

Distinguishing deep versus shallow accounts of aesthetic experience and why it matters.

In my long attempt to lay down adequate conditions for a unified, objective theory of beauty -- understanding "beauty" as shorthand for aesthetic value (positive, negative, great or small) -- I have not yet dealt with the staggering complexity of what I now see as the true reality. Today I wish to share some of these revelations. This has brought me to recognize the truly deep character of aesthetic experience and the remarkable implications this has for any theory of real beauty.

First, by a deep account I mean one that acknowledges the full character of aesthetic experience, not just the traits we commonly recognize. Secondly I mean one that draws the conclusions from the account even when they violate our commonsense and leave us powerless to reach the consequences even our refined normal understanding depends on. And yet these conclusions do not entail the subjectivity or relativity so often assumed by skeptics.

A collateral benefit is enhanced understanding of our everyday epistemic state, though again in violation of our normal understanding of our knowledge of reality.

Results like these will doubtless engender a lot of resistance. For a lot of apple carts are overturned. But I do not aim at provocation, only at what I am driven to believe must be the truth.

The recent online meetings of the American Society for Aesthetics seem to me to manifest a shallow account of aesthetic experience that will foreclose the whole idea of a real beauty and leave us bereft of any possibility of a coherent understanding of why we use the same term ("aesthetic appreciation") for the wildly different appreciations of the easy and the challenging sorts of foci, from the jejune, easy beauties to the disgusting and ugly. These shallow accounts seem in urgent need of a new and radical deepening, which is what I am aiming at here.

I The full content of an aesthetic appreciation

Typically, in our aesthetic experience and discourse, we think only of a very limited object of appreciation. It is the painting, or the poem, or the evening sky. But we realize that it is the qualities of the thing, say the particular color and form that we admire. It is what we admire about the painting or poem that is closer to being the object of our regard. But is this all? Is this a full account? Certainly not. Any number of other things with the same ensemble of properties we are thinking of could engender a very different response. So where does the specificity run out? Where can we draw a line between what counts and what does not? I suspect we have no clear idea. Further, the constituent qualities are more important or less important to us, though again we have little idea of their weight. Some have to do with the authorship, the other works of the creator, and so forth. A full account will have to embrace the real totality, and that recedes farther and farther in the recesses of our lived experience as we mount a serious survey.

Further yet, our past experience, all those things that make us the person we are, in the culture that has brought us up, with the manifold contingencies that have intruded, cannot be excluded. The whole mass is implicated.

The salient characteristics of what we may call the *full content* are (a) the qualitative and unconceptualizable nature of the totality; and (b) the variably conscious and preconscious presence of its elements. What we know is only that however hidden to our consciousness this awareness is, it is what shapes our aesthetic attitude toward the thing in question.

II What is it for our aesthetic attitude response to be disinterested?

Traditionally philosophical aestheticians put great weight on disinterested pleasure as the hallmark of valid appreciation. Yet critics typically doubted that the idea could be defined without circularity. The complaint was that no prizing of a thing could be really free of self-interest. In support of this critics cited the personal interests that regularly accompany our admiration. Honesty dictates admission of the close relation. We go to the museum hoping to obtain aesthetic pleasure. Generally, the moment we do, we are personally gratified. How could this be otherwise? But this in any way conflict with the genuinely disinterested admiration we feel toward the work? Clearly not: co-presence in a complex state of mind does not imply causation. Our personal pleasure need not bias our disinterested pleasure. Indeed, typically it depends upon that disinterested pleasure.

Here the criterion is merely that the pleasure is disinterested when the disinterested component of the total state of mind is *necessary*. When, but for it, the object would not be admired. This seemingly weak requirement for disinterestedness allows for all the variations that are essential to an appreciation being aesthetically disinterested. The plausibility of this lies in the fact that a person can admire work that she hates, dislikes in many ways, but still regards as impersonally worthy of some positive regard; and similarly a person can like work that she still regards as unworthy. And both of these states can reasonably engender some personal satisfaction for having taken the measure of the work.¹

III What general superiority distinguishes accurate from inaccurate perception of qualities?

From colors and forms to beauty and ugliness, a chief criterion of acuity is maximal discrimination, given that all maximal discriminators converge on the same distinctions. The more finely discriminating – the more shades of colors or tones – a person can consistently identify (given convergence of other high discriminators), the more authoritative that person's discrimination. This criterion is enshrined in driver's license tests and in the standard procedures of Munsell and other color operatives.

Maximal discrimination criteria apply to all the dimensions of the theory being proposed. Much more will be said about this below.

IV What is it for a response to be disinterestedly *aesthetic*?

Almost everyone allows that an aesthetic attitude has to be qualitative rather than quantitative, a requirement stressed by Guy Sircello². But this leaves a vital part of the full character of the attitude unmentioned. For a striking feature of aesthetic descriptions is the prevalence of metaphor. This offers us a new opening in developing a theory of aesthetic evaluation, namely to define aesthetic appreciation and evaluation to be essentially appreciation and admiration of metaphorical impressions constitutive of the object. They form a distinct class of phenomena. Psychologists have noted the universality of what I will call impressions of crossmodal resemblance, a classic case being the Kikki-Bubba, Ping-Pong and Mil-Mal shapes (see the

¹ A similar criterion applies to moral attitudes in relation to self-interest.

² In his 1975 *New Theory of Beauty*.

Appendix). Equally universal are the speed of lines, the warmth and coolness of colors. These are all non-literal or “as if” resemblances, since the things that “possess” them belong to categories that exclude them. Cases abound. Music cannot be literally jovial or sad. A fully saturated and bright red cannot be literally warm. But it cannot be seen as cool.

Granted, there are complications. Some cases, such as the sadness of music has some literal resemblance to aspects of sadness of feeling or behavior. This requires us to resort to a logically weak criterion that takes the form of the *sufficiency of non-resemblance*, comparable to the criterion for disinterestedness of pleasure. The musical melody cannot as a whole be crossmodally sad or merry unless a part of the mental state is crossmodally so.

The great benefit of this criterion is that we have a conception of an aesthetic quality that is both non-circular -- there is no value-loading; and non-factual -- hence open to further requirements that define the validity of a positive or negative aesthetic judgment.

Properly developed it solves this conception solves what we may call Sibley’s problem³. It provides a distinctive mode of awareness free from the burden of evaluation -- from Sibley’s focus on a faculty requiring taste. The vivacity of a color, for instance, is aesthetic because of the cascade of metaphors it carries: energy, boldness, vitality and endlessly more. The color cannot be literally any of these things, but its seeming so is what we relish (or disrelish) when we entertain the color aesthetically. We arrive at the same insight when we extract the value-neutral descriptive content from the traditional notion of an aesthetic quality. The new insight is that this content is never literally applicable. It is always metaphorical.

Be it noted: crossmodal perceptiveness is value-free. The quality may be positive or negative, depending on other factors. There is no crossmodal that is essentially valuable or disvaluable, taken entirely by itself.

The extent of crossmodality in our aesthetic attitudes is enormous. Pictorial depth is an example. Depth is not there literally but only virtually, so to speak. The velocity of lines, the expansiveness or muscularity of forms (recall Rodin), the sweetness of a tone, motif, or melody – all these qualities are crossmodals.

Crossmodals, being unresolvably metaphorical, are illusory impressions, but I suggest they are precisely what makes our awareness aesthetic. They are warranted when they satisfy a many-layered criterion of maximal discrimination under optimal conditions.

This conception of descriptive aesthetic properties differs from the most impressive, well worked out theory of aesthetic value which is presently, deservedly, dominant among philosophical aestheticians, namely the network theory advanced by Dom Lopes in *Being for Beauty: Aesthetic Agency and Value*, 2018. The crucial difference is the criterion of crossmodal resemblances, which sweeps into the aesthetic domain endlessly many things Lopes takes to be internally non-aesthetic. For me, skills, for instance, and the quality of life – its integrity and dignity – are aesthetic properties since they are full of crossmodal resemblances disinterestedly pleasing/displeasing to us. In themselves they are value-neutral. Their value is determined by what Lopes would call an ideal theory centering on aesthetic pleasure. But my conviction is that the complex, many dimensional, criterion of aesthetic value is utterly non-oppressive.

V What determines the validity of an aesthetic response – i.e. the correctness of a judgment?

³ Sibley’s problem, as I see it, is that he never disengaged the non-evaluational component of aesthetic qualities so as to consider by itself their descriptive content (of those qualities that have one) and seriously considered what this might be. Hence he lumped metaphorical with literal constituents and failed to see that crossmodal resemblances could provide a distinctive (and non-circular) character to the definition of aesthetic value. Sibley’s view that colors are simple properties is also challenged by scientific findings of metamers and other physical complexities.

The traditional answer is pleasure of the right sort. Using the prior conceptions, I propose that the pleasure be further specifiable as disinterested pleasure *taken in the crossmodal resemblances constitutive of the object*. But whose pleasure, people ask? The traditional answer is, the pleasure of qualified respondents when they operate in ideal conditions, which are conditions that maximize the discrimination of distinct qualities.

But who are these truly qualified experts? I here invoke a compound criterion, namely the maximal discriminators of the relevant properties who furthermore (inter alia) are free of defective characteristics (judged non-aesthetically, as in pathological sadism). This is an advance upon Hume's conditions for ideal critics.

But suppose such critics disagree, even they fulfill the stated conditions? Then I suppose the object of interest is what maximal discriminators tend to converge on as worthy of aesthetic pleasure. Whatever exceeds that is excluded. This clue leaves much to be added, but at least takes us closer to a full answer.

Suppose there is no convergence even among the best discriminators under ideal conditions and all other determinants? Then I suppose no judgment at that level is valid and a preference for or against the object of interest is epistemically subjective. Our best attempts are full of such retreats, as in the case of futile attempts to rank things in very different categories – sonatas with novellas, symphonies with novels.

A further condition, illustrative of the implacably growing complexity of the whole, is this: Given the complexity of content and the receptive sensitivity of the best judges in different cultures, preference has to be given to culturally “native” or “indigenous” experts. Further, aesthetic value, if real, cannot be not restricted to current respondents. In the future populations may come to exist with different sensory and emotional capacities. So a full account would have to include their best judgments. But we have no way of doing this.

We know this because there are multiple problems even between known minority populations with different capabilities, e.g. tetrachromats as opposed to the now dominant trichromats, and super-tasters as opposed to the rest of us. Projecting from these known cases, it becomes obvious that no forecast of the ultimate, *total* overall aesthetic value of anything is possible.⁴

The ideal theory I propose looks farther than into what we call the quality of life and the myriad forms of cultural particularity; it seeks to capture what strictly ideal aesthetic insight would be – godlike, if you will, in the conviction that we are deeply concerned with maximal superhuman capacities. Though we cannot spell out what perfect aesthetic competence would be, we have an interest in the concept and in why we are unable to form a clear conception of truly exalted ways of life.

For example, what would be the truly ideal aesthetic career for an aesthetically being, for instance one that never had to contend with a tragic view of life, to whom adversive virtues were irrelevant (though understood as inevitable for earthlings).

A counterpart ideal is that of cognition in general including intricate knowledge of the intricacies of the world and relevant to our fate – how likely it is that we likely to die moment to moment.

⁴ The extent to which we now recognize the variations in crossmodal response of different persons goes far beyond Sibley's generation. Even with colors we recognize far more illusions, as with Albers' interaction of colors. Our color perception is riddled with error. The true colors of things are immensely difficult because of the effect of context on the appearance of a color patch. Our traditional notion of the millennial constancy of color appreciation has been shown to be radically inaccurate, given the revelations of cartoonish coloring of ancient statuary.

In another dimension of difference, ancient attitudes toward slavery, plunder and genocide differ radically from modern ones. Me-too revelations of women's attitudes toward patriarchic treatment, and of minority populations toward marginalization, have exploded very recently, showing that historical attitudes are self-serving to the dominant populations.

The falsity of assumptions about the attitudes of others differs with different epochs. Medieval attitudes are affected by religious views differing from those of the pagan worlds. Thus overall, where traditionally historians thought of constancy, endless difference is now implied, far beyond what we have access to.

VI Why should we allow any validity to crossmodal resemblances since they are illusory impressions?

Crossmodal impressions are a vital function of our imagination. How vital is shown by the ubiquity of anthropomorphism in human response to nature. Streams are full of naiads, trees of dryads, mountains and preeminently volcanos of giants. Shave away the fictions and you have crossmodal qualities (the fictions have crossmodals too). Human culture may be able ultimately to do without the fictions, but it would be vastly diminished without these impressions. To make the best use of our imaginative nature is necessarily to cultivate this fund of impressions, to cherish it, not to disown it as deviant. Further, any mentality capable of the imagination essential to (a) cognition of the world and (b) emotional bonding with it, is bound to exercise this capability. Imagine it away and one is left with robotic beings which are mere purveyors of facts – beings without souls.

I believe it is possible to devise criteria of expertise in regard to detection of crossmodal resemblance that will play a role in defining the true aesthetic value of an object of regard.

VII Given the enormous mass of variations among things and among aesthetic judges, what sort of validation can we expect for aesthetic judgments of the total character of anything?

Here comes the shocking conclusion that emerges from these recognitions. The strictly overall aesthetic value of anything simply cannot be assessed, and likely will never be by any aesthetically sensitive creature. Our familiar aspiration, to take the full measure, strictly the full one, of the works we cherish, -- at least to form clear ideas of this -- is utterly quixotic. Among all the other reasons are the practical limitations of human hedonic sensitivity. Humans are simply not hedonically adequate to the task.

VIII What determines the standards currently used in appraising objects of aesthetic regard?

The best we can do is this: We operate upon the basis of a mixed bag of cultural standards having to do with the characteristics of the object (see above) and cultural history. This is a compound of highly diverse and complex, as well as nuanced, considerations. So the full bag is unique to our time and place. In the historical part of the compound, the creativity of the work is central. Originals vs. copies, pathbreakers vs. recollections. This is not at all “subjective” or “relativistic” because it defines the objective status of the work. But hungry skeptics will take it to be those things.

Lopes deals masterfully different varieties of these orientations and the aesthetic policies that promote or stifle them. I happily accept his work as part of the full story about aesthetic value. His account of this part is in its way as classic as Sibley’s was for his era.

At times we are right to think we are making a correct judgment within the cultural frames we adopt, but we are wrong to think that we are judging objects that have the same values just because they are physically the same. Also we are wrong if we think that anyone from a different context can judge on precisely the same basis given our analysis of it. Cross-cultural understandings are never perfect because the object of regard is to some extent different. For instance, a novel in one language group cannot be fully understood by a native of another language group. None of this denies that outsiders can share a lot with indigenous readers. But the sharing is of commonalities, never of the full aesthetic content. There is no reason to regret this, since it testifies to the uniqueness of each work. But enforces a certain modesty upon us, of which more in a moment.

IX The nonconceptual character of the basis of our knowledge of the world.

All I have said about aesthetic experience mirrors features of our experience of the reality of our world. We like to think there could be highly specific rules determining the warrant we have to believe we are not dreaming or any other of G. E. Moore’s commonsense beliefs. But the full warrant for our certainty about these commonsense matters, which the well-positioned and clear-headed of us enjoy most of the time, is way beyond anything we can reduce to concepts. It is foolish to think we could fill out the totality.

What is involved here is not just Merleau-Ponty's inclusion of bodily awareness. It includes all the background that operates – the details of which we could not possibly bring to consciousness. Each of us has slightly different content but there is enough in common to weed out actual error about our common knowledge. Each of us knows, beyond all peradventure, countless commonsense facts about oneself now and in the past. We know we were not created a few minutes ago complete with an illusory memory. We know we are not brains in a vat, that this is our hand, the same hand we have had for a long time. How much certainty we have depends on what items. Yes, memory is fallible, but not the memory of all things. It would be fallible only if we depended entirely on the idea or impression we have now plus its consistency with other ideas or impressions we believe we had earlier, which is what traditional skeptics believed.

Generalized philosophical skepticism is therefore wrong. The traditional notion of our occupying a subjective position – merely impressions and ideas all of which might be radically illusory – from which there can be no certainty about the “external world” – is radically erroneous. Far from being at the mercy of illusions about the “external” world, we have the best possible reason to believe in the reality of that world. There is no inaccessible noumenon.

Philosophical thought-experiments about our being brains in a vat are therefore fraudulent (or at least unwarrantedly speculative) when they go beyond actual and genuinely possible eventualities. Thinking otherwise is intellectual arrogance. The standard philosophical education is a hoax, promoting error in our students. We should rather focus on genuine unknowns, esp. surprising ones.

We also can be absolutely certain about a host of scientific facts. The earth is not flat; it turns; it has existed for millions of years. And so forth.

We know that other humans are mental creatures even though we cannot give the decisive reasons that enable us to know this. For this we do not need to know their intimate details, and we are foolish if we think we ever can. Thus we are adequately equipped to understand each other up to a point, but only up to a point. As with translations, much is private. But which things are private depends in part on what we reveal to each other.

X How do I know all this? What entitles me to think I know?

Ultimately I depend on my own reflection and my relationship with my fellows. But also partial vindication comes from scientific sources, e.g. the findings about the variety of the tactile and chemical senses, which traditional philosophy ignored. Even in vision the constant element of focus and parallax was ignored. Skepticism about the “external world” had a strong connection with irrelevant and problematic religious suppositions which society forbade people to question.

XI Other distinctions and clarifications

(a) Bias versus “noise” in public attitudes: ¹ here is a distinction applicable to our aesthetic life.

Bias is favoritism. Noise is diversity of attitude among judges *even when all the facts are accepted*, such as the sentence for a criminal case. Judges notoriously offer radically different sentences based on agreed facts. The same occurs in aesthetic evaluations when the cases are conventionally specified. Thus the aesthetic superiority of a creative over a revival style will be differently evaluated by critics accepted as “competent.” Likewise the evaluation of performances, productions, and works. Aesthetic cases are typically judged “noisily.”

In these cases the *full* content of the reception by the judges is not really the same. If aesthetic value is real, noise is a phenomenon of the less than fully specified. This is strongly suggested by our common practice: when we try to explain why critics deliver different evaluations, we push deeper into the *received* content, into the critics' mentality or the conditions of the critics' experience. For instance, loyalty to a rival of the author or star dancer might be responsible for a deviant judgment. Dyspepsia or fatigue might have soured the critic's

mood. And so forth. The factors are endless. The result of these factors is that the work seems to the critic to have crossmodal resemblances that it doesn't have, or to lack ones that it does have.

(b) A side issue of some relevance is the likely "transcendental" character of aesthetic value, i.e., that there is literally nothing which has zero aesthetic standing. Thus concrete and abstract things of all sorts, things and events, realities and illusions, etc. all rank somewhere to some degree. Large divisions within this universal class are (i) things of outstanding positive value (the ones we call splendid); (ii) things below the splendid but above a minimal positive threshold, (iii) things below that threshold but still better than things of negative value, which we might call the plain or undistinguished; (iv) things below the plain that we might call the unattractive; (v) things below the unattractive that are seriously ugly (hideous, monstrous); and finally (vi), things without any marked aesthetic character, which we might call the formless.

All but the last class will probably have some positive aesthetic value, even the hideous. But it will not be true that the extremely ugly is beautiful, in spite of the eagerness with which the claim is made by students. Despite whatever merits the ugly may have, they cannot suffice to raise its overall character above the ugly. Nor can the merits of the everyday raise it to the height of the splendid. To contend otherwise is to adopt a shallow account of aesthetic value.

(c) Some classes of aesthetically revered objects are baffling to reasonable persons. Outstanding among these are the scholars' rocks in East Asian culture. Bafflement arises from absence of information about what properties make one such rock superior or inferior to another. The literature on the subject is radically sparse. The same is true, to a lesser degree, of the wabi sabi aesthetic. Insiders claim to relish imperfection but it is left unexplained what the aesthetic merit of imperfection is. Is the real merit here that of a life that declines to pursue perfection rather than that of the objects expressing that orientation? If so, can that expressiveness be notable enough to be beautiful?

I mention these cases to show how subtle and problematic are many aesthetic evaluations.

XII Citations of signs of shallow assessments in the current aesthetic culture

I shy away from naming names because the cases are so numerous. The prevailing practice is to present cases as if only one aesthetic factor is involved. Thus if one praises Anthony Hopkins' performance as Hannibal Lector one is said to be just concerned with his resourcefulness, ignoring his atrociousness as a person. But plainly admiring one aspect goes along with various attitudes towards others, and in the present case recoiling from Hannibal Lector's character overall. Similarly in the interest taken in the disgusting. The positive interest some adventurous aestheticians have shown in the disgusting does not cancel the overall negativity of any reasonable response to it. The juvenility of Loony Tunes does not imply lack of many positive qualities. Everywhere we encounter highly complex ensembles all of which have at least some positive. We know this because we can easily see they would be worse if they lacked their positive qualities. All styles have some coherence.

More generally, there is probably nothing that has absolutely no positive qualities. This global fact in no way redeems everything. Sircello's example of the soft pulsing of a mass of maggots covering a dead water buffalo is a paradigm of this. This does not mean that the overall condition of the rotting corpse deserves to be aesthetically admired.

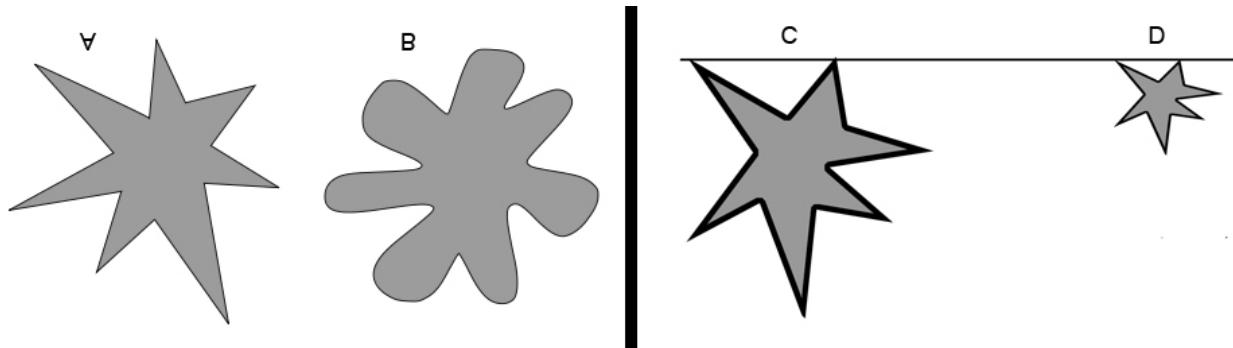
The most admired work in aesthetics in the current scene is represented by Dom Lopes' books. They introduce new and highly useful concepts and case studies, which as has already been emphasized are admirably developed. In my view they miss only the wider conception of descriptive aesthetic properties that I have proposed, and therefore do not carry us to the deepest level of reflection about aesthetic value.

Endnote 1

The problems noted in Sibley's conception of aesthetic qualities should in no way count against the admirable character of his reflections. By any reasonable standard, his articles are brilliant and have become deservedly classic in the literature. No one can fail to be impressed by them. But they drive us farther than he was able to carry his thinking. My point is that we must stand on his shoulders and move beyond – way beyond.

Appendix: Kikki-Bubba, Ping-Pong, Mil-Mal

9.2 Descriptive aesthetic properties: the Kikki-Bubba, Ping-Pong and Mil-Mal crossmodal resemblances.



Which of **A** and **B** is Kikki? Which is Bubba? Which is Ping? Which is Pong?

Which of **C** and **D** is Mil? Which is Mal?

Have we any difficulty whatever saying which is which?

¹New York Times article: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/15/opinion/noise-bias-kahneman.html?searchResultPosition=1> By Daniel Kahneman, Olivier Sibony and Cass R. Sunstein: Mr. Kahneman is an emeritus professor of psychology at Princeton and a recipient of the 2002 Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences. Mr. Sibony is a professor of strategy at the HEC Paris business school. Mr. Sunstein is a law professor at Harvard.

Further matters

First Matter It is profoundly unsettling how incompleteable any address to reality can be. We are so accustomed to our practices, whether aesthetic or in other ways cognitive, that we can hardly believe that things are so utterly beyond our capability. But it may be possible to soften the impact of this by a change of orientation. What would be involved in welcoming our limitations? What could we find to celebrate in that? This is subject of great philosophic interest that deserves our attention.

How to focus our thought on this subject? We have to compare our passionate lives with lives of “perfection” at a level we would have to call godlike – a perfection of both the totality of relevant knowledge and of hedonic response across all differences. Sceptics will say this is a wild goose chase. And they are right that we mortals cannot concretely imagine such a thing – reminiscent of questions about what life would be like if we had complete knowledge of the future – both what would happen at each moment and what we would do in response to it.

But however beyond us, the questions posed by such perfection don't seem absurd. Further, there would seem to be room for admiration. Not just admiration at a moment but an episodic sort. For that a being have perfect command of the quality of a thing when the thing comes up does not require that that admiring state of mind be eternally present. So the episodic character of a passionate life would seem still to be open to our imagined paragon.

Likewise an aesthetic paragon would have a normal range of aesthetic likings/dislikings both warranted (admiring only what is admirable) and personal. She/he could need relaxation and recuperation as often as the rest of us and therefore prefer being mindlessly entertained instead of mindfully assessing.

Second Matter The idea that we deal with the same work as our distant cultural forebears is naïve. For we never have precisely the same response to the outward object. This is shown by the difference of interpretation we give to the object compared with what the earlier culture saw as worthy of celebrating in it. A difference of interpretation makes a different object of aesthetic regard. We don't like to admit this. But the logic of our own knowledge undercuts our pretension.

A notable example is the ancient Greek conception of the great works of Homer and the tragedians. It was seriously at odds with our attitudes, so when we think of ourselves as dealing with their works we are mistaken. For us, slavery, plunder genocide and suppression of women are not things to be applauded; for the ancient poets and their audiences, those things were precisely what was joyous in the tales. Coming back loaded with plunder was a fine thing. That's what was sought in one's piratical ventures.

Equally, the cartoonish brilliance of the colors on statues and reliefs was celebrated to an extent that we cannot possibly take into our aesthetic heart. Our notion that we deal with the same works as they created is simply false.

Third Matter What aesthetic judgments can we know for sure? All specialists in aesthetic appreciation and judgment are quite certain they can be quite certain about quite a few questions about the value, individual and comparative, of objects of aesthetic regard. There seems no reasonable doubt that they are sometimes right about a particular case. Experts are certainly right in rating Raphael and Correggio among the foremost painters of the High Renaissance, and in rating them above Sodoma, Beccafumi, Vasari and other lesser masters. What is noteworthy about such judgments is the absence of any airtight reasons that the experts can give. Their knowledge-base is non-conceptual and largely inaccessible to them, composed of aesthetic experiences of a heterogeneous sort.

In contrast to these certainties, most interpretations of works of art are not known with anything approaching certainty...