

## **Aesthetic Testimony and Aesthetic Concepts**

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### **Abstract**

I propose a new account of the limits of aesthetic testimony. One of this new account's main claims is that, among the kinds of aesthetic cognitive achievements, it is useful to distinguish aesthetic understanding. In particular, I suggest that the aesthetic understanding of X involves an understanding of why X is aesthetically valuable. In turn, aesthetic understanding is essentially connected to the deployment of aesthetic concepts. Given the fine-grained structure of some of these concepts, certain forms of testimony are not adequate to acquire them.

### **Introduction**

If I tell some people that I. M. Pei's Bank of China Tower is an iconic landmark of Hong Kong, and (these people believe that) I am a trustworthy source of information, they (may believe that they) have acquired some form of knowledge. However, if they have never been to Victoria Harbour and I tell them that the Bank of China Tower is a *dynamic* example of modernist or expressivist architecture, and that the way the building reflects the sunlight at dawn is *beautiful* and *mesmerising*, they (may believe that they) have not thereby attained a significant form of aesthetic cognitive achievement – after all, can they really claim to know that the building looks beautiful at dawn? Similar examples have been used to support the idea that there is something special or peculiar about the means required to gain aesthetic knowledge. In particular, it has been argued that certain conditions must be satisfied in order

to obtain (some forms of) aesthetic cognitive gain when such an achievement comes merely from testimony – or, more generally, not from direct perception of the relevant aesthetic or non-aesthetic qualities.<sup>1</sup> More specifically, one frequently discussed requirement for the transmissibility of aesthetic knowledge about X between two parties holds that both must have been experientially acquainted with the relevant properties of X. This idea is embodied in (some versions of) the Acquaintance Principle (AP), according to which P’s aesthetic judgments about X (intended as, for example, expressions of aesthetic knowledge about X) are possible/justified/adequate only if P has been acquainted with X – or, at least, with a proper aesthetic surrogate of X.<sup>2</sup>

Now, the literature on aesthetic testimony in the last ten years has centred on the debate between pessimists (who claim that aesthetic testimony is either impossible or at most limited to certain cases) and optimists (who claim that aesthetic knowledge is in principle transmissible).<sup>3</sup> However, progress seems hindered by the narrow selection of study cases considered in the debate – as recently argued by C. Thi Nguyen (Nguyen 2017, p. 21). In this paper, I suggest that even the expanded diet of examples offered by Nguyen is still insufficiently diversified (section 1); I then present a new example, which shows another interesting hinge-point of the debate (section 2). In the third section, I outline what I call the concept possession approach to the transmissibility of aesthetic cognitive gains: an account that appeals to the notions of an *aesthetic concept* and of *aesthetic understanding*. In the final section, I apply it to the case discussed in section 2 – in particular, to two intuitions that emerge from it.

One of the main positive aims of this paper is to support the idea that the transmissibility of certain forms of aesthetic knowledge depends in part on the affinity of the agents giving and

receiving the testimony. For instance, the degree of success in transferring aesthetic knowledge or understanding depends partly on the overlap of the agents' relevant repertoires of aesthetic concepts. In normal circumstances, the only way to acquire the relevant aesthetic concepts is through direct experience – and this is particularly troublesome for the transmissibility of aesthetic understanding, an aesthetic epistemic state more demanding than some forms of aesthetic knowledge.

## **1. Examples**

### **1.1 Exemplary Works of Art and Aesthetic Surrogates**

Most if not all contemporary discussions about the AP start off with cases involving the appreciation of various forms of art. For example, Paisley Livingston considers (among others) Baudelaire's poetry and Ionesco's theatre. One of Livingston's conclusions is that the AP holds in some but not all cases, namely, those cases in which the relevant judgments concern 'non-semantic, perceptually based aesthetic qualities' or 'complex features of exceptional or unusual works' (Livingston 2003, p. 276). The 'hinge-point' that is revealed by considering, for example, the unusual work of artists such as Schubert or Balthus is that linguistic descriptions cannot fully capture the specific ways in which these works display their aesthetic merits – perhaps because of the limitations of natural languages (Livingston 2003, p. 276).<sup>4</sup> More specifically, the idea seems to be that, for example, a linguistic description of a non-linguistic work of art (say, a sculpture) cannot satisfactorily convey at least some aspects of the aesthetic experience of the work upon which adequate aesthetic judgments about it depend. I think that this point is largely correct, and that an adequate approach to aesthetic testimony and its connection with the AP should account for this intuition. I think that Livingston is also

right in claiming that the AP should be amended to include the notion of an *aesthetic surrogate*: some of the qualities of X which are relevant to evaluating it aesthetically can be appreciated through the perception of Y, where X is not Y, Y is not necessarily the same kind of object as X, and Y is capable of offering an aesthetic experience of at least some of the relevant aesthetic qualities of X (Livingston 2003, pp. 262-4). For example, although a picture of a painting is not a painting, it seems reasonable to claim that – within certain limits – a photograph may suffice to enable the appreciation of a fair amount of the relevant aesthetic qualities of the painting it is a picture of. What constitutes a good aesthetic surrogate may be a matter of degree and vary between different media. For instance, a good translation of a novel may be regarded as a proper and accurate aesthetic surrogate, but a movie based on a novel is not likely to be an equally proper aesthetic surrogate for the novel itself. The account I present in section 3 incorporates these points in a general framework that purports to explain them and defend their plausibility.

## **1.2 Recommendation Cases**

A different sort of example has been explored by Robert Hopkins, Daniel Whiting, and others. In particular, these philosophers discussed cases in which one person recommends to another (frequently, ‘you’) a movie or a kind of music; ‘you’ then decide to perform a certain action on the basis of the recommendation (Hopkins 2011, Nguyen 2017, Whiting 2015). For instance, Hopkins considers a case in which it seems rational and justified to watch one movie rather than another on the basis of a friend’s recommendation (Hopkins 2011, p. 153). This example is used to argue that there are cases in which the AP – intended as a norm regulating the transmissibility of aesthetic knowledge – lapses (Hopkins 2001, p. 154): perhaps implicitly, by following your friend’s advice you are acting in a way that shows that you now have a

certain aesthetic belief (e.g., that the movie is aesthetically valuable). Given the (believed) reliability of your friend's judgment, such a belief may count as a form of knowledge – or, better, as a cognitive state sufficient to cause a justified action that is at least rational to perform. However, Hopkins argues, once 'you' have experienced the movie, the other person's recommendation may be superseded by new aesthetic beliefs about it acquired from your own experience.<sup>5</sup> This kind of example is meant to show that there is a distinction between the norms governing the assertibility of aesthetic judgments and those governing (other kinds of) actions based on aesthetic reasons. In a nutshell, the idea is that whereas it may be reasonable to perform certain actions based on aesthetic beliefs acquired via testimony, we may not be thereby entitled to make aesthetic judgments merely on this basis.

A similar example is used to investigate cases in which there is a more significant asymmetry between the two people involved in the (alleged) transmission of aesthetic knowledge. For instance, Nguyen considers a case involving a musical philistine and a professor of music theory (Nguyen 2017, pp. 22-3). Notwithstanding the philistine's failed attempt at understanding why a certain kind of music is valuable, he follows the advice of the expert and consents to send his daughter to a school to learn this kind of music. In the example, it is argued that the philistine not only follows the advice but is also reassured about the music's value. Nguyen claims that, in this case, the AP lapses, and aesthetic knowledge is somehow transferred (or at least an aesthetic belief is legitimately acquired) – a manifestation of which is the alleged intuition that the philistine's action is somehow justified or rational.

I do not find this claim persuasive also because other descriptions of the outcome of the scenario seem to provide the basis for more plausible explanations. For instance, we may argue that the philistine's decision is best understood not as one based on acquired aesthetic

knowledge or belief but in terms of other motivational factors or generic rational norms (Meskin 2004). More precisely, his decision may adhere to a norm of rationality to the effect that, absent defeaters, we should defer to (recognised) experts when we believe we understand an issue insufficiently well to make an inevitable decision about it – something that may not have anything to do with (sincerely) holding an aesthetic belief. We may argue that had the philistine really acquired the belief that the kind of music in question is aesthetically valuable, he would have other dispositions as well: for example, a disposition to enjoy or partially detect some of its good-making features.

Leaving this scenario aside for a moment, let us now examine other cases. In particular, Nguyen proposes two more kinds of recommendation case, *Private Display* and *Public Display* (Nguyen 2017, pp. 25-6). The first new case involves a rich philistine who purchases a work of art he does not regard as beautiful – say, a Rothko or a Pollock – upon a so-called art expert’s recommendation. The rich philistine then hangs the painting in his bedroom because, Nguyen says, the philistine believes (‘is confident’) that it is beautiful – even though he cannot see that for himself. The second case involves a similar situation, but with the painting displayed not in the rich philistine’s private boudoir but in his own, publicly accessible, local museum. Nguyen argues that the philistine’s actions in the first case are ‘ridiculous’, but in the second, reasonable (Nguyen 2017, p. 25). The point Nguyen wants to make is that it is not true that the only important hinge point of the debate is the difference between acting and making judgments based on aesthetic testimony, since there are asymmetric cases also in applying testimonial aesthetic beliefs to actions. Our resistance to aesthetic testimony does not depend, at least not exclusively, on the warranted assertibility–actionability distinction but instead or, better, additionally on whether personal aesthetic experiences are involved – for

instance, when the scenario involves something primarily for the public, it seems (more) rational to rely upon testimonial aesthetic beliefs from (alleged) experts.

The asymmetric reasonability of the philistine's actions in the last two scenarios, according to Nguyen, is better explained by referring to the different content of the relevant aesthetic beliefs: more specifically, in the structure of the aesthetic properties involved. In particular, according to him, some aesthetic properties are composed of both a subjective and a cognitive component: the former depends on first-hand experience and can be apprehended only thereby, while the latter, being representational, does not.<sup>6</sup> On this view, some aesthetic properties both inspire a certain feeling that can be known through a relevant experience and have a representational component that can be rationally evaluated. For instance, we can evaluate whether a certain response to an aesthetic property is merited (Nguyen 2017, p. 31). Consider a property such as being graceful. On Nguyen's view, this property seems to be composed of two other properties or components: the personal feeling associated with an experience of a graceful object (the subjective component) and the property of meriting a certain response (the cognitive component). According to what he calls the *sensibility* account, there is something wrong in claiming that, for example, an object is graceful without having experienced it because, without acquaintance, we would not engage with both parts of gracefulness. On the other hand, claims regarding the aesthetic value of certain objects can be more reliably transmitted and acted upon (Nguyen 2017, p. 29). This account, applied to the two cases at issue, would correctly imply that the philistine is reasonable in acting upon a belief regarding the aesthetic worth of his Rothko in the *Public Display* scenario, but unreasonable in hanging it on the walls of his bedroom solely because someone else told him that the painting is vibrant or beautiful. However, Nguyen's application of this account to *Public Display* and *Private Display* is not entirely convincing. In particular, according to his

account of the hinge exposed by these cases, two distinct properties can be involved in the transmission of aesthetic testimony. More specifically, he argues that on the sensibility account, we should consider ‘whether something is found beautiful, and whether it merits a beauty-response. ... We should be pessimists about *the subjective aesthetic property of beauty* and optimists about *the objective property of merit*’ (Nguyen 2017, p. 31, emphasis mine). However, unless properly specified, it is not clear that he can consistently claim that the cases he discusses both involve *aesthetic* testimony. In fact, on Nguyen’s account of aesthetic properties (or, at least, according to my understanding of it), we should not say that being beautiful is a merely subjective one (‘the subjective aesthetic property of beauty’), or merely a cognitive one, because being beautiful is supposed to include at least two components. If we are to be optimistic about the cognitive component of beauty, it is not clear that such an optimism concerns an aesthetic property at all, or at least more than a part of one. The confusion grows when he writes,

Knowledge of aesthetic properties, like beauty, cannot pass through testimony because there is a first-personal requirement attached to subjective properties. But knowledge that something merits a beauty-response can pass through testimony because merit is a cognitive matter. (Nguyen 2017, p. 31)

Again, does this mean that the property of deserving a beauty-response is a different property from being beautiful? If it is a different property, then such a property does not seem to be an aesthetic property on Nguyen’s own preferred account since it lacks one component of what makes aesthetic properties what they are. At most, on his view, it is part of an aesthetic property. If that is the case, then, after all, on the sensibility account, *Public Display* and *Private Display* are not really asymmetric scenarios both involving transmission of knowledge of a



(full-blown) aesthetic property. What *Public Display* seems to show that we can transmit is knowledge of ‘having aesthetic value according to an expert’ or ‘the objective property of merit’ – and these properties are not aesthetic in Nguyen’s own sense.

In the next section, I offer an example that reveals a new and underexplored hinge in the current debate.

## **2. A New Example**

Consider the following case.

*Quaid Goes to Mars:* On Earth, Quaid steps into the teletransporter.<sup>7</sup> This device records the precise physical structure and composition of the user inside the device and beams this information to a receiver device on Mars, which in turn ‘prints’ the information it receives on the same kind of physical material of which the original Quaid is made. Notice that the resulting individual’s mental states are causally connected to the mental states of the individual who stepped into the recording device. Initially the two individuals are qualitatively indistinguishable, and they will have a high degree of physical and psychological similarity for some time after the activation of the device. Suppose that the individual on Earth is (exceptionally) not destroyed, and so two distinct individuals now exist who are (momentarily) qualitatively indistinguishable: Quaid<sub>Earth</sub> and Quaid<sub>Mars</sub>.

Suppose that, before the teletransportation, the original Quaid was a movie critic and was equipped with what it takes to properly evaluate landscapes.<sup>8</sup> After the

teletransportation, Quaid<sub>Earth</sub> watches *Total Recall* (1990) for the first time and Quaid<sub>Mars</sub> goes for a tour of Olympus Mons, a volcano on Mars. The latter enjoys the view – based on this experience, he now knows or comes to believe that Olympus Mons is beautiful. Suppose that after their experiences, the Quaid<sub>s</sub> converse through Voidpe (a new version of Skype) and exchange their views on what they experienced. For example, Quaid<sub>Earth</sub> tells Quaid<sub>Mars</sub> that the movie is witty, humorous, and full of quirky technology. Perhaps not a masterpiece of cinematic art, but definitely enjoyable, with its fast-paced action and catchy Schwarzenegger one-liners (which Quaid<sub>Earth</sub> enjoyed in *Predator* and *Commando*, as Quaid<sub>Mars</sub> also remembers).

Now, have Quaid<sub>Earth</sub> and/or Quaid<sub>Mars</sub> acquired at least some kind of assertible or actionable aesthetic cognitive gain about part of the Martian landscape (e.g., that Olympus Mons is beautiful) or *Total Recall* (e.g., that the movie is a vigorous and engaging sci-fi extravaganza), respectively? It seems implausible to hold that Quaid<sub>Earth</sub> has not acquired some proper belief about the (alleged) aesthetic value of part of Mars. After all, the kind of experience and reaction to it that Quaid<sub>Mars</sub> had are presumably almost indistinguishable from those Quaid<sub>Earth</sub> would have had – including their subsequent dispositions to perform certain actions based on their newly acquired beliefs. It is almost as if Quaid<sub>Earth</sub> had had the experience himself. In fact, by supposition, the Quaid<sub>s</sub> started with the same aesthetic epistemic profile (that is, the same set of psychophysical features responsible for their aesthetic perception, judgment, and forms of aesthetic knowledge) before the experiences; given equal circumstances, their respective aesthetic experiences, and resulting beliefs and judgments, would not differ in case we substitute one Quaid with the other. In other words, for at least a short time, they are interchangeable with respect to their aesthetic epistemic profiles: in a situation C, Quaid<sub>Earth</sub> would obtain the same aesthetic cognitive gain that Quaid<sub>Mars</sub> would

obtain from experiencing the relevant objects in C. Also, knowing themselves very well, the two Quaid's regard each other as sincere. In this case, Quaid<sub>Earth</sub> seems to have assertible and actionable beliefs about the beauty of Olympus Mons. If this reasoning is correct, then Nguyen's sensiblist account is at best incomplete: Quaid<sub>Earth</sub> seems now to possess an actionable and assertible form of aesthetic belief (e.g., Olympus Mons is beautiful) regarding at least some aesthetic property (being beautiful) that has a feeling component. In other words, aesthetic testimony was successful – for reasons that will be further specified. On the sensiblist account, we should be pessimistic about the transmissibility of aesthetic knowledge related to all ascriptions of beauty since this property contains a subjective component. However, my example shows that, in a sense and under some specific assumptions, aesthetic testimony can succeed also in cases involving the transmission of reliable beliefs about aesthetic properties that have a subjective component, since it seems plausible to say that each Quaid has acquired a certain kind of actionable and assertible aesthetic belief. Still, even if it seems plausible that the previous case involves the successful transmission of (some form of) aesthetic knowledge, there is something that is missing in Quaid<sub>Earth</sub>'s and in Quaid<sub>Mars</sub>'s epistemic status with respect to the aesthetic features of Olympus Mons and *Total Recall*, respectively. For instance, after their new experiences, Quaid<sub>Mars</sub> seems to be in a superior epistemic state with respect to understanding the aesthetic features of Olympus Mons, at least when compared to Quaid<sub>Earth</sub>. Cognitive affinity notwithstanding, the Quaid's respective aesthetic epistemic states still seem to differ after their new experiences. *Quaid Goes to Mars* shows that there are other underappreciated hinges in the contemporary debate on aesthetic testimony. In the next section, I will outline an account that explains both intuitions emerging from *Quaid Goes to Mars*: (1) the importance of cognitive affinity in the transmissibility of aesthetic knowledge (an importance that transcends and is not entirely captured by the

assertibility-actionability distinction) and (2) the persistence of an epistemic asymmetry in spite of significant cognitive affinity.

### **3. The Concept Possession Account**

Following Frank Sibley and Malcolm Budd, I will understand aesthetic judgments as comprising (i) ‘purely evaluative’ judgments, which ascribe a low, medium, or high aesthetic value to an object without specifying the (kinds of) features at the basis of such an attribution (e.g., ‘*Total Recall* is superb’); (ii) ‘purely descriptive’ judgments, which ascribe a property to an object without thereby indicating the object’s aesthetic value; (iii) evaluation-added judgments, which ascribe a property to an object indicating that such a property is regarded as adding value to the object or detracting value from it (e.g., ‘That painting is garish’) (Budd 2008). Other categories of judgments may be included, but for our purposes these will suffice. In what follows, I will understand aesthetic judgments as mental events, expressible in linguistic form, that may deploy different kinds of aesthetic concepts in different contexts. Also, I will frame my discussion in terms of aesthetic *concepts* rather than properties and, along with a trend in the philosophy of mind and cognitive science, I will understand tokenised concepts as instances of mental representations having semantic properties, more or less fine-grained, that occur in thought.<sup>9</sup> In the sense of ‘fine-grained’ used in the literature, two concepts can differ even if they refer to the same entity necessarily. I will use the expressions ‘fine-grained’ and ‘finer-grained’ to indicate an aspect of the structure of certain concepts, which can be more or less detailed, have specific structural components and, consequently, represent more or less accurately and specifically. In particular, concepts can be fine-grained to different degrees and have different kinds of structure, depending on such factors as their origins and their representational content (i.e., what and how they purport to represent). For

example, I will understand GRACEFUL IN THE STYLE OF GRACE KELLY as a finer-grained concept than GRACEFUL, as the former both contains the latter and includes a way of specifying it.<sup>10</sup>

A further issue is whether having a certain set of capacities or dispositions (i) is what it is to possess a concept, or (ii) determines the possession conditions for having a concept. For example, on Christopher Peacocke's view, having a concept amounts to being disposed to have certain beliefs and make certain inferences under specific conditions. Many philosophers have understood concept possession as a sort of dispositional condition, frequently spelled out in terms of *knowing that* or *knowing how* – Jerry Fodor calls this approach 'concept pragmatism' (Fodor 1998 and 2004, p. 29). On this approach, whether a person possesses a concept essentially depends also on the person's disposition to draw certain inferences from thoughts containing the relevant concept *in virtue of* that concept being a constituent of those thoughts. Some concepts, for example observational concepts, may involve also (or exclusively) the capacity to distinguish the things they correctly classify. This ability is supposed to be activated under favourable conditions for typical instances of the concept (one such concept, plausibly, is RED).

In the contemporary literature on concepts, there is also significant disagreement regarding what kind of mental representation concepts are and how they operate. For example, some claim that empirical evidence would show that categorisation (one of the central tasks for which concepts are deployed) operates on the basis of prototypes – concepts would operate on the basis of statistical information regarding the properties that are generally associated with the classes of objects they represent (Rosch 1978, Murphy 2002). Others argue that conceptual categorisation is better explained by referring to the degree to which what is

categorised is relevantly similar to *exemplars* of the category in question. Other models of the functioning of concepts have been proposed, the alleged superiority of which would depend on their better explanatory power with regard to other specific tasks (Medin et alia 2000 and Weiskopf 2009, p. 151-5). Given the multiplicity of representational formats (linguistic, iconic, etc.) and the ways in which they seem to represent (prototypically, by deploying exemplars or, in certain limited cases, necessary and sufficient conditions), a *pluralist* view of the nature and representational properties of concepts is probably best: there are different kinds of concepts, structured in ways that may differ in relation to the cognitive tasks for which they are put to use, and the possession of concepts is partly constituted and manifested by certain dispositions or capacities (e.g., the capacity to judge an object in a certain way). With regard to aesthetic concepts, we may argue that they can be in different formats – including hybrid linguistic-iconic ones – and that correctly deploying them depends also on certain specific abilities, for example, aesthetic taste (Sibley 1959/2001). My conception of an aesthetic concept is compatible with the idea that it may be a matter of degree whether we possess certain concepts: as some concepts can be more or less structured in certain respects (and thus involve more or fewer inferential patterns and abilities), so our possession of them may be gradual with respect to our mastery of their various structural aspects. The relationship between aesthetic concepts and the way we express them has a further layer of complication related to the generality of the concepts at issue. For example, after having watched *Reservoir Dogs* and paid attention to its dialogues, we may use expressions such as ‘a snappy dialogue in the style of *Reservoir Dogs*’ to describe one aspect of the movie. However, the listener could not (fully) understand what we intended to convey without having the relevant concept or at least parts of it. One reason is that a listener who has not seen *Reservoir Dogs* seems to possess at most only the concept SNAPPY, since full understanding of IN THE STYLE OF RESERVOIR DOGS seems to require recognitional capacities that a merely verbal report of the movie,

without repeating the dialogues themselves, cannot transmit. As a consequence, the listener may only partly understand the concept SNAPPY IN THE STYLE OF RESERVOIR DOGS and thus not fully understand some of the aesthetic features of the movie.<sup>11</sup> That is, the listener cannot fully understand the way in which an important aspect of the movie in question (and thus the movie itself) can be aesthetically valuable without possessing the entire concept.<sup>12</sup>

I think that similar considerations prompted various writers to feel that there is something mysterious or not completely linguistically explicable about many judgments of taste. For instance, Edmund Burke writes:

Gracefulness is an idea not very different from beauty; it consists in much the same things. Gracefulness is an idea belonging to posture and motion. In both these, to be graceful, it is requisite that there be no appearance of difficulty; there is required a small inflexion of the body; and a composure of the parts, in such a manner, as not to incumber each other, nor to appear divided by sharp and sudden angles. In this case, this roundness, this delicacy of attitude and motion, it is that all the magic of grace consists, and what is called *je ne sais quoi*; as will be obvious to any observer who considers attentively the Venus de Medicis, the Antinous, or any statue generally allowed to be graceful in an high degree. (Burke 1757/1998, p. 109)

The above passage can be taken to be about not only the necessity of using demonstrative expressions based on experience to transmit forms of aesthetic knowledge – it is *this* roundness and *this* delicacy that ground the gracefulness of the Venus de' Medici – but also the fact that aesthetic judgments seem to be grounded in certain determinate and specific features of what

is being conceptualised. For example, GRACEFUL is properly applied in thinking about the Venus de' Medici in virtue of some of its determinate and specific, perceivable features – along with other considerations regarding its kind or category of artwork (Sibley 1974/2001, p. 95-8).

Equipped with these notions, we may now attempt to rephrase some ideas from the previous section. In particular, we may argue that the degree of success in transmitting aesthetic knowledge or understanding about X through aesthetic testimony alone (that is, without the listener having had first-hand experience of the relevant features of X or of an adequate aesthetic surrogate) depends on the kind of aesthetic cognitive gain and on how much the individuals (before and after communicating) share the relevant fine-grained aesthetic concepts. In normal situations (e.g., without teletransporters) involving sensory experiences of aesthetic objects, finer-grained, more specific aesthetic concepts can be acquired and mastered only through sense perception precisely because merely linguistic testimony lacks the representational resources to (fully) transmit the relevant concepts or let us acquire the relevant capacities to master them. In some cases, the incommunicability of the finer-grained ways in which we represent the objects of our sense perception justifies the AP. In particular, to the extent that a fuller or better understanding of the objects of appreciation depends on these more specific concepts, the AP seems to be correct. Aesthetic knowledge, on the other hand, may not always require as much conceptual specificity as aesthetic understanding – for example, in cases of purely evaluative aesthetic judgements. On the concept possession account, the importance of cognitive affinity for aesthetic testimony is explained through a need for interlocutors to share sufficiently fine-grained concepts.



How does this approach account for the intuition about the persistent epistemic asymmetry between the two Quuids? First, we can claim that there is a distinction between at least two aims that aesthetic testimony may have: the aim of transmitting aesthetic knowledge and that of transmitting aesthetic understanding.<sup>13</sup> At a more general level, it is frequently argued that knowledge and understanding are at least *prima facie* different cognitive attitudes (Elgin 1996, Kvanvig 2003, Pritchard 2009, 2010, p. 74–6). In particular, understanding is an attitude, applicable to objects, propositions and events, that can sometimes be more demanding than knowledge. The reason is that understanding, intended here as understanding *why*, essentially involves a grasp of the causes and functioning of the objects or events at issue with respect to the kind of quality ascribed to them.<sup>14</sup> Some epistemologists have also argued that understanding, unlike knowledge, (i) admits of degrees and (ii) is compatible with epistemic luck (Kvanvig 2003). For instance, Jonathan Kvanvig suggests that we can properly claim to have acquired some understanding of an historical event from a book that is only accidentally true or accessible, but that owing to this element of epistemic luck we have not thereby obtained knowledge – and this would be a case of understanding without knowledge (Kvanvig 2003, p. 197-8).<sup>15</sup> Duncan Pritchard has emphasised the idea that coming to understand is a kind of cognitive achievement, in which a subject undertakes an ‘obstacle-overcoming effort’ to assemble pieces of information in a relevant whole (Pritchard 2009). In this paper, I will regard aesthetic understanding of X as involving a grasp of the reasons why X is aesthetically valuable in the way it is through the deployment of adequately structured aesthetic concepts. In other words, if I aesthetically understand X, I can represent, with sufficient accuracy and specificity for the context, the connection between X’s positive or negative aesthetic value and the specific reasons that underpin it. Crucially, such reasons can be (partly) constituted by, identical with, or understood in virtue of deploying aesthetic concepts. Some of these concepts can be very fine-grained – there might be concepts essentially containing indexical

references to specific features of the object in question and to the specific way in which they are realised. For example, only someone with the conceptual resources to grasp what gives a landscape its aesthetic value (or disvalue) can claim adequate aesthetic understanding of it. The degree of cognitive achievement obtained in a state of aesthetic understanding depends on the adequateness of the aesthetic concepts deployed in the specific context. Now, consider again *Quaid Goes to Mars*, in which ‘is beautiful’ stands for ‘has positive aesthetic value’. In this case, the concept possession view can account for the intuition that there is still a difference in the epistemic status of the two Quaid’s by saying, for example, that albeit Quaid<sub>Earth</sub> may *know* that Olympus Mons is beautiful after communicating with Quaid<sub>Mars</sub>, Quaid<sub>Earth</sub> lacks a full aesthetic *understanding* of it. So, there is a sense in which Quaid<sub>Earth</sub> has obtained some sort of aesthetic cognitive gain, but his overall epistemic status with respect to the Martian landscape is still inferior to Quaid<sub>Mars</sub>’s as he did not have the experience required to acquire aesthetic concepts fine-grained enough to fully grasp its aesthetic value.

One objection to this view is that it is not clear why aesthetic concepts would be required for understanding why something is aesthetically valuable, or aesthetically valuable in the way it is. After all, the objection goes, all we need is the capacity to represent a specific feature (that particular shape) and this may not involve anything especially ‘aesthetic’. For example, we may argue that in order to explain the aesthetic value of a room we may need only to represent, say, one or more angles – THAT ANGLE or THOSE ANGLES. However, the aesthetic understanding of X requires more than representing certain formal features of an object. In particular, we also need to connect the determinate non-aesthetic feature(s) of X to one or more aesthetic qualities to properly understand the basis of the aesthetic value of X. In other words, aesthetically understanding X involves deploying aesthetic concepts sufficiently fine-grained to explain why X is aesthetically valuable in the way it is. Such concepts will not be

merely, say, recognitional concepts (THAT CURVATURE), but will also involve representing a certain curvature *as* graceful, or at least connecting the curvature to an aesthetic concept. For example, the concepts deployed in aesthetically understanding gracefulness should be expressed in an aesthetic judgment having the structure ‘that X is GRACEFUL IN THAT CURVATURE’, where the inscribed concept is a representation that connects the specific features of X to the way in which they contribute to or constitute the aesthetic merits of X. On this view, I (fully) aesthetically understand that an X is aesthetically valuable only if I represent how the features at issue (e.g., a curvature) make it aesthetically valuable in a certain way (e.g., by making it graceful). It is in this sense that I claim that specific or fine-grained aesthetic concepts are required for full aesthetic understanding.

To sum up, understanding an object aesthetically involves grasping the specific reasons why the object has the aesthetic value it has. Such an understanding requires possession and/or mastery of aesthetic concepts that are fine-grained or specific enough to discern those determinate features that give the object aesthetic value. The level of specificity and mastery depends on the context. If we think of cases of aesthetic testimony involving solely linguistic reports of non-linguistic aesthetic objects, since an ability to deploy the relevant concepts is hardly transmissible solely by testimony (partly because of the limits of our natural languages), acquaintance with the relevant object or with an adequate aesthetic surrogate is necessary for the aesthetic understanding of an object. Based on these ideas – which constitute the concept possession account – we can reformulate the AP in terms of understanding as follows:

(AP–U) Where X’s aesthetic value depends on fine-grained features, P’s adequate aesthetic understanding of X is possible only after and as a consequence of P’s acquaintance with X or with an adequate aesthetic surrogate of X. In addition, such

an acquaintance essentially involves the relevant aesthetic concepts appropriate to represent X.

## **Applications and Conclusions**

How can the cognitive account explain the intuitions raised by the scenarios discussed in 1.2? In general, this account suggests that we can deploy the distinction between cases involving some forms of aesthetic knowledge and those involving understanding. For instance, we may claim that the philistine in Nguyen's cases may have aesthetic knowledge regarding the aesthetic worth of a Rothko but does not have an understanding of it. One reason is that some (but perhaps not all) cases of aesthetic knowledge require less conceptual specificity than full aesthetic understanding does. Since the philistine does not grasp the aesthetic value of the artwork he possesses – that is, he does not have the required concepts or perhaps does not sufficiently master them – it may be unreasonable to keep it in his bedroom – at least if he does not plan to impress someone there with his conspicuous consumption. Moreover, under normal circumstances, there cannot be significant aesthetic cognitive gain in merely linguistic interactions between individuals having markedly different aesthetic profiles and no common acquaintance with the objects at issue – provided that the proper representational format for their appreciation is not linguistic. In recommendation cases and in cases equivalent to *Quaid Goes to Mars*, linguistic aesthetic testimony is sufficient to transfer a certain degree of aesthetic understanding if those involved possess or have enough mastery of relevant concepts. To the extent that they can both deploy aesthetic concepts of sufficient specificity, they may transfer some degree of aesthetic understanding through mere verbal testimony. The more their aesthetic profiles differ, the less successfully they will transmit aesthetic understanding. For instance, to the

extent that *Quaid*<sub>Mars</sub> can deploy aesthetic concepts shared with *Quaid*<sub>Earth</sub> relevantly similar to those involved in appreciating the Martian landscape, the former can transmit some degree of understanding to the latter – although the latter’s understanding, without direct experience, will not reach the same level as that of the former.

Increasing one’s own aesthetic understanding of *X* is more demanding than obtaining some forms of aesthetic knowledge: with the exception of extraordinary cases (e.g., the reduplication of entire persons, brain transplants and so on), one usually cannot obtain aesthetic concepts fine-grained enough without experiencing *X* (or a proper aesthetic surrogate). Aesthetic knowledge about *X* is less demanding, at least when we can obtain certain properly justified beliefs about aesthetic matters without needing to make connections between *X*’s aesthetic value and the reasons for *X*’s having such value. Given this asymmetry, the concept possession account can explain both of the intuitions emerging from *Quaid Goes to Mars*.

One possible objection to what I have proposed is that recent findings in experimental aesthetics seem to have shown that it is hard if not impossible to ensure that our aesthetic judgments are based on objects’ intrinsic features. Rather, the reasoning goes, these judgments (whether to express aesthetic knowledge or understanding) would be irremediably infected by apparently irrelevant facts – e.g., social influence or mere exposition (Sackris 2021). In short, aesthetic judgements of a certain complexity and detail seem inevitably arbitrary. Now, I am not entirely persuaded that the empirical studies on, say, the mere exposure effect do indeed show this much. However, for the purposes of this paper, suffice it to say that the revised AP, the concept possession account, and the account of aesthetic understanding delineated above are all concerned with the normative epistemic

conditions that should be satisfied to make aesthetic cognitive gains. Those claiming that aesthetic judgements are *de facto* arbitrary could in principle agree with much of what is suggested above and then interpret the empirical findings on which they base their view as showing that such normative conditions are never met in the real world. In conclusion, most of the claims made in this paper could be in principle compatible with empirical findings showing that few or no people base their judgements on what they should.

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<sup>1</sup> Some scholars characterise this kind of cognitive achievement as the acquisition of aesthetic *beliefs*, others in terms of *knowledge*. My arguments are meant to apply to both (with some qualifications) so I will distinguish them only when needed.

<sup>2</sup> The contemporary debate on this principle has been recently reinvigorated also by these seminal works: Budd (2003), Gorodeisky (2010), Hopkins (2000, 2011), Livingston (2003), Meskin (2004), Mothersill (1984) and Wollheim (1980). The AP has been interpreted as articulating an epistemic, a non-epistemic or even a peculiarly aesthetic norm. More specifically, as stating (i) an essential requirement for making epistemically adequate aesthetic judgments, (ii) a non-epistemic norm – for example, a norm of use for making morally appropriate judgments – or (iii) a norm that characterises aesthetic judgments as such. In this paper, I will understand the AP as an epistemic requirement. I will use primarily the term ‘adequate’ to describe those forms of cognitive gain that meet at least to a certain degree such an epistemic norm.

<sup>3</sup> Admittedly, sometimes the differences between these views are so subtle and nuanced that they may appear almost indistinguishable.

<sup>4</sup> This point is discussed also in Sibley (1974/2001). Robson (2018) offers a criticism of Livingston.

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<sup>5</sup> See Robson (2013) for an extended criticism of Hopkins' paper and Robson (2015) for an extended discussion of the norms of assertion in aesthetics.

<sup>6</sup> I write 'some aesthetic properties' because Nguyen does not seem to want to be committed to the claim that *all* aesthetic properties have these two components. Nguyen's account of aesthetic properties borrows some ideas from McDowell (1998). See De Clercq (2002) and Levinson (2005) on aesthetic properties. The sense of 'representational' at issue here does not coincide with my subsequent use of 'mental representation' in the next section.

<sup>7</sup> I have noticed that examples of this kind elicit strong reactions from my readers or interlocutors: some do enjoy them, while others find them tiresome (or worse). I do apologise to the latter sort, but I do not have the space to defend this argumentative style here.

<sup>8</sup> The scenario is intended to be neutral with respect to various accounts of the proper appreciation of natural beauty. See Carlson (2008) for an introduction.

<sup>9</sup> See Laurence and Margolis (1999) and Murphy (2002) for overviews of the recent literature on the nature of concepts, and Camp (2009) for an assessment of the current debate. See Fodor (1985), Haugeland (1989), and Ryder (2009) on the nature of mental representation. Peacocke (1992) claims that concepts are Fregean senses, the identity conditions of which are determined by their possession conditions. Although I have assumed a certain view on the metaphysics of concepts (that is, concepts as mental representations), most of my claims are compatible with other conceptions of their nature. See Sauchelli (2022) for an extended discussion and my favourite account of aesthetic concepts.

<sup>10</sup> I will use the convention of referring to concepts using small capital letters. On the structural properties of concepts, see Fodor (1987, 1998).

<sup>11</sup> See Wikforss (2017) on partially understanding a concept.

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<sup>12</sup> It may be possible that, having watched other movies by Tarantino (e.g., *Pulp Fiction*) with sufficiently similar dialogue styles, the listener can still achieve a good level of understanding of *SNAPPY IN THE STYLE OF RESERVOIR DOGS*.

<sup>13</sup> Compare Alison Hills' work on aesthetic understanding (Hills 2018). Our accounts are similar but also significantly different: for instance, mine includes reference to the role of concepts and their structure in understanding. For reasons of space, I will not outline here all the relevant similarities and differences.

<sup>14</sup> I will not explore in detail the issue of whether 'understanding why X' works or can be reduced to forms of 'understanding that P'.

<sup>15</sup> Pritchard presents a slightly modified version of this scenario in terms of environmental luck that purports to be more plausible (Pritchard 2010, pp. 78–80).