

Is Perception the Canonical Route to Aesthetic Judgement?

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ABSTRACT

It is commonplace amongst philosophers of art to make claims which postulate important links between aesthetics and perception. In this paper, I focus on one such claim: that perception is the canonical route to aesthetic judgement. I consider a range of prima facie plausible interpretations of this claim and argue that they each fail to identify any important link between aesthetic judgement and perception. Given this, I conclude that we have good reason to be sceptical of the claim that perception is in any way privileged as a source of aesthetic judgement.

KEYWORDS

Aesthetics, Aesthetic Epistemology, Perception, Aesthetic Judgement

1. Aesthetics and Perception

Throughout the history of aesthetics philosophers have postulated a fundamental connection (or connections) between perception and the aesthetic. Yet, despite this common theme, there has been considerable disagreement as to the respects, if any, in which this connection manifests itself.

This paper focuses on one area where this claimed association is especially prominent: the epistemology of aesthetic judgement. A number of prominent aestheticians have maintained that (with, perhaps, a few minor and isolated exceptions) perception is the only legitimate route to aesthetic judgement. As such, all sources of judgement other than perception are excluded. This influential position has, however, been questioned of late with several philosophers arguing that these other sources can frequently provide a legitimate basis for aesthetic judgements. Nonetheless, even they are often keen to stress that perception still plays a central, or *canonical*, role in the formation of aesthetic judgements (henceforth, ‘the perceptual canonicity claim’). The consensus remains, then, that perception provides the royal road to aesthetic judgement, and that other sources of judgement, if admitted at all, can only serve as ersatz stand-ins for direct perceptual experience.

Further, advocates of the perceptual canonicity claim almost invariably take their claim to highlight something distinctive about the relationship between *aesthetic* judgement and perception. As such, they are keen to draw a contrast between aesthetic judgements and other species of judgement – such as judgements of colour – which we might ordinarily take to be strongly linked to perception.¹ The thought being that there is some sense (or senses) in which perception provides the canonical route to the former but not to the latter.

In this paper, I argue that the perceptual canonicity claim is mistaken. While it is no doubt true that perception often plays an important role in aesthetic judgement, there is no general reason to privilege perception above other sources of judgement. In §2 I clarify a few key

¹ Contrasts with the colour case are drawn by, e.g., Alcaraz León [2008: 292], Pettit [1983: 25] and Gorodeisky [2010: 55].

aspects of the perceptual canonicity claim and outline some important assumptions I will be making throughout the paper. In §3-6 I consider various interpretations of the perceptual canonicity claim and argue that they are uniformly unsuccessful. §7 offers some concluding remarks.

2. Some Clarifications

Before I begin evaluating the perceptual canonicity claim, I will first clarify some key aspects of the claim itself. First, it is crucial to lay out precisely what I mean by 'aesthetic judgement' since this phrase has been employed in a range of different ways in the literature. In what follows, I will take the 'judgement' part of 'aesthetic judgement' to be equivalent to what Neil Sinclair [2006] calls 'minimal belief'. That is, 'any state of mind that is expressed by sincere assertoric use of a sentence' [ibid.: 253]. This understanding is compatible with aesthetic judgements being beliefs in the standard cognitivist sense as well as their being some appropriate kind of non-cognitive state. It is, however, incompatible with certain prominent accounts of the nature of aesthetic judgement, such as those which view aesthetic judgements as primarily concerned with appreciation construed as 'perceiving [a work's aesthetic properties] as realized in the work' [Budd 2003: 392]. There is, however, little to say about the perceptual canonicity claim when applied to aesthetic judgements understood in this manner since, while it is true that perception provides the canonical means to appreciation *of this kind*, this is a mere tautology.

As to the 'aesthetic' part of 'aesthetic judgement', I will interpret this very broadly so as to include not only aesthetic concepts in Sibley's [1959] sense but also what Sibley [1965:

136] terms ‘verdicts’. A such, it will include judgements as to an object’s being, for example, ‘unified, balanced, integrated, lifeless, serene, sombre, dynamic, powerful, vivid, delicate, moving, trite, sentimental, tragic’ [1959: 421] as well as those concerning ‘whether things are aesthetically good or bad, excellent or mediocre, superior to others or inferior, and so on’ [1965: 136]. My aim will be to deny that the perceptual canonicity claim holds with respect to judgements of *any* of these properties.

The ‘perceptual’ part of the perceptual canonicity claim is also to be understood very broadly so as to include judgements of the object itself made with respect to any perceptual modality (or cross-modal perception), perception of various stand-ins or surrogates (including photographs, reproductions, and the like), and sensory imagination.

With these clarifications in place, the only part of the perceptual canonicity claim left to explain is what precisely it means for a certain route to judgement, aesthetic or otherwise, to be canonical. It is this task which will occupy the remainder of the paper. The central thought behind the canonicity intuition is, roughly, that there is – in contrast to judgements in other domains – something special or privileged about perception as a route to aesthetic judgement. There are, however, a number of importantly different ways in which this key idea might be spelled out. In the following sections I will consider four *prima facie* plausible interpretations of the perceptual canonicity claim and argue that they are uniformly unpersuasive.

3. The Only Possible Route to Aesthetic Judgement?

A first interpretation of the perceptual canonicity claim maintains that perception is the only *possible* route to aesthetic judgement and that it is literally impossible to form a genuinely *aesthetic* judgement in the absence of perceptual experience. As such, perception earns the title of the canonical means to such judgements by default. To see why someone might accept an interpretation along these lines, consider the following famous passage from Sibley [ibid.: 137]:

To suppose indeed that one can make aesthetic judgments without aesthetic perception [...] is to misunderstand aesthetic judgment.

This therefore is how I shall use "aesthetic judgment" throughout. Where there is no question of aesthetic perception, I shall use some other expression like "attribution of aesthetic quality" or "aesthetic statement." Thus, rather as a color-blind man may infer that something is green without seeing [...] so someone may attribute balance or gaudiness to a painting, or say that it is too pale, without himself having judged it so.

Before we consider how to evaluate Sibley's claims here, we should note that his account of 'aesthetic judgement' is, to some extent, a stipulative one. This means that, on his account, it will certainly be true (indeed true by definition) that perception is required for aesthetic judgement. Yet, such stipulations will not, by themselves, tell us anything about aesthetic judgements in the sense I outlined above. This passage does, however, highlight some substantive worries for the claim that aesthetic judgements (in my sense) can be formed on any basis other than perception.

Consider, for example, the comparison Sibley draws between the person attempting to make aesthetic judgements in the absence of perception and a colour-blind person inferring that an object is green. It seems plausible that – as Frank Jackson's [1982] famous Mary

example is sometimes taken to illustrate – someone without any perceptual experience of colours would lack some important piece of knowledge regarding what it is for a particular object, *o*, to be green (since they lack any subjective experience of greenness). Further, suppose we made the additional claim that this missing element is so important that someone in this position wouldn't even understand greenness sufficiently to fully form the judgement that *o* is green rather than, say, forming the meta-semantic judgement that '*o* is green' expresses a truth. Of course, this interpretation of the colour case is highly controversial and there is considerable debate over the question of what (if anything) Mary learns upon leaving her black and white room, as well as the impact this has with respect to her ability to make full-blooded colour judgements prior to doing so. If, however, we accept an interpretation of this kind then it seems to point to a reason for endorsing the claim that perception provides the only route to aesthetic judgement.

We could, after all, tell an exactly parallel story according to which someone without any experience of an aesthetic property such as gracefulness would be unable to fully form the judgement that *o* is graceful rather than, say, forming the meta-semantic judgement that '*o* is graceful' expresses a truth. Indeed, there are some, such as Michael Tanner, appear to explicitly adopt such a view of the aesthetic. According to Tanner [2003: 33] 'judgements of aesthetic [...] value must be based on first-hand experience of their objects [...] because one is not capable of understanding the meanings of the terms which designate the properties without the experience'. Again, this story is extremely controversial but its truth or falsity is largely irrelevant since the very fact that the reasons given in the aesthetic case so closely parallel those in the colour case undermines any support it might offer for the perceptual canonicity claim. This is because, as we have seen above, proponents of the perceptual

canonicity claim intend their view to highlight something importantly distinctive about the relationship between *aesthetic* judgments and perception. An aim which the close parallel between aesthetic judgements and colour judgements here clearly undermines.

Further, this motivation for accepting the perceptual canonicity claim wouldn't – as Malcolm Budd [2003: 388] has already argued elsewhere – require that *every* aesthetic judgement be based on perception of its object but merely that anyone looking to make aesthetic judgements would have to have had *some* perceptual experience of the relevant aesthetic properties. Those of us who have already experienced gracefulness (and *mutatis mutandis* other aesthetic properties) would, even granting the controversial claims about what experience teaches outlined above, still be perfectly able to form the judgement that some new object we have not yet perceived is graceful. Just as, after leaving her black and white room, Mary would be perfectly able to form the judgement that some new object is red prior to any perceptual experience of that particular object.

It could be objected, though, that the analogy between the colour case and the aesthetic case here isn't as close as I have suggested.² Claims about what Mary knows prior to leaving her room are (to say the least) controversial and someone who rejected a concept empiricist view concerning colour concepts might claim that Mary *can* make fully fledged colour judgements without ever experiencing colour for herself. Given such a position, combined with the view that a parallel feat is not possible for Mary's aesthetic analogue, we would arrive at a clear contrast between the two cases. This contrast arises because, in the aesthetic case, we would

² I thank an anonymous referee from the journal for pushing me to consider this worry.

require some experience of gracefulness in general to be able to judge that some particular object was graceful but we would not need to have experienced redness in general to judge that some particular object was red. Yet, while such a combination of views is consistent, it is difficult to see what could motivate it. The most natural position seems to either be one which accepts concept empiricism concerning both aesthetic concepts and colour concepts or else one which rejects empiricism in both cases. A mixed verdict (such as the one outlined above) would, therefore, require a powerful argument in its favour. As things stand, though, no such argument is forthcoming. There is, after all, nothing in the interpretation of the arguments from Sibley and Tanner that I have been discussing (nor in the extant literature on aesthetic judgement more generally) which would justify accepting an empiricist view of aesthetic concepts while rejecting such a view concerning colour concepts.

There is, however, another way of reading these passages. A reading which locates the contrast not in an appeal to a lack of perceptual experience with respect to a particular determinable aesthetic property such as gracefulness but, rather, in a lack of perceptual experience concerning the way in which *this particular object* instantiates some determinate version of that property. I will consider an interpretation of this kind in section 5 below.

4. The Only Legitimate Route to Aesthetic Judgement?

Another interpretation of the perceptual canonicity claim is a normative one according to which perception is the only route by which we can *legitimately* form aesthetic judgements. Views of this kind have famously been defended by various prominent aestheticians such as Richard Wollheim who claims that ‘judgments of aesthetic value [...] must be based on first-

hand experience of their objects' [1980: 233] and Marcia Muelder Eaton [1994: 392] who maintains that 'direct experience is always required for verification of aesthetic' judgements.

There are, however, a number of ways in which principles of this kind might be interpreted. First, one might take these principles to be making epistemic claims to the effect that it is only possible to achieve aesthetic *knowledge* on the basis of perception. Second, one might come to think that there is some non-epistemic norm – that is a norm which doesn't determine 'whether the belief the recipient is offered would count as knowledge' [Hopkins 2011: 147] – which renders aesthetic judgements illegitimate when not formed in this way. Finally, one might claim that aesthetic judgements are best construed in an expressivist manner and that some feature of judgements of this kind prevents their being properly formed in the absence of perceptual experience. In discussing these principles below, I will, for convenience's sake, focus on epistemic interpretations but my arguments will apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to other versions also.

Regardless of how we interpret such principles, though, this version of the perceptual canonicity claim encounters a fundamental problem; it is false. There are various routes, besides direct perception, by which someone might come to legitimately form an aesthetic judgement. In particular, there are compelling reasons – discussed in Meskin [2004], Laetz [2008], and Robson [forthcoming] – to believe that legitimate aesthetic judgements can be formed on the basis of testimony and – as discussed in Livingston [2003] and Robson [2014] – on the basis of suitable descriptions. Of course, while I take this version of the perceptual canonicity claim to be mistaken, I am aware that this conclusion remains controversial. I will not, however, rehash the various arguments that have been offered here. Rather, I will aim to show that this interpretation of the perceptual canonicity claim is mistaken via a rather more

circuitous route. A route which involves targeting a further interpretation of the perceptual canonicity claim which I will address in the next section. This interpretation makes a weaker claim than the version under consideration here and so the failure of the former will show, *a fortiori*, that the latter must also fail.

5. The Most Specific Route to Aesthetic Judgement?

A further interpretation of the perceptual canonicity claim suggests that it is only perception which allows us to legitimately make aesthetic judgements with respect to certain determinate, rather than determinable, aesthetic properties. Consider, for example, a putative case of someone who comes to know that an object is graceful purely on the basis of someone else's testimony that 'the object is graceful'. Even if we assume, contra the principles discussed in section 4, that such aesthetic knowledge *is* available via testimony it seems eminently plausible to maintain that the recipient of such testimony would, in various respects, lack knowledge of the *ways* in which the object in question is graceful. Yet, this kind of knowledge would typically be possessed by someone who had perceived the object for themselves. There is, after all, a vast array of different objects which may be assessed aesthetically and an indefinite number of ways in which such objects might be graceful, elegant, harrowing, beautiful, delicate, and so forth.

Of course, the issue here cannot be purely quantitative since there are also indefinitely many ways in which an object might be green or a sound high pitched. Still, even if the ways in which an object can be graceful are no more numerous than the ways in which it can be green, they are certainly more disparate. Consider, for example, that according to most

metaphysical views of colour greenness supervenes on a rather limited range of underlying microphysical properties. By contrast, there are manifold different ways in which an aesthetic property might supervene on underlying non-aesthetic properties. There is, for example, a vast difference between the beauty of a musical work, a painting, a landscape, and a face. Further, even with respect to objects of the same kind, there is still a wildly disparate range of ways in which the same aesthetic property might be instantiated. Consider, for example, the various kinds of beauty which might be exhibited in musical works of different genres, styles and moods. We might think, then, that the only way to know that an object is beautiful (or graceful, or gaudy, or...) in *this particular way* is via perception.

Indeed, the issue here may not merely concern the legitimacy of the relevant judgments. Rather, we might take this to be a more plausible way of interpreting the worries from Sibley and Tanner (concerning the *impossibility* of forming aesthetic judgements in the absence of perception) discussed above. They may, perhaps, be taken as claiming that we can't even *form* this very specific kind of aesthetic judgement in the absence of perceptual experience since we cannot *understand* what it means to say that an object is beautiful *in this particular way* without such experience.

Once again, though, this interpretation of the perceptual canonicity claim turns out to be less persuasive than it may initially seem. It certainly the case that we can get *some* idea of the particular ways in which an object is beautiful without perceiving the object for ourselves. Merely learning that the object we are discussing is a musical work rather than a painting, or a requiem rather than a lullaby (knowledge which can easily be acquired in the absence of perceptual experience) would already give us some idea as to the specific ways in which the object is beautiful. There is, however, no need to stop here. There is, after all, so very much

that we can learn about a work without perceiving it for ourselves. Consider, for example, Aaron Ridley's [1996: 419] discussion of his (hypothetically) refusing to read Anita Brookner's latest novel on the basis that

I've read several of Anita Brookner's novels, under increasing protest. Her tiny stock of recurrent themes fails to engage my interest; I find her style translucent in all the wrong ways; I gather from reviews that the latest one is simply more of the same; and I feel oppressed by the certainty of what to expect.³

In this instance it seems that Ridley would be able to make some very specific judgements about the aesthetic character of the new work without ever reading it.⁴ And, of course, the same applies in a range of other cases.

Further, this line of argument can be applied to show not only that we are able to make such judgements but that we are able to do so *legitimately*. We can have excellent inductive grounds for postulating many of the specific aesthetic properties which a new Tim Burton film or a new Daft Punk album will have without encountering these specific works for ourselves (provided, of course, that we are sufficiently familiar with the relevant artists' oeuvres). It may be objected, however, that these beliefs don't really have the status of knowledge but are merely educated guesses.⁵ There is, after all, nothing to prevent Burton from deciding on a whim to make his next film a gritty piece of social realism. Thankfully, though, we need not rely on induction alone here. Rather, we can – as Ridley suggests –

³ There may be some concerns regarding the use of a literary example here since there are (as discussed in, e.g., Shelley [2003: 373-5] famous debates surrounding whether such works possess genuinely perceptible aesthetic properties. I will, however, ignore such concerns here since (as I highlight further below) the argument clearly generalises beyond the literary case.

⁴ For the record, I don't share Ridley's assessment of Brookner's work but the general point still stands.

⁵ I thank an anonymous referee from the journal for bringing this point to my attention.

combine the kind of inductive considerations outlined above with suitable testimony. In short, we can ask others (who we know to be reliable about such matters) to confirm whether things are as we suspect; whether the new work is typical for its creator, whether their writing still has that particular quality, whether their music employs the same familiar motifs, and so forth. Given this, we have good reason to reject the claim that we cannot legitimately form very specific aesthetic judgements (and, *a fortiori*, that we cannot legitimately form *any* aesthetic judgements) in the absence of first-hand experience).

How widely can such strategies be applied though? A common line to take at this stage (Livingston [2003: 275-7], Ridley [1996: 421-2]) is to suggest that this only holds with respect to certain examples and that while this kind of determinate knowledge may be possible with respect to works of popular art, or of what Ridley terms 'medium-grade art', this will not be so with respect to truly great or revolutionary artworks. That is that, as Livingston [2003: 276] puts things, 'even the most genial descriptions cannot enlighten us regarding the specific splendours of works by Schubert, Villon, Balthus, et al., if we have no prior acquaintance with these works'.

Yet, even this weaker claim still encounters difficulties. First, when phrased in this way it begins, as Livingston [*ibid.*] highlights, to look less like an important claim about the nature of aesthetic judgement and more like a very modest empirical claim concerning a very circumscribed set of aesthetic judgments. Second, such a modest claim no longer allows us to maintain a clear distinction between aesthetic judgements and judgements of other kinds. It would, for example, often be extremely difficult to convey the idea that an object is a certain determinate shade of green without any perceptual experience of that object's particular greenness. This is, at least in part, because we very rarely have specific names for particular

determinate colours (International Klein Blue being one notable exception). Finally, it is not clear that this weaker claim is even *true*.

Various philosophers and art theorists have recently argued, persuasively in my view, that we overestimate the extent to which great innovations (in art and elsewhere) involve radical departures from what came before and that although ‘it is common to portray progress in the artifactual realm – whether art or technology – as propagated by genius inventors or artists making great leaps forward [...] this is not in fact how artifacts develop’ [Eaton forthcoming: 22].⁶ If this is so, then it looks as if we may well be able to arrive at fairly specific judgements concerning the particular greatness of some new artist’s work by combining our knowledge of what came before with some well-chosen information from suitable critics. Even if we accept the traditional view of artistic genius as involving radical departures from previous work, though, we should still be able to learn a lot about an unfamiliar work by, say, Schubert on the basis of his previous work (in a manner somewhat similar to that described by Ridley with regards to Brookner above). That is not, of course, to suggest that the new work will be entirely predictable or generic, far from it, but even great artists have been known to frequently revisit favourite motifs and themes. Indeed, we often take it to be a prerequisite for someone’s being a first-rate artist that they have their own artistic ‘voice’ or ‘style’.

6. The Actual Route to Aesthetic Judgement?

A final way of interpreting the perceptual canonicity claim is as a descriptive claim according to which people *do not* form aesthetic judgements on the basis of sources other than

⁶ For arguments in support of this claim see Eaton [ibid.] and the references therein.

perception. Views of this kind date back at least as far as Kant's claim that 'if a man [...] does not find a building, a prospect, or a poem beautiful, a hundred voices all highly praising it will not force his innermost agreement' [1790 / 2005: 94] and that '[w]hether a dress, a house, a flower is beautiful is a matter upon which one declines to allow one's judgement to be swayed by any reasons or principles' [ibid.: 37]. Perhaps what makes perception special, then, is just that it is (or is close to being) the only route by which we do, as a matter of fact, form aesthetic judgements.

At first glance, this view may seem highly plausible. After all, it doubtless seems to many people as if they only form their aesthetic judgements on the basis of first-hand perception. The intuitive appeal of this view is, however, by the by. Time and again, empirical research has clearly demonstrated that we are surprisingly bad at identifying the sources of our own judgements and, in particular, that we tend to overestimate the extent to which our judgements in various domains are formed on the basis of first-hand perceptual experience. Consider, for example, the so called 'misinformation effect' – identified in a series of classic studies by Elizabeth Loftus [1975] – on the basis of which subsequent misleading testimony can permanently alter a subject's own recollection of events. For example, an eye witness to a car crash between two blue cars may, after reading an account according to which one of the cars was red, come to believe not only that the car *was* red but that this belief originated in their own perceptual experience of the incident. This general picture should certainly give us reason to doubt our intuitions with respect to the descriptive claim. There is, however, reason to go beyond mere scepticism in this respect since there is a broad range of empirical evidence demonstrating that we frequently *do* form aesthetic judgements by means other than perception.

Let's look at one illustrative example in detail. Ginsburgh and Ours [2003] examined results in Belgium's prestigious Queen Elizabeth music competition and found that musicians 'who are successful in the Queen Elizabeth competition seem to be rewarded by subsequent success' [ibid.: 294]. It was shown, for example, that those who were ranked higher in the contest were typically regarded as better performers (and as producing better performances) by professional music critics. One possible explanation for this result, which Ginsburgh and Ours ultimately defend, is that the contest rankings themselves are playing a significant role in determining the later aesthetic beliefs of these critics. This explanation would, however, clearly be at odds with the version of the perceptual canonicity claim currently under consideration. Yet, this is hardly the only available explanation for this correlation and it could be that, as Ginsburgh and Ours themselves note, it simply arises because 'those who are better ranked in the competition are better musicians anyway' [ibid.]. In response to this worry, Ginsburgh and Ours adopted a rather ingenious method for testing this alternative explanation. They began by noting the surprisingly large extent to which results in the contest itself were influenced by the, randomly determined, order in which performers appeared (with those who performed first and last tending to be more favourably received than those in middle positions). After determining the extent to which the rankings of performers were affected by their order of performance, Ginsburgh and Ours then proceeded to produce an adjusted ranking of all the performers based on ordering effects alone. Having done so, they then compared this adjusted ranking to the reputation which each performer now enjoyed amongst Belgian music critics. Their results demonstrated a clear correlation between these adjusted rankings and subsequent reputation among critics, to the extent that Ginsburgh and Ours were willing to declare that 'the opinion of music critics is more influenced by the ranking than by the quality of the performers' [ibid.].

Of course, the beliefs which the critics have formed in this case are clearly somewhat problematic from a normative point of view but this is of no help to defenders of the perceptual canonicity claim for two reasons. First, the version of their claim currently under consideration is a purely descriptive one, rendering the normative status of the beliefs in question moot. Second, the feature which renders such beliefs problematic (being strongly influenced by aesthetically irrelevant ordering effects) is also present in the first-hand perceptual judgements of the contest judges themselves. Given these results, then, (alongside similar studies from, for example, Dixon et al. [2015] and Salganik & Watts [2008]) a descriptive claim according to which perception has anything approaching a monopoly as the route to aesthetic judgement becomes clearly implausible.

It might be objected, though, that everything I have said above is compatible with a weaker version of the descriptive claim according to which perception is merely the typical or standard (rather than the exclusive) route to aesthetic judgement.⁷ We would, however, need to say much more about how this claim should be spelled out.

If the claim is that we *rarely* form non-perceptual aesthetic judgements then this seems to be mistaken, since I know of no good reason to treat the case I outlined above as an isolated exception. Indeed, Ginsburgh and Ours focus on the judgements of experts who we would typically expect to be even more reliant on their own first-hand judgements than laypeople. Further, there is (as the references above indicate, and as I discuss in more detail in Robson [2015]) a wide range of empirical work highlighting similar cases. By contrast, an even weaker

⁷ I thank an anonymous referee from the journal for drawing my attention to this worry.

interpretation of the 'standard route' claim according to which we form *the majority* of our aesthetic judgements on the basis of perception strikes me as far more. Still, this should provide little comfort for defenders of the perceptual canonicity claim. First, for reasons already highlighted above, I am unwilling to put much weight on what we take to be intuitively plausible about our belief forming methods in aesthetics. Second, and more substantively, any intuitive plausibility which such a claim has seems to be matched by various non-aesthetic cases. I would, for example, be very surprised if we didn't form the majority of our judgements concerning shape and colour on the basis of perception. Once again, then, we are left with no distinctive relationship between the aesthetic and the perceptual.

7. Conclusions

We have seen, then, that there are good reasons to reject all of the interpretations of the perceptual canonicity claim I have considered. Yet, it could reasonably be objected that this doesn't entail that no possible interpretation of the claim is successful. There may, after all, be other, more plausible, ways of interpreting the perceptual canonicity claim which I have not considered here. I have tried, so far as is possible, to address all extant interpretations of the claim but it will always remain open to the proponent of perceptual canonicity to suggest novel interpretations which might prove more successful. Until they are able to do so, though, the prospects for the perceptual canonicity claim appear rather bleak.

It might be claimed, though, that we could have good reason to accept that *some* version of the perceptual canonicity claim must be true – because, for example, we have an excellent argument in favour of accepting the general thrust of the perceptual canonicity intuition – even if we weren't yet sure which version to opt for. In principle, this is certainly correct but, unsurprisingly, I am less than sanguine about the prospects for such an approach. Again, I cannot hope to respond to every possible line of argument which could be offered here but addressing one possible line of defence for something like the perceptual canonicity intuition should prove illustrative.⁸

Consider a case where you and I are arguing about whether a work (*w*) has some property (*p*). You have seen the work for yourself and, on that basis, believe that it possesses *p*. I have not seen *w* for myself but believe, on the basis of testimony from a reliable critic, that *w* lacks *p*. It seems that, no matter how much of an expert or how scrupulously honest the relevant critic is, I will be at a clear dialectical disadvantage in such a case. Indeed, it seems that I will not be able to sensibly engage in any kind of reasoned argument with you until I have seen the work for myself. We might think, then, that such cases clearly demonstrate that the person who forms their aesthetic judgements on the basis of first-hand perception enjoys some advantage over the one who forms them by other means (even if we are unable to specify the exact nature of that advantage).

Such a conclusion would, however, be premature. In my view, the main disadvantage I possess in the case above concerns my lack of access to certain relevant facts. In particular, I do not know the reasons why the critic takes the work to lack the relevant property (indeed, it may well be that these reasons can't be conveyed by testimony alone). Give this, it is highly

⁸ I thank an anonymous referee from the journal for pushing me to consider this worry.

unlikely that I would be able to contribute much of value to our dispute (beyond merely parroting the critic's conclusion). This situation gives us no reason to endorse the perceptual canonicity claim, though, since there are non-perceptual cases where such an impasse does not arise. One example of this can be found by revisiting the kinds of case I discussed in section 5 above. While I may not have seen the latest Tim Burton film for myself, I may still be able to usefully contribute to a debate concerning its merits if I knew it was just 'more of the same'. Given the availability of such cases, then, the argument under consideration fails to lend support to any version of the perceptual canonicity claim.

It is worth stressing, though, that my intention here has not been to deny that there are *any* interesting connections between aesthetics and perception. Rather, my conclusions are entirely neutral with respect to a number of influential claims in this area. They are, for example, compatible with Kendall Walton's [1970: 337] claim that 'there is something right in the idea that what matters aesthetically about a painting or a sonata is just how it looks or sounds' and Bence Nanay's [2014: 101] recent position according to which 'many, maybe even most, traditional problems in aesthetics are in fact about philosophy of perception and can, as a result, be fruitfully addressed with the help of the conceptual apparatus of philosophy of perception'. I am not, therefore, denying that there is any fundamental link (or links) between the aesthetic and the perceptual but merely suggesting that those in search of such a link will not find it by appealing to any version of the perceptual canonicity claim.⁹

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