



Aesthetic Understanding

Jeremy Page 

Uppsala University, SE

RESEARCH ARTICLE

HUP HELSINKI
UNIVERSITY
PRESS



FACULTY OF ARTS
Charles University

ABSTRACT

Winner of the Fabian Dorsch ESA Essay Prize.

In this paper, I introduce an account of aesthetic understanding. Recent discussions of aesthetic understanding have associated it with aesthetic justification and with understanding why, for example, a given object is aesthetically valuable. I introduce a notion of aesthetic understanding as a form of objectual understanding, which I refer to as ‘appreciative understanding’. Appreciative understanding is related to and partly constituted by an agent’s capacity to comprehend and experience an artwork holistically and to communicate effectively regarding its particular aesthetic character and value. I then argue for the understanding account of aesthetic judgement on which the paradigmatic form of aesthetic judgement is grounded on appreciative understanding. This argument partly consists in demonstrating how the understanding account can explain the autonomy of aesthetic judgement. In closing, I explore the potential of the understanding account to explain the structure of our appreciative practices. That is, I put forward the view that our appreciative practices are structured so as to promote appreciative understanding.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Jeremy Page

Uppsala University, SE

jeremy.page@filosofi.uu.se

KEYWORDS:

aesthetic judgement;
aesthetic appreciation;
aesthetic normativity;
understanding; aesthetic
epistemology

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Page, Jeremy. ‘Aesthetic Understanding.’ *Estetika: The European Journal of Aesthetics* LIX/XV, no. 1 (2022): pp. 48–68. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33134/eja.269>

The purpose of this paper is to introduce an account of aesthetic understanding and begin to argue for its centrality in aesthetics, that is, to argue that it is the ground of aesthetic judgement and the goal of aesthetic appreciation. As a preliminary, Section I sets out two central aims of our appreciative practices and the forms of aesthetic judgement that are paradigmatic. Section II introduces the two components that constitute aesthetic understanding. Section III then gives an account of aesthetic understanding as the canonical mode of grounding the paradigmatic form of aesthetic judgement and of how the autonomy of that form of judgement can be explained with reference to aesthetic understanding. Section IV briefly explores how aesthetic understanding is plausibly thought to stand as the goal of our appreciative practices.

I. AESTHETIC JUDGEMENT PROPER

I.1. PARTICULARITY AND COMMUNICABILITY

Inquiry concerning aesthetic judgement can be exceptionally broad – covering all forms of judgements about ‘the aesthetic’ – or take as its focus those forms of aesthetic judgement that critical and appreciative practices uphold as an ideal and which have traditionally been of most interest to philosophers. In this paper, my focus will be narrowed to the latter category and what I will refer to as ‘aesthetic judgements proper’. It is plausible that such judgements should be taken as paradigmatic.

When we are drawn to an artwork and imagine ourselves to be on the cusp of uncovering something aesthetically valuable in it, we understand that the proper thing to do is to pursue this aesthetic value. We understand also that the route to pursuing it is to attempt to develop our sensitivity towards it so that we are able to offer a judgement of it in the form not of a recommendation or attribution of some generic aesthetic property but of a kind that approximates those that we find in art criticism.

Providing a tight definition of ‘aesthetic judgement proper’ such that it can be sharply distinguished from other forms of aesthetic judgement is not the task of this paper. For our purposes, it is sufficient to bring into view an intuitive distinction between serious aesthetic judgements and the clumsy ‘first takes’, recommendations, generic property attributions, reviews, top 10 lists, or preference statements we also make. Introducing two aims of aesthetic judgements proper, which are also two central aims of our critical and appreciative practices more generally, is helpful here. Characterizing aesthetic judgement proper via these two aims is thus to characterize it as something like an ideal to which aesthetic appreciation and aesthetic judgement aspire.

Particularity: aesthetic judgement proper aims to judge the target artwork’s particular aesthetic character and/or aesthetic value. That is to say, the judgement aims to target novel and fine-grained aspects of the artwork’s aesthetic character and/or aesthetic value in such a way that the work is judged on its own terms and as the individual that it is.

Communicability: aesthetic judgement proper aims to communicate the novel and fine-grained contents relating to the target artwork’s particular aesthetic character and/or aesthetic value, that is, to make communicable the particular aesthetic character and/or aesthetic value that the object possesses in such a way that this is made available to recipients of the judgement.

If an aesthetic judgement remains generic and does not attempt to specify anything particular of the aesthetic character and/or aesthetic value of the artwork it judges, then it fails to be an aesthetic judgement proper. Aesthetic judgements proper themselves strive to make communicable some high degree of particularity and thus highly specific content.

A first thing to note about these dual aims is that they are, in one sense at least, in tension with each other. We have greater resources for communicating those aspects of an artwork that we can parse as instances of aesthetic properties or aesthetic values also present in other artworks than for communicating what is novel and particular to the artwork in question.

1.2. GENERIC VS. PARTICULARIZED JUDGEMENTS

In analytic aesthetics, it is common to use 'x is graceful' or 'x is aesthetically excellent' as stand-ins for aesthetic judgements. This invites aestheticians to take generic forms of aesthetic judgement as their target when theorizing:

(Descriptive) generic property ascriptions, for example, 'x is graceful'.

(Evaluative) generic aesthetic evaluations, for example, 'x is aesthetically excellent'.

What I have labelled evaluative judgements are often referred to as verdicts. These are 'thin' judgements that attribute aesthetic value (or determinable evaluative properties) to the artwork in question, perhaps to some extent or other, without further specifying the nature of the work's aesthetic value.¹ What I have labelled descriptive judgements are judgements of an artwork's aesthetic properties. These properties are shareable and, indeed, widely shared. Such judgements are generic in that their content remains highly general. As generic property ascriptions, these judgements attribute the determinable property to the artwork.²

It is not my purpose to argue that generic judgements are not a form of aesthetic judgements.³ What it is pertinent for us to note is simply that generic judgements are exceptionally poor modes of achieving the aims of our appreciative practices – namely, particularity and communicability. Such judgements specify or make communicable little about the particular aesthetic character or value of the works they target beyond their possession of a (usually widely) shared property. They are also almost never

1 Such generic evaluative judgements are often taken as the focus of theorizing by affective views. See Keren Gorodeisky, 'The Authority of Pleasure', *Noûs* 55 (2021): 217n48, as well as Keren Gorodeisky and Eric Marcus, 'Aesthetic Rationality', *Journal of Philosophy* 115 (2018): 113–40; Keren Gorodeisky, 'On Liking Aesthetic Value', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 102 (2021): 261–80.

2 Robson takes determinable judgements as the prime focus of theorizing. Jon Robson, 'Is Perception the Canonical Route to Aesthetic Judgment?' *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 96 (2018): 657–68; see also C. Thi Nguyen, 'Autonomy and Aesthetic Engagement', *Mind* 129 (2019): 1127–56, which I discuss below. It is common in aesthetics to distinguish between determinable and determinate merit-responsible properties; see Frank Sibley, 'Particularity, Art and Evaluation', *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 48 (1974): 1–22. The distinction between generic property ascriptions and fine-grained property ascribing judgements can be thought about along similar lines. An aesthetic judgement proper does not merely judge that a work is graceful (determinable) but instead judges its particular gracefulness (determinate).

3 Though Nehamas takes steps in this direction. See Alexander Nehamas, *Only a Promise of Happiness: The Place of Beauty in a World of Art* (Princeton University Press, 2007), 93.

advanced in critical works or meaningful long-form conversations about art, for this very reason. While it is true that critical pieces will often contain assertions to the effect that 'x is graceful' or 'x is aesthetically excellent', the wider context of the piece will involve an attempt to sharpen the content of such judgements in relation to the work's particular aesthetic character and value.⁴

The foregoing helps us to identify two forms of aesthetic judgement proper that are distinct from their generic cousins. In the discussion of descriptive judgements above, we have focused on generic judgements attributing aesthetic properties as determinables. Descriptive aesthetic judgements proper may take the form of judgements of an artwork's determinate aesthetic properties. However, as Sibley reminds us, '[s]ome aesthetic judgments employ a characteristically aesthetic term ("graceful", "balanced", "gaudy") whilst others do not'.⁵ Descriptive judgements may well target an artwork's aesthetic character without being restricted to the attribution of a particular aesthetic property. Here, then, are examples of the paradigmatic form of descriptive aesthetic judgement proper.

(Descriptive) judgements of aesthetic character (JACs), that is, judgements of the particular aesthetic character of an object. For example:

- (1) 'The work's apparently disparate threads are united by the theme of jealousy.'
- (2) 'The unfinished quality of the work is what lends it a particular fragility.'
- (3) 'A distinctive and rough gracefulness pervades the work.'
- (4) 'Central to the work's aesthetic character is the intentional ambiguity relating to whether Nature or Art has brought the depicted landscape to a standstill.'⁶

The evaluative form of aesthetic judgement proper can be characterized in the following way:

(Evaluative) judgements of particular aesthetic value (PAVs), that is, judgements of the particular aesthetic (dis)value of an object. For example:

- (5) 'The novel's use of narrative style facilitates the development of what is new and novel about its perspective on the subject matter.'
- (6) 'The figure is too far to the left.'
- (7) 'The work achieves a vulgar sublimity apt to its subject.'⁷
- (8) 'The painting has a striking beauty constituted by its momentary suspension of the future tense.'⁸

As noted earlier, the statements listed here as vehicles for communicating aesthetic judgements proper are to be interpreted in the context of a wider critical work or

4 Frank Sibley, 'Aesthetic and Nonaesthetic', *Philosophical Review* 74 (1965): 135–59.

5 *Ibid.*, 135.

6 This last example is inspired by the discussion of Poussin's *Landscape with a Calm* (1650–51) in Timothy J. Clark, *The Sight of Death: An Experiment in Art Writing* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 15. As with the generic form of judgement, JACs shade into evaluative judgements. Indeed, it is often not possible to distinguish descriptive from evaluative aesthetic judgements proper.

7 This example is paraphrased from the discussion of August Saint-Gauden's statue of General William Tecumseh Sherman in Peter Schjeldahl, *Hot, Cold, Heavy, Light, 100 Art Writings 1988–2018* (New York: Abrams, 2019), 196–99.

8 This example is liberally paraphrased from the discussion of Poussin's *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake* (1648) in Clark, *Sight of Death*, 106.

conversation.⁹ Some of them wear this feature on their face. The statement that ‘the figure is too far to the left’¹⁰ is clearly not intended to stand on its own. It is, rather, intended to be interpreted in the context of an exploration of the work’s aims, its key compositional features, how these relate to its aims, and so on.

II. AESTHETIC UNDERSTANDING

The notion of aesthetic understanding I wish to introduce in this paper can fruitfully be thought of as appreciative understanding. It involves two components: the capacity to form and communicate an appreciative interpretation of an artwork and an experiential sensitivity to the artwork’s particular aesthetic character and/or value. In introducing these components, I will already begin to consider why aesthetic understanding is intuitively considered to be the ground for aesthetic judgement proper and how its so being can help account for the autonomy of aesthetic judgement. These themes will then be focused on in more detail in Section III.

II.1. APPRECIATIVE INTERPRETATION

As noted in the previous section, aesthetic judgements proper often require the context of the judge’s wider picture of the work in order for aspects of their fine-grained content to be communicable. This places a demand on the judge. They must have the capacity not only to utter a statement offered as the prime vehicle for communicating their judgement, which on its own may be insufficient to communicate its content, but also to be able to offer a wider picture of the artwork that enables the communication of its fine-grained content. Without an agent being able to contextualize judgements similar to (1)–(8), the capacity of the judgement to satisfy the joint aims of aesthetic judgement proper relating to particularity and communicability will be impaired. The understanding account labels the wider picture of the artwork from which the judgement emerges, and in the context of which its finer aspects must be interpreted, as the ‘appreciative interpretation’. It takes the development of an appreciative interpretation to be one of the two components of aesthetic understanding.

That the possession of an appreciative interpretation is indeed part of the canonical route to the formation of aesthetic judgement proper is plausible and fits well with a natural and intuitive picture of how we develop sensitivity to the aesthetic value of artworks. The relevant form of interpretation is appreciative and aesthetic in being directed towards uncovering aesthetic value.¹¹ It is the process via which we move from our initial first responses to a work (perceptual, affective, and reflective) – our recognition of various features about it concerning, for example, its background, form, genre, standard and contra-standard properties, the nature of its use of colour, the subject(s) it takes up, and so on – to an organized and penetrative epistemic perspective towards the work. This process begins from our development of a picture of certain aims or themes as central to the work. We form an appreciative

9 We can, of course, interpret them outside of this context but in doing so we will likely fail to grasp their fine-grained content or interpret them unreliably.

10 Sibley, ‘Aesthetic and Nonaesthetic’, 140.

11 In this sense, it is not identical to an interpretation of meaning; for discussion, see Peter Lamarque, ‘Appreciation and Literary Interpretation’, in *Is There a Single Right Interpretation?*, ed. Michael Krausz (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002), 285–306.

interpretation by explaining the relative salience, centrality and role of the work's features in relation to these central aims or themes and in relation to each other. When successful, the recognition of various features, the significance of which cannot be grasped in isolation, 'acquire significance [...] when assigned a function within an artistic structure' that our appreciative interpretation recasts.¹² Such a process is the epistemic route to grasping the finer aspects of a work's aesthetic character and value.

As fine-grained sensitivity to aesthetic character and value requires the development of an appreciative interpretation, it is no surprise that an agent in an epistemic position to properly ground an aesthetic judgement proper will also typically possess the capacity to form and communicate an appreciative interpretation of the work judged. This point about the judge's sensitivity extends to a point about how they are able to share this sensitivity in their judgement. It is typically only in this context of an appreciative interpretation that the fine-grained content of aesthetic judgements proper can be communicated. This again chimes with one strand of a classic picture of aesthetic communication in works of criticism.¹³ The structure of our critical practices is such that we recognize that the language used within them, particularly that which is geared towards communicating some very particular aspect of the work in question, itself requires interpretation. Critics include relevant background facts, clues about how they are approaching the work, the highlighting of salient features of the work (often in figurative and metaphorical use of language), the relevance of genre and medium, the mood in which the work should be viewed, the themes and aims that are central to it, and so on as means of intimating and communicating their wider picture (appreciative interpretation) of the work. This is done precisely to provide a context within which '[m]any words – like "subtlety", "variety", "complexity", "intensity" – which in ordinary communication are among the vaguest in the language' can be 'used [in criticism] to convey sharp critical perceptions'.¹⁴ Just as these words take on a determinate meaning in this context, so do the judgements that they constitute. This fact about criticism helps to ease the tension noted in the previous section between the aim of forming highly particular and individual judgements and the aim of successfully communicating their fine-grained content. The foregoing demonstrates the plausibility of the thought that the possession of an appreciative interpretation is integral to the issuing of aesthetic judgement proper.

II.2. APPRECIATIVE UNDERSTANDING

Appreciative interpretations are ways of uniting the features of a work under the centrality of a theme or aim that enables the work to be encountered with sensitivity, on its own terms and as a whole. This being the case, an association between appreciative interpretations and understanding is natural. Indeed, that understanding involves the capacity to unify, draw together, and/or make coherent different aspects of a subject matter is uncontroversial.¹⁵ In this vein, Linda Zagzebski states that understanding involves the ability 'to see unity in complex phenomena' that 'enables

12 Peter Lamarque, 'Aesthetics and Literature: A Problematic Relation?', *Philosophical Studies* 135 (2017): 33.

13 Arnold Isenberg, 'Critical Communication', *Philosophical Review* 58 (1949): 330–44; Mary Mothersill, 'Critical Reasons', *Philosophical Quarterly* 11 (1961): 74–78.

14 Isenberg, 'Critical Communication', 340.

15 Stephen Grimm, 'The Value of Understanding', *Philosophy Compass* 7 (2012): 105.

us to see some part of the world as a single object'.¹⁶ Appreciative interpretations perform this same process for artworks. In tying together a work's distinct features under a central theme or aim, an appreciative interpretation enables an agent to develop their sensitivity to the work as a whole and to take the work as a single thing. By directing attention to an individual feature, or small cluster of features, from the vantage point of an appreciative interpretation, agents are able to see these features as a component of a whole instead of in terms of its character in isolation from its place in the artwork. When the work is good, the agent will come to see why features have the character and position they do in fact have. Coming to understand an artwork in this way is similar to coming to understand other objects of understanding in that it involves 'an experience of grasping new and improved coherence'.¹⁷ The process of drawing the features of the object together in this way via an appreciative interpretation is geared towards eliciting their aesthetic value.

The notion of appreciative understanding that I introduce in this paper, as partly constituted by appreciative interpretation, is most fruitfully viewed in relation to forms of objectual understanding. Appreciative understanding is not most immediately associated with, or reducible to, a narrower form of understanding – 'understanding why' – which is related to the citation and grasp of reasons. The most developed recent aesthetic understanding view, that of Alison Hills, transfers a notion of 'understanding why' from epistemology and characterizes aesthetic understanding in terms of it.¹⁸ We can call this view, and others of its kind, 'justificatory understanding' views.¹⁹

Like other forms of understanding, appreciative understanding is also associated with certain skills and abilities involving the ability to communicate what one understands.²⁰ However, the primary skills it is associated with are different from those viewed by Hills as central. Hills develops an account of 'understanding why' on which understanding why p involves a kind of intellectual know-how consisting primarily in the capacity to give and follow the right explanation (q) of why p , as well as draw inferences to p (or its close relative p') on the basis of q (or q').²¹ In applying this view in aesthetics,

16 Linda Zagzebski, 'Toward a Theory of Understanding', in *Varieties of Understanding: New Perspectives from Philosophy, Psychology, and Theology*, ed. Stephen R. Grimm (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 131.

17 Jonathan L Kvanvig, *The Value of Knowledge and the Pursuit of Understanding* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 202.

18 Alison Hills, 'Aesthetic Testimony, Understanding and Virtue', *Noûs*, published ahead of print, 2 July 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1111/nous.12344>.

19 Aesthetic understanding is also discussed in other recent work. See Irene Martínez Marín, 'Non-standard Emotions and Aesthetic Understanding', *Estetika* 57 (2020): 135–49, for example, for another view with a focus on justificatory understanding. See also Elisabeth Schellekens Dammann, 'Seeing the Light: Aesthetic Experience and Understanding Pictures', in *The Pleasure of Pictures: Pictorial Experience and Aesthetic Appreciation*, ed. Jerome Pelletier and Alberto Voltolini (London: Routledge, 2018), 21–35, for a suggestive notion of aesthetic attunement that is plausibly partly constitutive of aesthetic understanding. See also Jeremy Page, 'Literary Appreciation and the Reconfiguration of Understanding', in *Educating Character through the Arts*, ed. Panos Paris, Aidan Thompson, and Laura D'Olimpio (London: Routledge, forthcoming); Noël Carroll, 'Hume's Standard of Taste', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 43 (1984): 181–94, for a notion of 'active understanding'; and the essays collected in Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetics Understanding: Essays in the Philosophy of Art and Culture* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 1998).

20 Michael Strevens, 'No Understanding without Explanation', *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 44 (2013): 510–15.

21 Alison Hills, 'Moral Testimony and Moral Epistemology', *Ethics* 120 (2009): 94–127; 'Understanding Why', *Noûs* 49 (2015): 661–88.

'*p*' is taken to stand in for the aesthetic value of an object and '*q*' is associated with the reasons why the work is indeed valuable.²² The view identifies the most relevant form of ability, then, as the capacity to give explanations involving the citation of reasons in support of generic judgements, for example '*Citizen Kane* is an excellent film because its cinematography is beautiful, it has a strong narrative and a powerful lead performance'.²³ The ability of prime importance in relation to appreciative understanding – to form and communicate one's appreciative interpretation – is different. It does not primarily involve the citation of reasons for the purposes of justification but rather the specification of the fine-grained content of one's judgement within the context of an appreciative interpretation for the purposes of sensitivity and communication.²⁴ Note that the citation of the kind of generic reasons or determinable properties given above in support of the judgement regarding *Citizen Kane*'s excellence does little to distinguish its content from the thousands of other films that also have beautiful cinematography, a strong narrative, and a powerful lead performance. It therefore fails in the task of raising the judgement above genericity.²⁵ The capacity to specify the content of one's judgement, then, requires appreciative understanding – which links more closely with objectual understanding – rather than understanding why.

An explanation of the non-ideality of the adoption of aesthetic judgements via a basic testimonial exchange presents itself here.²⁶ This is that, regardless of whether we think an epistemic state that can ground aesthetic judgement can be communicated through a basic testimonial exchange, the capacity to specify and communicate the

22 Hills, 'Aesthetic Testimony'; see also Alison Hills, 'Aesthetic Understanding', in *Making Sense of the World: New Essays on the Philosophy of Understanding*, ed. Stephen Grimm (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 159–76.

23 Hills, 'Aesthetic Testimony', 8.

24 Though my focus is on the ground for the issuance of aesthetic judgements, a point running broadly parallel to the one made here regarding specification can be made regarding aesthetic justification. This is that the citation of reasons in the absence of an appreciative interpretation will fail to specify the reasons adduced as determinates. As it is only the reasons as determinates and not determinables that can legitimately be cited in support of aesthetic judgements (Sibley, 'Particularity, Art and Evaluation'), and as the specification of these reasons as determinates requires their presentation in the context of a wider picture of the work, the possession of an appreciative interpretation is also necessary for the justification of aesthetic judgements. Thus, though in this paper I distinguish my notion of appreciative understanding from Hills's justificatory understanding partly by an emphasis on communication and specification rather than justification, I believe the narrower form of 'understanding why' Hills advances will ultimately need to be supplemented anyway with a form of appreciative understanding in order to be a plausible account of aesthetic justification. This being the case, it is appreciative understanding that is central in aesthetics and not aesthetic understanding as understanding why. Part of this centrality consists in the fact that appreciative understanding is what is required for the 'grasp' (Nguyen, 'Autonomy and Aesthetic Engagement') or 'possession' of aesthetic reasons by an agent such that they can be used to genuinely justify judgements. See Errol Lord, 'How to Learn about Aesthetics and Morality through Acquaintance and Deference', *Oxford Studies in Metaethics* 13 (2018): 71–97.

25 And, as per the above footnote, fails to justify any such judgement as well.

26 By 'basic testimonial exchange' I mean a testimonial exchange in which a hearer takes on an aesthetic judgement that *p* on the basis of a speaker's testimony that *p*. This is in contrast to cases where a speaker offers up a rich description of *p*, or demonstration to the effect that *p*, and the hearer adopts a belief on the basis of engagement with this richer epistemic source. Other philosophers operate with a similar distinction. See Paisley Livingston, 'On an Apparent Truism in Aesthetics', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 43 (2003): 260–78; Nguyen, 'Autonomy and Aesthetic Engagement'; Madeleine Ransom, 'Frauds, Posers and Sheep: A Virtue Theoretic Solution to the Acquaintance Debate', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 98 (2019): 417–34.

judgement adopted (in the way described above) will presumably not be. Failing to be able to specify one's judgement is a failure for which aesthetic judgers are properly criticizable. (This is not identical to another failure often noted in this context: the failure to be able to adduce reasons in support of one's judgement.)²⁷ We regularly notice this deficiency in ourselves and others. For example, when having felt that we have detected something of deep and specific aesthetic value in a work, we then fail to be able to do more in communication than fall back on the words of others, or on words of our own that are not sufficiently penetrative. At this point we understand a fault – or at least imperfection – in ourselves as appreciators. The deficiency we are registering is the inability to live up to the dual aims of our appreciative practices: to communicate the particular aesthetic character and value of artworks in fine-grained specificity.

Judgers who base their judgements merely on deference to testimony will also be lacking in the second component of aesthetic understanding: experiential sensitivity.

II.3. EXPERIENTIAL SENSITIVITY

In a recent thought experiment, Thi Nguyen discusses the example of Brandon. Brandon defers to the testimony of audio guides when looking at paintings in museums.

He looks at the paintings he is told to look at, studies those details which are called to his attention, and always assents to the audio tour's judgment of the [...] aesthetic properties present. He never looks for any details that aren't specified by the audio tour, nor does he ever form aesthetic judgments without the explicit guidance [...] of an audio tour.²⁸

Brandon's engagement with the paintings involves merely perceptually registering the aesthetic properties the audio tour instructs him that these paintings have. He does not seek to explore, savour, or understand the paintings but to perceive the specific properties the audio tour highlights and categorizes them as having. Let's not contest Nguyen's assertion that this perceptual registering is some form of sensitivity to the aesthetic character of the artworks in question,²⁹ or the assumption that Brandon's form of being visually acquainted with the painting would enable a brute form of aesthetic sensitivity. Let's call such registering 'brute aesthetic perception'.

Whether or not we take brute aesthetic perception of aesthetic properties to be an important form of aesthetic sensitivity (or as plausibly approximating any form of aesthetic perception), few will be tempted to think it exhausts aesthetic sensitivity. Indeed, even aestheticians with perceptualist leanings like Frank Sibley assert the importance of more refined forms of aesthetic sensitivity. In discussing the form of aesthetic sensitivity underpinning the judgement that a figure in a painting is 'too far to the left', referred to in our list above, Sibley notes that, while 'aesthetic sensitivity is not involved in seeing that a figure is on the far left of a picture, it is involved in seeing that it is too far left'.³⁰

27 Fabian Dorsch, 'Non-Inferentialism About Justification – The Case of Aesthetic Judgements', *Philosophical Quarterly* 63 (2013): 660–82.

28 Nguyen, 'Autonomy and Aesthetic Engagement', 1132.

29 *Ibid.*, 1133.

30 Sibley, 'Aesthetic and Nonaesthetic', 140.

Such sensitivity, as hinted in our discussion of appreciative interpretations earlier, is constituted differently from brute aesthetic perception. It is not a simple form of perceptually registering some aesthetic property akin to seeing redness or rectangularity. Instead it is, first, something that can be had to some degree or other. We can imagine, for example, that in first approaching the hypothetical painting in question in Sibley's example an agent has only a vague impression that its composition fails to be balanced. On visiting the painting a second time, perhaps they experience the heavier feel of the more saturated hues on the right of the picture as being spatially and thematically dislocated from the figure on the left. On a third visit, imagine they are now clear that the painting aims to present the figure as struggling to emerge from a period of suffering and stagnation, which is connoted by the heavier hues on the right, to a liberated state of determination and focus. The desired effect is for the figure's emotional state to be a liberation anchored in, and emerging from, the mood of the right-hand side of the canvas. However, the figure's position too far to the left means that it drops out of conversation with the right-hand side of the painting and this desire is frustrated, leaving the work with an unbalanced character and lacking in aesthetic value. We would naturally say that the aesthetic sensitivity of the agent in our example to the aesthetic character and value of the work has increased by degree upon each visitation to the work. When they now judge that 'the figure is too far to the left', they are able to specify the fine-grained content of their judgement by providing an account of the particular way in which it is too far to the left, that is, by providing a wider context for their judgement like the one we have just given.

In Section II.1, I introduced the route to the development of sensitivity to artworks as the development of an appreciative interpretation. It seems, or so the understanding account asserts, that developing this form of sensitivity involves precisely being able to see how the various features of the work can be organized in relation to a theme or aim taken to be central. The aesthetic character and value that is the target of aesthetic judgement proper is precisely the aesthetic character and value that a work has by virtue of how its features come together (or fail to come together) as a whole. The component of aesthetic understanding labelled 'experiential sensitivity' is, for this reason, tied in a symbiotic relation with the development of an appreciative interpretation. It is still meaningfully distinct, however. It is possible that an agent could develop an appreciative interpretation regarding some artwork that posits some way of making sense of its aesthetic character yet could fail to possess the counterpart form of experiential sensitivity required for aesthetic understanding.³¹ Aesthetic understanding requires more than simply the capacities to theorize, make sense of, or explain the aesthetic character and value of artworks. It requires the capacity also to be able to experience the artwork as possessing the aesthetic character or value attributed to it in an appreciative interpretation. We need to be able to experience the figure as 'too far to the left' in precisely the way described above if we are to possess the aesthetic understanding that the agent in our example eventually achieves.

The understanding account explains the deficiencies of Brandon's deference, and similar modes of deferring to testimony in aesthetics, in terms of his failing to seek or possess aesthetic understanding. His narrow epistemic interest in the painting is lamentable not because it is an epistemic interest (*contra* Nguyen) but because

31 Experiential sensitivity might usefully be labelled as experiential understanding. It is not the undergoing of some affect or sensation but is rather the capacity to have manifested in one's experience the fine-grained aspects of an artwork's aesthetic character and value that appreciative interpretations capture.

it is a *narrow* epistemic interest. Brandon focuses solely on perceptual recognition, categorization, and the formation of correct judgements. The appropriate focus of aesthetic appreciation and judgement is, however, the pursuit of aesthetic understanding. It is so because this is the route to developing sensitivity to aesthetic value and to achieving the dual aims of particularity and communicability. It is also plausibly thought to be the gateway to various other goods of the aesthetic, as will be explored in Section IV.

III. AESTHETIC UNDERSTANDING AND AESTHETIC JUDGEMENT

The understanding account as applied to aesthetic judgement involves two main claims. The first is that aesthetic understanding is the canonical ground of aesthetic judgement proper. The second is that reference to aesthetic understanding explains the autonomy of aesthetic judgement. These claims are interrelated. I will focus on the latter before summarizing the plausibility of the former.

III.1. THE AUTONOMY OF AESTHETIC JUDGEMENT

The understanding account is a form of theoretical account of aesthetic judgement proper. The label 'theoretical account' here indicates only that the understanding account is an account on which aesthetic judgements are straightforwardly judgements about the nature of the work judged. Theoretical accounts contrast with accounts of aesthetic judgement as a form of practical judgement (that is, a judgement about what to do)³² or accounts of aesthetic judgement as constituted by a feeling of pleasure, which is a stance on whether to appreciate the work.³³ Theoretical accounts have recently been challenged because of their purported inability to respond adequately to Kant's problem and, in particular, to explain the autonomy of aesthetic judgement. Kant's problem relates to the difficulty of accommodating two observations about the nature of the grounds of aesthetic judgement that are in tension with one another. Here is an influential formulation:

Autonomy: Neither the mere fact that everyone else makes a certain aesthetic judgment nor the testimony of experts can be adequate grounds for making the judgment oneself.

Doubt: Doubts about one's aesthetic judgments can justifiably be based on the mere fact that everyone else disagrees [or] on the aesthetic judgment of an expert.³⁴

The majority of theoretical accounts are 'belief accounts', that is, they take aesthetic judgement to be a belief with aesthetic content.³⁵ In aesthetic judgement, the relevant belief relates to the artwork's aesthetic character and/or aesthetic value.³⁶

32 Anthony Cross, 'Art Criticism as Practical Reasoning', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 57 (2017): 299–317.

33 Gorodeisky and Marcus, 'Aesthetic Rationality'.

34 *Ibid.*, 122.

35 Robert Hopkins, 'How to Be a Pessimist about Aesthetic Testimony', *Journal of Philosophy* 108 (2011): 138–57; Nguyen, 'Autonomy and Aesthetic Engagement'.

36 In this paper, I focus on aesthetic judgements of artworks. The understanding account extends in a fairly natural way to aesthetic judgements of natural beauty, character, mathematical proofs, and so on.

Belief accounts have no problem accommodating Doubt. Just as doubt regarding some belief can be justifiable on the basis that everyone else disagrees or on the basis of the judgement of an expert in other (standard) theoretical domains, so it is in the aesthetic domain. However, given that it is also generally accepted that one can acquire the requisite epistemic grounds for making a judgement oneself via a basic testimonial exchange in other (standard) theoretical domains, belief accounts struggle to accommodate Autonomy.³⁷

The perceived inadequacies of belief accounts on this score have been taken as a springboard for dual-explanandum accounts of aesthetic judgement that are better placed to accommodate Autonomy. Dual-explanandum accounts take questions regarding aesthetic belief and questions regarding aesthetic judgement to require separate explanations. Regarding aesthetic belief, they can accept that one can, for example, be epistemically justified in taking on aesthetic belief via testimony. However, they take aesthetic judgement to be grounded on some state non-reducible to belief. The question of the autonomy of aesthetic judgement is thus a separate question. Dual-explanandum accounts then have the capacity to specify the state non-reducible to belief on which aesthetic judgement is canonically grounded – aesthetic judgement’s ‘grounding state’ – in such a way that this state cannot be communicated via testimony. The move of identifying a grounding state non-reducible to belief provides dual-explanandum accounts with the potential to accommodate Autonomy. The most notable recent dual-explanandum view identifies aesthetic pleasure as the state non-reducible to belief upon which aesthetic judgement is grounded and which cannot be communicated through testimony.³⁸ Gorodeisky and Marcus take their arguments to show the plausibility of their pleasure view over theoretical accounts. They further suggestively posit a new realm of ‘aesthetic’ rationality, separate from theoretical rationality, which revolves around the meritedness of aesthetic pleasure in relation to artworks.

The understanding account takes aesthetic judgement proper to be grounded on aesthetic understanding. It has a shape in one sense similar to dual-explanandum accounts: it identifies the grounds of the judgement with something non-reducible to belief. It is, or so I will argue, a form of theoretical view that has the capacity to deal with autonomy. It is thus a viable option for those who acknowledge the limitations of traditional belief accounts but are unwilling to abandon the thought that aesthetic judgement is a form of theoretical judgement.

How, then, does the understanding account accommodate autonomy? One immediate point to make is that understanding is standardly thought not to be transmissible via normal testimonial exchanges or other second-hand sources.³⁹ This being the case

37 Gorodeisky and Marcus, ‘Aesthetic Rationality’. The difficulty belief accounts have in accommodating autonomy is exacerbated by the fact that the assumption that first-hand acquaintance, canonically by aesthetic perception, is the only epistemically justifiable route to forming an aesthetic judgement (Sibley, ‘Aesthetic and Nonaesthetic’, 137). It has been challenged on many fronts by those who argue that rich description, reasoned judgement and testimony (or Humean inductive inference) can indeed provide robust epistemic grounding for at least some forms of aesthetic judgement. See Livingston, ‘On an Apparent Truism’; Dan Cavedon-Taylor, ‘Reasoned and Unreasoned Judgement: On Inference, Acquaintance and Aesthetic Normativity’, *British Journal of Aesthetics* 57 (2017): 1–17; Hopkins, ‘How to Be a Pessimist’, respectively.

38 Gorodeisky and Marcus, ‘Aesthetic Rationality’.

39 For the standard view that understanding cannot be transmitted via testimony, see Linda Zagzebski, *On Epistemology* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2009), 145–46; Hills, ‘Moral Testimony’, 19–20; and, for a critical discussion of this standard view, Federica I. Malfatti, ‘Can Testimony Transmit Understanding?’, *Theoria* 86 (2020): 54–72.

means that 'adequate grounds' for aesthetic judgement proper cannot be acquired in this way on the understanding account, and autonomy is accommodated. This is merely to reassert the claims of the understanding account, though, rather than to argue for it. An argument needs to be made that an agent merely deferring to a second-hand source like testimony would be unable to make an aesthetic judgement proper.

This claim does not entail, of course, a commitment to the view that generic aesthetic judgements are autonomous. It may well be the case that mere deference to testimony provides one with adequate grounds for a generic aesthetic judgement. Assuming that one's testimonial source is reliable, there would seem to be no problem with one's epistemic grounds for such a judgement.⁴⁰ A similar point might naturally be thought to apply in the case of aesthetic judgements proper as well. If one's source is reliable, why wouldn't one have good epistemic grounds for issuing a judgement communicated via testimony? The understanding account rests its case that deference cannot provide adequate grounds for aesthetic judgement proper, however, not primarily or directly on considerations relating to epistemic justification but rather on whether the relevant content can be successfully communicated in the testimonial exchange.

The argument I will now defend is that agents typically lack the capacity to appropriately grasp the fine-grained content of aesthetic judgements proper in basic testimonial exchanges. This is because grasping such fine-grained contents requires the development of the two components of aesthetic understanding set out in Section II. As it is precisely such content that is distinctive of aesthetic judgements proper, agents cannot receive adequate grounds for issuing aesthetic judgements proper through mere deference.

III.2. AUTONOMY AND COMMUNICATION

The first thing to say in support of this claim relates to our discussion of the necessity of communicating aesthetic judgement proper in the context of an appreciative interpretation. A demand is placed in this regard on both judge and recipient alike. In order to grasp the fine-grained content distinctive of aesthetic judgements proper, it is typically incumbent on recipients to engage with, and be able to adopt to some degree, the perspective of the appreciative interpretation out of which the judgement emerges. Take the example of judgement (4) above of Poussin's *Landscape with a Calm* that 'central to the work's aesthetic character is the intentional ambiguity of whether Nature or Art has brought the depicted landscape to a standstill'. A recipient could not grasp the judgement's fine-grained content regarding the centrality of the ambiguity between idealization and naturalism in the painting without adopting the perspective of the appreciative interpretation behind it. The reason for this is, as argued in Section II.1, that access to the precise aesthetic character that the judgement targets comes via the process of being able to draw the work's features together and, in so doing, understanding their relations to each other. If this is not done, then the judgement's fine-grained content relating to how a distinctive kind of ambiguity is central to the

40 A relevant point here with regard to generic aesthetic judgements is that, as deference frustrates the pursuit of aesthetic understanding and aesthetic understanding is the goal of aesthetic appreciation, deference is subject to normative restrictions even if it is not epistemically problematic. A similar normative point applies in relation to aesthetic judgement proper too – though it is also the case that the autonomy of aesthetic judgement proper can be defended on epistemic grounds.

work's aesthetic character in a particular way will be exceptionally difficult for an agent to grasp appropriately and reliably.

It may be objected here that the adoption of the wider perspective of an appreciative interpretation is not necessary for such a grasp of the content of a judgement; simply taking on a longer list of beliefs about the painting via testimony can suffice. What we may concede at this point is, again, that a recipient could – by taking on a sophisticated set of beliefs from the judgement and appreciative interpretation without appropriately adopting its perspective – recover sufficient content to make a generic judgement regarding the painting, for example that it trades on some sort of ambiguity between idealization and naturalism. However, the aesthetic judgement proper, as embedded in the appreciative interpretation communicated in a critical piece, targets something that the adoption of a set of beliefs seems incapable of capturing, that is, the precise ambiguity of Poussin's painting. Or, to use another of our examples (6), the exact way that the figure is 'too far to the left' with regard to the painting's aims. It is precisely this kind of fine-grained content that is distinctive of the aesthetic judgement proper and which a recipient in a basic testimonial exchange – or an exchange where a sophisticated set of beliefs is taken on but where the agent does not attempt or succeed in adopting the perspective of the relevant appreciative interpretation – will typically not be able to grasp precisely because of its fine-grained and novel character. If the relevant content cannot be communicated via a basic testimonial exchange, then there is a straightforward sense in which the exchange cannot furnish the recipient with adequate grounds for making the aesthetic judgement proper.

At this point we can push the point one step further, for it is plausible that the communication of the fine-grained content of the relevant judgements also often requires more than merely the adoption of the appreciative interpretation in question, that is, even where such an adoption involves not only taking on a set of beliefs from a work of criticism but also adopting its interpretative perspective. It often also requires the development of experiential sensitivity. Recall our discussion of how an agent develops their aesthetic understanding of the unbalanced nature of the painting that judgement (6) targets. It is pre-theoretically plausible to say that, if, *before* they developed their experiential sensitivity to the work, they read a critical piece communicating the same aesthetic understanding that they eventually came to, they would not be able to grasp from this critical piece the fine-grained content of the judgement concerning the figure's position being too far to the left. And this holds even if they are, to some extent at least, able to adopt the perspective of the appreciative interpretation present in the critical piece. Indeed, it is plausible to think that, even upon their second visitation to the painting – that is, before their experiential sensitivity has become sufficiently sharp – they would still fail to do so. The relevant content of the judgement is not merely that the figure is 'too far to the left' in some sense but that it is 'too far to the left' in a very precise sense that relates to the painting's aims, the placement of other features of the work, the mood it attempts to trade in, and so forth. Thus, the understanding account asserts that, in order to communicate the fine-grained content distinctive of aesthetic judgement proper, it is often necessary to develop both components of aesthetic understanding concerning the artwork judged. Thus, neither basic testimonial exchanges nor exchanges where a recipient attempts to adopt the perspective of the relevant appreciative interpretation while not enjoying experiential sensitivity can typically furnish an agent with adequate grounds for issuing aesthetic judgements proper.

The reason that the autonomy of aesthetic judgements proper is thus preserved is not that it is shown to be impossible or illicit to engage with the judgements of others when forming one's own. On the contrary, the understanding account sees such engagement as a central and integral part of our judgemental and appreciative practices. Autonomy is preserved because the conditions under which the relevant content of aesthetic judgements can be communicated typically involve the receiving agent developing aesthetic understanding (at least to some extent) and thus themselves developing the grounds for making the judgement autonomously. Though they are in a very important sense indebted to the original judge, they judge the work for themselves and on a basis that is not reducible to testimonial warrant – that is, from their own (newly developed) aesthetic understanding.

The position adopted here may seem to be a strong one, especially if compared to philosophical discussions of the recovery of contents in testimonial exchanges in contexts outside of the aesthetic.⁴¹ However, a concomitant point regarding aesthetic communication has a long lineage in aesthetics. That is, 'it is a hallmark of responsible criticism that it more or less explicitly demands that its descriptions be compared with the direct data of acquaintance', as Aaron Ridley puts it.⁴² Or, as Arnold Isenberg does, 'criticism always assumes' such acquaintance 'to both parties', that is, critic and reader, and 'it is upon this assumption that the vagueness or precision of a critical statement must be judged'.⁴³ Indeed, Isenberg goes further and states that '[r]eading criticism, otherwise than in the presence, or with direct recollection, of the objects discussed is a blank and senseless employment'.⁴⁴ Mary Mothersill goes so far as to say that the most important aspects of critical pieces, which naturally include the aesthetic judgements proper stated in or extractable from them, are typically in themselves 'totally or almost totally opaque'.⁴⁵

III.3. THE CANONICITY OF AESTHETIC UNDERSTANDING

The above defence of the understanding account's explanation of the autonomy of aesthetic judgement provides support for the claim to the canonicity of aesthetic understanding as the route to aesthetic judgement proper. In critiquing the view that perception is the canonical route to aesthetic judgement, Jon Robson considers four ways in which the canonicity of a particular epistemic state as a route to, or as the

41 The analysis offered in this section is in sync with recent work questioning the reliability of our processes of recovering content in testimonial exchanges. See Andrew Peet, 'Testimony and the Epistemic Uncertainty of Interpretation', *Philosophical Studies* 173 (2016): 395–416; Joey Pollock, 'Linguistic Understanding and Testimonial Warrant', *Erkenntnis*, published ahead of print, 20 February 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10670-020-00362-w>; Malfatti, 'Can Testimony Transmit Understanding?'; Tyler Burge, 'Content Preservation', *Philosophical Review* 102 (1993): 457–88.

42 Aaron Ridley, 'The Philosophy of Medium-Grade Art', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 36 (1996): 415.

43 Isenberg, 'Critical Communication', 339. See also Mothersill, 'Critical Reasons', 77–78.

44 Isenberg, 'Critical Communication', 337.

45 Mothersill, 'Critical Reasons', 77. I do not think that what is 'opaque' to readers of critical pieces who lack experiential sensitivity is simply demonstrative content which is in principle not capable of capture in critical descriptions. Rather, we routinely recognize that perceptive critical pieces re-read after a development of experiential sensitivity on our part do indeed succeed in capturing fine-grained features of artworks. For a view opposed to the line of argument offered in this section, see Robson, 'Is Perception the Canonical Route', 659–60 and 661–64, who argues that the content of almost all aesthetic judgements can be grasped by recipients minimally competent in matters aesthetic.

grounds of, a form of judgement might be defended.⁴⁶ It might be defended as (i) the only possible route to a certain form of judgement, (ii) the only legitimate route, (iii) the route to judgements of particular specificity, or (iv) the route which is actually most commonly taken. The understanding account takes the canonicity of aesthetic understanding to aesthetic judgement proper to be defensible along each of these dimensions. First, both an appreciative interpretation and experiential sensitivity towards a given work are at least typically necessary to issue and communicate the fine-grained contents distinctive of aesthetic judgement proper (i). As the mutually enriching interaction of both of these components of aesthetic understanding is the primary epistemic route to the fine-grained aesthetic character and value of the work, this is unsurprising and explains why aesthetic understanding is canonically the route to judgements of the requisite specificity (iii). Further, as it is difficult (perhaps impossible) to form aesthetic judgements proper without aesthetic understanding, it is the case that these judgements are typically actually formed on such a basis (iv). When an agent attempts to form such a judgement without the requisite aesthetic understanding, there are good reasons for deeming this attempt illegitimate or at least normatively unideal (ii). First, they may in fact be passing off as their own a fine-grained judgement whose content they are unable to properly grasp. Second, they are limited in that they do not possess the capacity to make the fine-grained content of this judgement accessible to others and thus frustrate the dual aims of our appreciative and judgemental practices.

IV. AESTHETIC UNDERSTANDING, AUTONOMY, AND THE NORMS OF APPRECIATION

Traditional theoretical accounts (that is, belief accounts) have recently been challenged for advancing a picture of our appreciative and judgemental practices as serving a narrow epistemic purpose.⁴⁷ In the case of traditional belief accounts this narrow epistemic purpose is the promotion of correct judgements formed for the right reasons. Other answers as to what purpose our appreciative practices primarily serve are suggested in recent literature: the possession of a form of aesthetic virtue that makes agents admirable⁴⁸ and is related to understanding why some work is valuable;⁴⁹ the enjoyment of good artworks and the holding of a merited attitude of aesthetic pleasure towards them;⁵⁰ the promotion of a pleasurable form of autonomous engagement in the appreciator;⁵¹ the curation and expression of an aesthetic personality or style;⁵² the opportunity to commune emotionally with each other;⁵³ the development of our understanding of the subject matters that given artworks interrogate and present anew (and in relation to which they have distinctive

46 Robson, 'Is Perception the Canonical Route'.

47 Nguyen, 'Autonomy and Aesthetic Engagement'.

48 Ransom, 'Frauds, Posers and Sheep'.

49 Hills, 'Aesthetic Understanding'; 'Aesthetic Testimony'.

50 Gorodeisky, 'On Liking Aesthetic Value'; Gorodeisky and Marcus, 'Aesthetic Rationality'.

51 Nguyen, 'Autonomy and Aesthetic Engagement'.

52 Nick Riddle, 'On the Aesthetic Ideal', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 55 (2015): 433–47.

53 Peter Goldie, 'Virtues of Art and Human Well-Being', *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 82 (2008): 179–95; John Holliday, 'Emotional Intimacy in Literature', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 58 (2018): 1–16.

forms of cognitive and perhaps moral value);⁵⁴ and the development of sensitivity to the novel modes of expressing emotions and points of view that artworks are capable of.⁵⁵

Claiming that the promotion of aesthetic understanding is the purpose of our appreciative practices is not to argue against the value of any of the above goods of aesthetic appreciation listed above.⁵⁶ Nor is aesthetic understanding a narrow epistemic goal. Aesthetic understanding is rather the mode of developing sensitivity to, and the capacity to communicate to others, the aesthetic value of artworks. A plausible case can be made that aesthetic understanding is the central purpose of our appreciative practices, then, as the goods of appreciation listed above are furthered precisely by agents' sensitivity to aesthetic value. It is through developing our sensitivity to aesthetic value, for example, that the deepest opportunities for emotional communion with others present themselves, that we grasp what is of cognitive and moral value in artworks and that we are able to have our lives enriched by the novel ways emotions and points of views are expressed in art. The promotion of aesthetic understanding (and the sensitivity it furthers) is an epistemic goal, but its value is not solely or primarily epistemic.⁵⁷

Though I have focused on those aspects of aesthetic understanding typically required for the issuance of aesthetic judgement proper in this paper, aesthetic understanding is multifaceted – like the objectual understanding it can in various ways helpfully be modelled on. It involves the capacity not only to communicate and be sensitive to its object (the artwork) but also to be able to navigate that object in a more exploratory fashion, to frame new hypotheses and questions about it and reconfigure how it is approached – as objectual understanding is traditionally held to.⁵⁸ It also involves the capacity to mull over and engage subtly with others about the aesthetic value of artworks. The promotion of aesthetic understanding is not solely the pursuit of a single correct appreciative interpretation of artworks, then; it involves, rather, the continual development of new appreciative interpretations, new ways of making intelligible and of enlivening the value of artworks, or ways of uncovering hitherto undiscovered values that they have, and of communicating these to the community.

54 See Page, 'Literary Appreciation'; Angela Breitenbach, 'One Imagination in Experiences of Beauty and Achievements of Understanding', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 60 (2020): 71–88.

55 See R. G. Collingwood, *The Principles of Art* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968); Jenefer Robinson, *Deeper than Reason: Emotion and Its Role in Literature, Music, and Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Leo Tolstoy, *What Is Art?*, trans. Larissa Volokhonsky and Richard Pevear (London: Penguin, 1995).

56 Though, for what it is worth, the final three seem to be the considerations of central importance to me.

57 This hints at a conception of the normativity of aesthetic appreciation which is plausible and has the capacity to both successfully explain the normative structure of aesthetic appreciation and establish this strand of aesthetic normativity as a genuine or robust form of normativity; see Richard Rowland, 'The Authoritative Normativity of Fitting Attitudes', *Oxford Studies in Metaethics* 17 (forthcoming); Alex King, 'In Defence of Robust Aesthetic Normativity' (unpublished manuscript). On this conception, aesthetic appreciation is structured so as to promote aesthetic understanding but the source of this strand of aesthetic normativity is plural or hybrid. See Robbie Kubala, Review of *Being for Beauty: Aesthetic Agency and Value*, by Dominic McIver Lopes, *Estetika* 56 (2019): 250–62, for related discussion. That is, the normativity derives from multiple sources and goods – such as those listed in the above paragraph. Thanks to Daniel Star for helpful discussions on this point.

58 Neil Cooper, 'Understanding', *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 68 (1994): 1–26.

In this paper, I have sought to introduce a new notion of aesthetic understanding: appreciative understanding. I have begun to argue for its centrality relative to aesthetic judgement and aesthetic appreciation. The notion of appreciative understanding developed in this paper is novel and, as I intimated in the previous section, rich enough that various features and norms of our appreciative practices may fruitfully be explained as being structured so as to promote it. Further investigation and more detailed argumentation on this issue is called for.

In introducing the understanding account of aesthetic judgement, I set out the plausibility of the thesis that aesthetic understanding canonically grounds aesthetic judgement proper. The understanding account occupies a promising place on the philosophical landscape as a form of theoretical account that has the capacity to accommodate autonomy and doubt in a way that traditional belief accounts cannot. A related further line of inquiry will be to use the understanding account and recent discussions of content preservation in testimonial exchanges in social epistemology to defend a form of pessimism in aesthetics. The shift away from an exclusive focus on questions of justification⁵⁹ and towards the communication of content certainly seems fruitful and timely in this connection.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper benefited from invaluable feedback at the European Society of Aesthetics annual conference 2021, the American Society of Aesthetics annual meeting 2020 and the Aresmur seminar at the University of Murcia. Irene Martínez Marín, Andrew Reisner, and Elisabeth Schellekens, as well as editors from *Estetika*, provided helpful comments on earlier drafts.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

REFERENCES

- Breitenbach, Angela. 'One Imagination in Experiences of Beauty and Achievements of Understanding.' *British Journal of Aesthetics* 60 (2020): 71–88. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/aesthj/ayz048>
- Burge, Tyler. 'Content Preservation.' *Philosophical Review* 102 (1993): 457–88. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/1523046>
- Carroll, Noël. 'Hume's Standard of Taste.' *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 43 (1984): 181–94. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1111/1540_6245.jaac43.2.0181
- Cavedon-Taylor, Dan. 'Reasoned and Unreasoned Judgement: On Inference, Acquaintance and Aesthetic Normativity.' *British Journal of Aesthetics* 57 (2017): 1–17. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/aesthj/ayw088>
- Clark, Timothy J. *The Sight of Death: An Experiment in Art Writing*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006.

59 A rare exception is Michael Tanner, 'Ethics and Aesthetics Are – ?' in *Art and Morality*, ed. Jose Luis Bermudez and Sebastian Gardner (London: Routledge, 2003), 19–36.

- Collingwood, R. G. *The Principles of Art*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1968.
- Cooper, Neil. 'Understanding.' *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 68 (1994): 1–26. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/aristoteliansupp/68.1.1>
- Cross, Anthony. 'Art Criticism as Practical Reasoning.' *British Journal of Aesthetics* 57 (2017): 299–317. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/aesthj/ayx016>
- Dorsch, Fabian. 'Non-Inferentialism About Justification – The Case of Aesthetic Judgements.' *Philosophical Quarterly* 63 (2013): 660–82. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9213.12063>
- Goldie, Peter. 'Virtues of Art and Human Well-Being.' *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 82 (2008): 179–95. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8349.2008.00168.x>
- Gorodeisky, Keren. 'The Authority of Pleasure.' *Noûs* 55 (2021): 199–220. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/nous.12310>
- '. 'On Liking Aesthetic Value.' *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 102 (2021): 261–80. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/phpr.12641>
- Gorodeisky, Keren, and Eric Marcus. 'Aesthetic Rationality.' *Journal of Philosophy* 115 (2018): 113–40. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5840/jphil201811538>
- Grimm, Stephen. 'The Value of Understanding.' *Philosophy Compass* 7 (2012): 103–17. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-9991.2011.00460.x>
- Hills, Alison. 'Aesthetic Testimony, Understanding and Virtue.' *Noûs*. Published ahead of print, 2 July 2020. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/nous.12344>
- '. 'Aesthetic Understanding.' In *Making Sense of the World: New Essays on the Philosophy of Understanding*, edited by Stephen Grimm, 159–76. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.
- '. 'Moral Testimony and Moral Epistemology.' *Ethics* 120 (2009): 94–127. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1086/648610>
- '. 'Understanding Why.' *Noûs* 49 (2015): 661–88. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/nous.12092>
- Holliday, John. 'Emotional Intimacy in Literature.' *British Journal of Aesthetics* 58 (2018): 1–16. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/aesthj/ayx033>
- Hopkins, Robert. 'How to Be a Pessimist about Aesthetic Testimony.' *Journal of Philosophy* 108 (2011): 138–57. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5840/jphil201110838>
- Isenberg, Arnold. 'Critical Communication.' *Philosophical Review* 58 (1949): 330–44. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/2182081>
- King, Alex. 'In Defence of Robust Aesthetic Normativity.' Unpublished manuscript.
- Kubala, Robbie. Review of *Being for Beauty: Aesthetic Agency and Value*, by Dominic McIver Lopes. *Estetika* 56 (2019): 250–62. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33134/eeja.192>
- Kvanvig, Jonathan L. *The Value of Knowledge and the Pursuit of Understanding*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511498909>
- Lamarque, Peter. 'Aesthetics and Literature: A Problematic Relation?' *Philosophical Studies* 135 (2007): 27–40. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-007-9090-3>
- '. 'Appreciation and Literary Interpretation.' In *Is There a Single Right Interpretation*, edited by Michael Krausz, 285–306. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5325/j.ctv14gp0qq.18>
- Livingston, Paisley. 'On an Apparent Truism in Aesthetics.' *British Journal of Aesthetics* 43 (2003): 260–78. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjaesthetics/43.3.260>
- Lord, Errol. 'How to Learn about Aesthetics and Morality through Acquaintance and Deference.' *Oxford Studies in Metaethics* 13 (2018): 71–97. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198823841.003.0004>
- Malfatti, Federica I. 'Can Testimony Transmit Understanding?' *Theoria* 86 (2020): 54–72. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/theo.12220>

- Martinez Marin, Irene. 'Non-standard Emotions and Aesthetic Understanding.' *Estetika* 57 (2020): 135–49. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33134/eeja.211>
- Mothersill, Mary. 'Critical Reasons.' *Philosophical Quarterly* 11 (1961): 74–78. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/2216682>
- Nehamas, Alexander. *Only a Promise of Happiness: The Place of Beauty in a World of Art*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007.
- Nguyen, C. Thi. 'Autonomy and Aesthetic Engagement.' *Mind* 129 (2019): 1127–56. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/mind/fzz054>
- Page, Jeremy. 'Literary Appreciation and the Reconfiguration of Understanding.' In *Educating Character through the Arts*, edited by Panos Paris, Aidan Thompson, and Laura D'Olimpio. London: Routledge, forthcoming.
- Peet, Andrew. 'Testimony and the Epistemic Uncertainty of Interpretation.' *Philosophical Studies* 173 (2016): 395–416. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-015-0498-x>
- Pollock, Joey. 'Linguistic Understanding and Testimonial Warrant.' *Erkenntnis*. Published ahead of print, 20 February 2021. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10670-020-00362-w>
- Ransom, Madeleine. 'Frauds, Posers and Sheep: A Virtue Theoretic Solution to the Acquaintance Debate.' *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 98 (2019): 417–34. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/phpr.12467>
- Ridley, Aaron. 'The Philosophy of Medium-Grade Art.' *British Journal of Aesthetics* 36 (1996): 413–23. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjaesthetics/36.4.413>
- Riggle, Nick. 'On the Aesthetic Ideal.' *British Journal of Aesthetics* 55 (2015): 433–47. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/aesthj/ayv026>
- Robinson, Jenefer. *Deeper than Reason: Emotion and Its Role in Literature, Music, and Art*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/0199263655.001.0001>
- Robson, Jon. 'Is Perception the Canonical Route to Aesthetic Judgment?' *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 96 (2018): 657–68. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00048402.2017.1389964>
- Rowland, Richard. 'The Authoritative Normativity of Fitting Attitudes.' *Oxford Studies in Metaethics* 17, forthcoming.
- Schellekens Dammann, Elisabeth. 'Seeing the Light: Aesthetic Experience and Understanding Pictures.' In *The Pleasure of Pictures: Pictorial Experience and Aesthetic Appreciation*, edited by Jerome Pelletier and Alberto Voltolini, 21–35. London: Routledge, 2018. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315112640-2>
- Schjeldahl, Peter. *Hot, Cold, Heavy, Light, 100 Art Writings 1988–2018*. New York: Abrams, 2019.
- Scruton, Roger. *The Aesthetic Understanding: Essays in the Philosophy of Art and Culture*. South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 1998.
- Sibley, Frank. 'Aesthetic and Nonaesthetic.' *Philosophical Review* 74 (1965): 135–59. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/2183262>
- , 'Particularity, Art and Evaluation.' *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 48 (1974): 1–22. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/aristoteliansupp/48.1.1>
- Strevens, Michael. 'No Understanding without Explanation.' *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 44 (2013): 510–15. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.shpsa.2012.12.005>
- Tanner, Michael. 'Ethics and Aesthetics Are – ?' In *Art and Morality*, edited by Jose Luis Bermudez and Sebastian Gardner, 19–36. London: Routledge, 2003. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003060222-2>
- Tolstoy, Leo. *What Is Art?* Translated by Larissa Volokhonsky and Richard Peavars. London: Penguin, 1995.

Zagzebski, Linda. *On Epistemology*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2009.
-----'. 'Toward a Theory of Understanding.' In *Varieties of Understanding: New Perspectives from Philosophy, Psychology, and Theology*, edited by Stephen R. Grimm, 123–36. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190860974.003.0007>

Page
Estetika
DOI: 10.33134/eeja.269

68

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:
Page, Jeremy. 'Aesthetic Understanding.' *Estetika: The European Journal of Aesthetics* LIX/XV, no. 1 (2022): pp. 48–68. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33134/eeja.269>

Submitted: 21 March 2021
Accepted: 24 September 2021
Published: 15 March 2022

COPYRIGHT:
© 2022 The Author(s).
This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

Estetika: The European Journal of Aesthetics is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Helsinki University Press in cooperation with the Faculty of Arts, Charles University in Prague.

HUP 



FACULTY OF ARTS
Charles University