the discovery of HOE puts normative pressure on individuals who learn about such evidence to change their initial judgement. If one’s aim is to believe the truth, as it typically is in epistemological inquires, the problem, roughly, is this: HOE gives the person aiming to form a true judgement a reason to doubt or re-evaluate the evidence upon which they founded their initial judgement; however, if they have actually reasoned correctly based on their original evidence, it would be unfortunate if the HOE led this individual to withhold or change what was initially a correct judgement.

To illustrate the epistemological problem, let’s turn to another example. Consider the situation of a detective investigating a crime. Suppose this detective performs a fingerprint analysis that indicates to him that the butler did it. If this detective learns that he has made mistakes in his fingerprint analyses in the past, this would be a good reason for him to double check his work in this particular case if his conclusion is based primarily on the results of his fingerprint analysis. The epistemological problem alluded to above, then, is this: If the detective has *actually* done the fingerprint

¹⁰ Whether HOE really is different in kind from first-order evidence is not something we aim to adjudicate here. We’re inclined to agree with Feldman that what is referred to as “HOE” is really just more evidence and not different in kind from first-order evidence. For an overview of the issue, see Whiting (2020). See also: Christensen (2010); Lasonen-Aarnio (2014); Tal (2021); Whiting (2019).

¹¹ The exposure effect is a well-documented phenomenon. See Zajonc (1968, 1980).

analysis correctly in this case (if he has actually reasoned perfectly concerning his first-order evidence), then it would be a mistake for him to change/withhold his judgement in light of his HOE concerning his past analyses. Although David Christiansen raises questions about how an individual who has in fact reasoned perfectly in response to her first-order evidence should treat HOE, he concludes by saying: “HOE is, it seems, an extremely valuable resource for creatures living with the possibility of imperfection. It is an indispensable epistemic tool, not an isolated curiosity” (Christiansen, 2010, p. 213).

The empirical evidence considered above indicates that we are in fact creatures living with the possibility of imperfection; at least it is possible for us to be deceived about the bases of our aesthetic appreciation. So, the next question to consider is whether Susan should revise her initial judgement of the aesthetic quality of Monet’s work in light of her HOE that her liking of the water lilies may be deeply coloured by her previous, repeated exposure to said work over the course of her lifetime. That is, should Susan question the relationship between liking the water lilies and judging them to be masterly works or art?

Before providing our own response to this question, let us consider the work of those who believe that the HOE surrounding aesthetic appreciation can be overcome. If such evidence can in fact be overcome, we would have little to worry about in terms of its effects on our aesthetic judgements.

4. Higher-Order Evidence, Optimism, and Expertise

There are a number of contemporary scholars who believe that the empirical evidence concerning the bases of aesthetic appreciation discussed thus far can be overcome or explained away (Dorsch, 2014; Kieran, 2010, 2011; Meskin et al., 2013; Nanay, 2017). Furthermore, we might go back to David Hume’s “ideal critic,” as well as his appeal to the “test of time” (Hume, 1985), as evidence that scepticism regarding our ability to form reliable aesthetic judgements is overblown; that we still regard the *Iliad* as a masterpiece is some evidence that it really is better than 99% of the literary material produced by human beings over the past 3000 years (at least in the West). The joint verdict of Greeks, Romans, and almost all subsequent European civilizations is solid evidence in favour of its resounding quality. In his recent defence of aesthetic value realism, Peter Kivy (2015) appeals to both the test of time and the joint verdict of critics as evidence that our aesthetic judgements are most likely tracking something real: Critics over the course of history have reached similar aesthetic verdicts because some works really are better than others.¹²

In an effort to dismiss arguments along the lines of the one offered here, Fabian Dorsch (2014) explicitly considers empirical evidence concerning the grounds of aesthetic appreciation. He presents the following thesis for consideration:

¹² Technically, Kivy (2015) is arguing that the best way to make sense of people’s behaviour is that most people take aesthetic value realism to be true. However, that people generally seem to believe and act as if it is true is also supposed to be some evidence for thinking that it might really be true. See especially Chapter 15.

Empirical evidence can be sufficient to defeasibly justify sceptical judgements about our capacity to form adequate aesthetic judgements (e.g. “I am an unreliable critic and should refrain from forming aesthetic judgements”). (Dorsch, 2014, p. 76)

Although Dorsch focuses on aesthetic judgement, appreciating or enjoying an aesthetic object is typically taken to be part of, or a form of, judging it (e.g., Olsen, 2014). If this is basically correct, for the purposes of considering Dorsch’s argument, we can take aesthetic appreciation to at least be part of, or in certain contexts equivalent to, aesthetic judgement. Dorsch’s stated goal is to reject this thesis. It is to this argument that we now turn.

Dorsch admits that aesthetic judgements, even the judgements of experts, have been shown to be influenced by seemingly irrelevant contextual factors by empirical work in the field (Dorsch, 2014, p. 91). Dorsch compares the evidence concerning the unreliability of aesthetic judgement to moving to “fake barn country”: Because of the high number of fakes, we should become much more reticent with our judgements concerning what constitutes a real barn, and he suggests that “we should stop forming the judgement that there is a real barn whenever it visually seems to us as if there is one present in our environment — at least as long as we remain in fake barn country” (Dorsch, 2014, p. 91). Similarly, given that the empirical research into aesthetic judgement shows that our aesthetic judgements are influenced by such irrelevant contextual factors, which Dorsch takes to inappropriately “bias” our judgements, and given that we may be unable to distinguish the “biased” judgements from the “unbiased” judgements, we should perhaps withhold our aesthetic judgements or doubt the evidence provided by the experience of taking pleasure in/appreciating an aesthetic object (Dorsch, 2014, p. 92).

Yet, just like the newcomer to fake barn country, Dorsch believes we can adjust; we can learn to distinguish the fake barns from the real barns, perhaps by walking completely around each apparent “barn” to ensure that it is not merely a barn facade. Similarly, Dorsch believes that we can learn to reduce the number of biases impacting our aesthetic judgements and “regain our ability to recognize aesthetic properties to a considerable extent” (Dorsch, 2014, p. 92). In this respect, he is echoing Hume: The ideal critic must be “cleared of all prejudice” (Hume, 1985, p. 241).¹³ How do we regain this ability then? According to Dorsch, we actively work to make ourselves aware of such biases and try to combat them:

Once we are aware of the fact, say, that we tend to value artworks more the more we are confronted with them, we can actively counter this effect — for instance, by increasing and balancing our exposure to different artworks that we want to assess or compare. Similarly, once we realize that we are aesthetic snobs, we can actively go against our tendency to care about our social status when appreciating art [...] So, by means of careful actions, we may be able to ensure that our aesthetic judgements are *unbiased* more of the time than not. (Dorsch, 2014, pp. 92–93, our emphasis)

¹³ Interpretations of Hume’s (1985) “Of the Standard of Taste,” as well as the problems perceived in his argument, vary. See, for example, Kivy (2015, Chapter 1); Levinson (2002); Zangwill (2001).

We find Kieran making a similar argument. Kieran believes that these “negative” or “irrelevant” contextual influences can be overcome. Kieran (2010, 2011) argues that it is possible to develop aesthetic virtues and diminish aesthetic vices and that doing so will help us to properly appreciate an aesthetic object. An aesthetic vice, according to Kieran, is merely appreciating a cultural object because it is trendy, or because it is expensive. On his view, what is “crucial is that the motivation to appreciate an aesthetic object for its own sake must govern the activity of appreciation” (Kieran, 2011, p. 41). The idea, then, is that virtuous appreciators appreciate aesthetic objects for their own sake, and not for other, extraneous reasons. How do we ensure that this occurs? He lists several virtues that we should focus on cultivating:

- We must be humble: We must seek to do justice to the work itself “rather than taking one’s self to be the measure of the work.” (Kieran, 2011, p. 41)
- We must be critically self-honest: We can’t be afraid to admit that our own judgement “might be incomplete or wrong.” (Kieran, 2011, p. 42)
- We must be courageous: “Courage is crucial in having the fortitude to be true to one’s own responses and not cave in to received opinion or social influence without appreciative justification.” (Kieran, 2011, p. 42)

By developing these virtues, supposedly, we can increase the likelihood that we are appreciating an aesthetic object for its own sake.

The common theme expressed by Dorsch and Kieran is two-fold: First, that we can somehow combat unconscious biases/aesthetic vices (what we have neutrally referred to as external or contextual influences); and second, that there is such a thing as an “unbiased” aesthetic judgement, as Dorsch puts it, or, as Kieran puts it, that there is such a thing as “considering an aesthetic object for its own sake” (we take these claims to amount to the same thing). Further, true expert appreciators (or “ideal critics”) are those who are best able to overcome such biases, and Kieran develops the example of a budding coffee connoisseur, which counts in favour of such an interpretation (Kieran, 2011, p. 39). Let’s critically address Dorsch’s and Kieran’s positions.

It is literally impossible to combat some of these “unwanted” influences, no matter how careful or virtuous we try to be in our aesthetic appreciation. It is certainly true that when made aware of certain unconscious biases, we can take effective steps to mitigate them. For example, when made aware of unconscious racial biases in hiring, we can take steps to mitigate such biases, such as blinding job applications, or by reassessing the basis of some of our previous judgements.¹⁴ However, biases such as the “mere exposure effect” cannot be meaningfully and practically combatted, even if we are made aware that such a bias exists. We are constantly being exposed to images and sounds, often against our will. There is no practical way to “cut” ourselves off from the myriad of images of Monet’s water lilies in our society, nor is it practically possible to “undo” the art education (for lack of a better word — we don’t mean anything formal) that we receive as children and young adults, often induced through omnipresent cultural sources. We could become fully aware that seeing images over and over again builds an affinity for them, but it is unclear how we would ever combat

¹⁴ We owe this point to an anonymous reviewer.

the creation of such affinities. Even if we deliberately exposed ourselves to certain kinds of images, we would nonetheless be routinely exposed to countless other images, whether we liked it (or even realized it) or not. More importantly, we lack a clear understanding of all of the factors that might influence our appreciation of aesthetic objects, nor are we aware of when and which such factors enforce their influence. For example, the mood we are in when we view an object could have a deep effect on our appreciation of it; that the work is in a light blue room and we like the colour of light blue might have an influence; that the work was painted by a person we find attractive might have an influence; that we feel slightly hungry or thirsty might have an influence on our judgement. Yes, we can seek to experience works numerous times, hoping to sort of “even out” the various contextual influences, but each time, there will be numerous unknown and uncontrolled variables, and many works do not easily admit of numerous viewings (movies, experiential art).

Philosophers (like Dorsch and Kieran) who hold that it is possible to parse and dissect what grounds our aesthetic appreciation still owe an explanation of how this is to be done in practice. Is it actually possible to successfully come to know about and combat all of these conscious and unconscious influences? And, if so, how exactly is this done? As one example, if a person was in a good mood when they first went to the Met, must they return later in a bad mood? Do the subsequent verdicts then need to be somehow evened out? Question such as these will abound if we seriously attempt to mitigate the extraneous factors that, consciously or unconsciously, influence our aesthetic judgements.

A further, perhaps more significant, problem for the Standard Position is this: We can in fact “blind” ourselves to certain biases, such as the name of the author of a piece, or its price, or the time period in which it was created. However, this sort of blinding is exactly what proponents of a Walton-style “categories of appreciation” view reject. That is, their instruction entails not blinding oneself to contextual factors, but actively inviting them in. If one consults a work like that of Burnham and Skilleås’s *The Aesthetics of Wine* (Burnham & Skilleås, 2012), there they will find arguments to the effect that to properly appreciate a wine, we must know what sorts of grapes were used to make it, what region it was grown in, and the style in which it was made. Similarly, a seasoned art appreciator might maintain that to properly appreciate an early Picasso, we must know that it was painted by Picasso. Yet, it is this very sort of knowledge that is likely to taint our judgement: Because the wine is French, it must be good; because the painting is a “Picasso,” it must be a masterpiece, etc. The Waltonian approach is fundamentally opposed to a blinding process that might serve to mitigate the influence of certain contextual factors.

As we see it, the idea that we can somehow come to “consider the work in itself” or that there is such a thing as an “unbiased” experience of an aesthetic object is conceptually and practically suspicious, to say the least. We again ask a similar question to the one asked just above: What exactly constitutes “considering the work in itself” and how do we know when we have successfully done so? That is, even if we could somehow become aware of all of the inappropriate influences on our judgement of an aesthetic object, how would we know when we had successfully made a judgement that was *not* influenced by such factors and that our judgement was in fact responding to the aesthetic object alone?

Let's return to Picasso. Consider *Les Femmes d'Alger*. Today, this work is considered to be an influential one in the history of 20th century art movements, and of course it is by Picasso himself, who is considered among the greatest artists of the 20th century. At its debut, however, Picasso's contemporaries, such as Henri Matisse and Georges Braque, disparaged the work and interpreted it as a kind of parody of cubism (MoMA learning, n.d.).¹⁵ The question is how the contemporary viewer should aim to view the work in order to appreciate it in such a manner that one is fully aware of what factors ground and influence one's appreciation; that is, what steps must we take to "consider the work in itself" or free from inappropriate "biases"?

Typically, when we aim to appreciate a work like *Les Femmes d'Alger*, we do so knowing full well that it is a *famous* work, which many of us have seen numerous times before by the *famous* artist Picasso as part of an *influential* 20th century art movement known as cubism and that it is worth *millions* of dollars (and so on). The question is whether we can bracket, or stop, such information from inappropriately influencing our judgement of the work. Is our appreciation based *at least in part* on how famous and valuable we take the work to be or how many times we have been previously exposed to it? It is utterly impossible to confidently answer such questions in the negative, no matter how hard we strive to develop appreciative virtues.

Alternatively, in a bid to appreciate the work free from any "bias" whatsoever, as Dorsch recommends, we could aim to view it, as much as is possible, as if we ourselves are a kind of blank slate, or at least in a similar state to Picasso's contemporaries, who at that time had no idea what the fate of the work would be. However, given our contemporary culture of ubiquitous images and ubiquitous information, it might not even be possible to view *Les Femmes d'Alger* in such an idealized state of perception — *without* having been exposed to the image countless times before, *without* knowing it's a Picasso, *without* knowing that it was an influential work in the cubist movement, *without* knowing that it is worth millions of dollars, etc. And even if such an idealized viewing was possible, would we still think the work was successful? Given the reaction of Picasso's contemporaries, perhaps not.

If what we are worried about is appreciation for "snobbish reasons," as both Kieran and Dorsch are, it is hard to see how we might avoid falling prey to such reasons after knowing the facts. We can tell ourselves that we are discounting the fact that a work is worth millions of dollars, or the fact that we have been shown numerous images of it over the course of our lives, or the fact that we typically *really* like works by that artist, or the fact that it has been canonized by our culture, and so forth. But how can we be sure? Kieran makes a critical observation that helps illustrate our claim that

¹⁵ Warncke and Walther, writing in 2006, state that "This painting, more than any other work of European Modernism, is a wholly achieved analysis of the art of painting and the nature of beauty in art" (Warncke & Walther, 2006, p. 163). Yet they also find themselves having to dispel the myth that the painting is unfinished (Warncke & Walther, 2006, p. 160). Serrallier calls *Les Femmes d'Alger* "one of [Picasso's] most tremendous and admired works" yet also states that it "stunned" the few of Picasso's contemporaries who had access to it when it was first painted. Finally, Boeck and Sabartés state, "With this painting, which was not understood even by broad-minded contemporary artists, Picasso entered a period of 'horrible mental solitude.'" Kahnweiler reports that Derain said that someday Picasso would hang himself behind his painting (Boeck & Sabartés, 1955, p. 147).

experiencing a work with “expertise” does not inevitably lead to an experience in which the appreciation is caused only or primarily by the aesthetic object in question: “[W]e feel pleasure in the recognition that we can classify works or draw on knowledge that others may lack so that we can belong to groups we identify with or indeed feel superior to” (Kieran, 2011, p. 39).¹⁶ In other words, if you can identify the varietal from which a wine has been made, or distinguish a Monet from a Manet, this will indeed make you seem wise to your companions and make you feel proud of your ability. You may take great pleasure in this ability, which then makes the wine taste all the sweeter or the painting seem all the more brilliant. Yet, pleasure in your own ability is certainly not pleasure caused by the work itself. It is unclear how such factors could be successfully differentiated (i.e., the pleasure caused by the object considered in itself versus the pleasure of being a know-it-all), given that experts on *x* are also typically great appreciators of the *x* in question.

There is little reason to doubt that we can learn a great deal about art, or wine, or any other area of aesthetic activity from recognized experts. And learning about these areas will likely increase our pleasure in appreciating said objects. But we shouldn’t think that such knowledge gets us any closer to a completely uninfluenced form of appreciation, or that it allows us to consider the work “in itself” or “for its own sake.” We have argued that there is no such thing as a critic who is “cleared of all prejudice”: The critic merely has different prejudices than the layperson. Information about a work is just one more framework through which to view the work. The factors that influence our interpretation of an aesthetic object are myriad, and if we think we can somehow create “idealized conditions” by which to facilitate a viewing in which any pleasure we experience is necessarily caused by the work itself, we are perhaps nothing but conveniently fooling ourselves.

5. Higher-Order Evidence and the Scepticism it Triggers

Let us suppose that our argument has been successful, that HOE concerning aesthetic judgement cannot be overcome and as a result pleasure is an unreliable indicator of aesthetic quality, as posited by the Standard Position. It is in considering the practical question of what to do in response to this evidence that the disanalogies between epistemology and aesthetics come to the fore. One can surely be wrong about propositions like, “The butler did it,” and one should likely reconsider such judgements in light of HOE that suggests that one is misinterpreting one’s first-order evidence. However, unlike the detective, it doesn’t seem to us that we, the aesthetic appreciators, have any *normative* reason to change our appreciative conclusions in light of our discoveries of HOE; that is, it doesn’t seem like we can be wrong that we like something, that we take pleasure in this and that artwork.

To return to Susan and her trip to the Princeton Art Museum, if she enjoyed her viewing experience, it does not seem that she should change her judgement about *that* in light of her evidence concerning the mere exposure effect — and it’s unclear what it would even mean for her to do so. She perhaps has some new information

¹⁶ Bach (2013) makes this same distinction between taking pleasure in a work and taking pleasure in knowing about a work, as does Sackris (2018).

about what might have formed the basis of her pleasure, but there doesn't seem to be any clear sense in which she is rationally obligated to change her judgement that she liked her experience. This is especially obvious if there is no way for her to set aside or mitigate the effect of, for instance, the "mere exposure effect." Even if that liking was partially caused by this effect, it is still the case that she took pleasure in the experience. Repeated exposure to an image forms a preference for it, and if she was repeatedly exposed to prints of Monet's water lilies, then it is no surprise that she liked the paintings.

But what if Susan had also formed the judgement that the water lilies are an artistic masterpiece? If her judgement is based primarily on her feeling of pleasure, then perhaps she has some reason to revise her judgement. Knowing about the mere exposure effect, she cannot be sure of the basis of her liking. However, her judgement that the water lilies are an artistic masterpiece may have had little to do with her first-hand experience of it to begin with. Susan might think this in part because the work is by Monet, or because this is what her professor of Art Appreciation 101 said, or because this is essentially what her culture has taught her to believe (she has been taught the "joint verdict of ideal critics"). That is, if judgements of aesthetic merit are to be based *only* on the intrinsic properties of the work (or only on the work considered for its own sake, or only in an unbiased manner), then the evidence considered above indicates that Susan will *never* be in a situation to form that sort of judgement.

Our position here is not that it is *impossible* to form any judgements whatsoever that we can have some confidence in regarding the relative merits of aesthetic objects. We do not mean to endorse the extremist version of aesthetic subjectivism, thereby implying that comparative judgements are effectively meaningless. We are fairly certain that a trained artist can produce a higher quality painting than we can, and, in most cases, we trust trained artists and artisans to do a better job than untrained ones, whatever that training may entail. We are in no hurry to try prison "wine," for example, nor do we marvel over the doodles in the margins of our notepads. Our position is instead that once a certain threshold of minimal quality is met, it is likely that our judgements of relative merit are highly influenced by factors that have little to do with the work itself. What we very much doubt is that "the canon" or the works that "stood the test of time," or the works that have been endorsed by the "joint verdict of ideal critics" really are that much better than the merely good works that have been lost to history. And perhaps more importantly, we doubt the basic premise in the Standard Position: That there is a reliable way to evaluate which of these (quality) works of art is truly better. Put another way, we doubt the human ability to know that Vermeer really was that much better than van Meegeren. Our ancestors have played a huge role in our preference formation. One of us really does think the *Iliad* is a masterpiece, but that one of us was also received a Bachelor's degree in classical studies.

Another way of interpreting the argument outlined in this article is that it implies that aesthetic disputes are essentially "meaningless" or "a waste of time."¹⁷ If there is no real way of knowing whether Wine A is better than Wine B, why do people discuss such things, why are there wine critics, why are there wine blogs, etc.? This is an

¹⁷ Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for encouraging us to consider this issue.

intricate question that we suspect is perhaps better addressed elsewhere. However, we can make some initial appraisals: First, our position is compatible with the possibility that some aesthetic objects really are better than others (however one wants to cash that out). Our position is that, because of contextual factors, once a minimal quality threshold is met, it is very difficult to be certain that the judgement “Wine A is better than Wine B” is based *primarily* on the intrinsic properties of Wine A; what we doubt is that people can actually come to know which is better. Second, our view is compatible with a kind of error theory. We are sympathetic to Kivy’s (2015) argument that perhaps the best explanation of our behaviour is that most people assume something like aesthetic value realism, nonetheless the belief that underlies their activities could ultimately be mistaken. However, given our position on a minimal quality threshold for aesthetic objects, as of now, we lean towards the former position: Some objects really are more aesthetically valuable (or more pleasing) than others because of *something* about the properties of the objects in questions, but the trouble is determining what exactly is forming the basis of our judgements. So, it could be that people are not wrong that some objects are more aesthetically valuable than others, but they may be wrong about the basis of their judgement, which then undermines the judgement itself.

Some healthy scepticism towards the supposed “masterworks” is probably a good thing. To take some recent examples: Is *Citizen Kane* really the greatest movie of all time? Are the Beatles actually the best rock and roll band? Is *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* really that good? Hume was certain that John Milton was better than John Ogilby. We doubt that very many of our contemporaries have ever read Ogilby (we are guilty of the same charge), but perhaps we shouldn’t be so quick to take Hume’s word as definitive on the matter. He was likely a prisoner of the trends of his age, just as we all are.

6. Conclusion

There are aesthetic snobs, people who take pleasure in things for what seems like all the wrong reasons. From our own perspective, these individuals might be too concerned with status, or financial value, or whatever. But then we have our own, incidental reasons for taking pleasure in the things we appreciate, and we are perhaps just as blind to these factors as the so-called snobs. If the HOE discussed here has demonstrated that the bases for aesthetic appreciation are opaque, the experience of taking pleasure in an aesthetic object cannot be taken — as stated in the Standard Position on Aesthetic Appreciation — as a reliable sign that said object is high quality, or truly successful, or a masterpiece. But if the act of aesthetic appreciation is focused on the maximization of pleasure and not necessarily on the discovery of the truth about the quality of an artwork, then we have little reason to fear the evidence discussed. That is, if we give up on the Standard Position, then we have little ground to be worried about the stochastic nature of aesthetic judgements shown in recent empirical evidence. The conclusion is *not* that human beings don’t take pleasure in aesthetic objects and events; it’s that such appreciation is not necessarily grounded in the reasons that we thought they were. This isn’t a disastrous philosophical concession, nor is it philosophically less interesting.

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