
AESTHETIC ACQUAINTANCE

BY

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Abstract: If, as Richard Wollheim says, the Acquaintance Principle is ‘a well-entrenched principle in aesthetics,’ it would be surprising if there were not something true at which those who have asserted it have been aiming. I argue that the Acquaintance Principle cannot be true on any traditional epistemic interpretation, nor on any usability interpretation of the sort Robert Hopkins has recently suggested. I then argue for an interpretation of the principle that treats acquaintance as the end to which judgments of aesthetic value are the means as opposed to the other way around.

1. Introduction

In *Art and Its Objects*, Richard Wollheim (1980) refers to ‘a well-entrenched principle in aesthetics’ which he dubs ‘the Acquaintance Principle’ (hereafter the AP), and which he takes to hold ‘that judgments of aesthetic value ... must be based on first-hand experience of their objects and are not, except within very narrow limits, transmissible from one person to another’ (p. 233). Assuming that the AP is well entrenched, as Wollheim says, it would be surprising if there were not something true at which those who have asserted it were aiming, even if they have failed to hit the mark.

Not all interpretations of the AP take it to express an imperative,¹ but most do. According to what I will call a *Wollheimian interpretation of the AP*, the AP tells you that you must base your judgments of aesthetic value on first-hand experience *or else*. *Or else what?* is the question over which Wollheimian interpretations divide. Traditionally, Wollheimians have interpreted the AP as an epistemic principle, according to which you must base your judgments of aesthetic value on first-hand experience or else forego knowing their truth. Recently, Robert Hopkins (2011) has suggested

an alternative, non-epistemic Wollheimian interpretation, according to which you must base your judgments of aesthetic value on first-hand experience or else forego having a legitimate basis on which to believe their truth. Adapting Hopkins's terminology, I will refer to the traditional Wollheimian interpretation as *the availability interpretation of the AP* (the AAP, for short), since it holds that first-hand experience alone makes aesthetic knowledge *available*, where aesthetic knowledge is knowledge that some object has, or fails to have, aesthetic value. And I will refer to the alternative interpretation suggested by Hopkins as *the usability interpretation of the AP* (the UAP, for short), since it holds that first-hand experience alone legitimizes the *use* of aesthetic knowledge as a basis on which to form aesthetic belief, where aesthetic belief is belief that some object has, or fails to have, aesthetic value.

I will argue that the AP is false on both of these interpretations and that both therefore fail to capture the truth at which those who have asserted the AP have been aiming. But I also think that each interpretation fails instructively, and I am as eager, in what follows, to take instruction as I am to refute. I hope, by this paper's end, to have arrived at a new articulation that explains why the AP is well entrenched in aesthetics by locating the imperative it expresses at the center of aesthetic life. This alternative will differ from the AAP and the UAP in at least three important respects. One is that it will treat acquaintance as something that admits of degrees rather than as something you have either in full or not at all. Two is that it will prescribe acquaintance merely of things having aesthetic value. Three is that it will treat acquaintance as the end to which judgments of aesthetic value are the means and not the other way around. These differences are significant enough to raise the objection that what I am offering is less an alternative interpretation of the AP than an alternative to the AP. I reply to this objection in closing.

2. *The AAP*

Three objections threaten the AAP, each positing a means to aesthetic knowledge other than first-hand experience. *The objection from aesthetic surrogates* holds that we can achieve aesthetic knowledge of things not by experiencing them first-hand but by experiencing aesthetic surrogates of them, such as reproductions or photographs in the visual arts, or recordings in the case of music. *The objection from non-aesthetic descriptions* holds that we can achieve aesthetic knowledge of things not by experiencing them first-hand but by having their non-aesthetic properties described to us. *The objection from aesthetic testimony* holds that we can achieve aesthetic knowledge of things not by experiencing them first-hand but by having someone tell us whether or not they possess aesthetic value.

I argue that it is clear that the objection from aesthetic surrogates fails, that it is not clear whether the argument from non-aesthetic descriptions succeeds or fails, and that it is clear that the argument from aesthetic testimony succeeds. Given that the argument from aesthetic testimony clearly succeeds, it may be wondered why I bother with the others. The reason is that the deficiencies of the others clarify the truth of the AP, which, again, is my ultimate aim.

2.1. THE OBJECTION FROM AESTHETIC SURROGATES

The objection from aesthetic surrogates seems fatal to the AAP, which holds:

(AAP) You must base your judgments of aesthetic value on first-hand experience if they to make aesthetic knowledge available to you.

Not only can we have aesthetic knowledge by means of aesthetic surrogates, arguably most aesthetic knowledge we have is had by this means. This fact has led defenders of the AAP, including Alan Tormey (1973, p. 39) and Mary Mothersill (1961, p. 78), to retreat to a weakened version of the AAP, one according to which surrogate-mediated aesthetic knowledge is possible so long as the mediating surrogates are adequate:

(AAP*) You must base your judgments of aesthetic value on first-hand experience, or on experience of an adequate aesthetic surrogate, if they are to make aesthetic knowledge available to you.

But talk of *adequate* aesthetic surrogates invites the question when aesthetic surrogates are adequate, and this is a question, Paisley Livingston has argued, to which no one has given an adequate answer. Absent an account of the conditions on which something is an adequate aesthetic surrogate, Livingston (2003) maintains, introducing an adequate aesthetic surrogacy clause renders the AAP regrettably vague (pp. 262–264).

But whether introducing the surrogacy clause renders the AAP regrettably vague depends on whether introducing the surrogacy clause renders the AAP vaguer than it already was, and this I doubt. Assuming some version of the AAP to be true, the reason you should not base an aesthetic judgment of *W* on an experience of an inadequate aesthetic surrogate of *W* (however such inadequacy is spelled out) is that such an experience does not result in aesthetic knowledge of *W*. An inadequate aesthetic surrogate of *W* is inadequate, in other words, because it results in an inadequate experience of *W*, which is inadequate because it does not result in aesthetic knowledge of *W*. But it is not as if every face-to-face, in-the-flesh, or live experience of *W* is adequate relative to this standard. Lighting conditions may be

inadequate; acoustics may be inadequate; performances may be inadequate; above all you yourself may be inadequate. Indeed, surrogate-mediated experiences are often epistemically superior to their face-to-face counterparts precisely because you can exert greater control over the conditions under which you undergo them. But if face-to-face experiences are sometimes inadequate relative to the same epistemic standard that surrogate-mediated experiences sometimes are, we need an account of the adequacy of the former no less than we need an account of the adequacy of the latter.

Hence, the vagueness Livingston takes to be introduced by the aesthetic surrogacy clause is vagueness that was already there. Moreover, the reason that vagueness was already there is that vagueness is already present in every Wollheimian version of the AP. All Wollheimian versions of the AP tell you that basing your judgments of aesthetic value on your own experience is necessary. No Wollheimian version should tell you that basing your judgments of aesthetic value on your own experience is sufficient. All versions must therefore contend and contend equally with the vagueness that Livingston locates in the adequate surrogacy clause.

I therefore wonder whether Livingston's objection might itself be objectionable for the very reason that the AAP* is. Suppose we distinguish between two different ways of thinking about acquaintance. According to what we may call *the binary account of acquaintance*, experiences are either fully or not at all acquainting. According to what we may call *the gradual account of acquaintance*, experiences are more and less acquainting. The mistake committed by Tormey and Mothersill in introducing the aesthetic surrogacy clause, the mistake perpetuated by Livingston in objecting to its vagueness, is to treat first-hand experience as binary while treating surrogate-mediated experience as gradual, when both are equally gradual.² This suggests that the AAP be re-formulated so as to hold:

(AAP**) You must base your judgments of aesthetic value on *adequate* first-hand experience, or on *adequate experience of an aesthetic surrogate*, if they are to make aesthetic knowledge available to you.

Once we recognize, however, that first-hand and surrogate-mediated experiences are both incrementally acquainting and that there is no reason to think that first-hand experience is, in principle, more acquainting than surrogate-mediated experience, we should begin to wonder whether there ever was any reason to separate them at all. As originally formulated, the AAP holds that you must base a judgment of *W*'s aesthetic value on first-hand experience of *W* or else fail to achieve aesthetic knowledge of *W*. The objection from aesthetic surrogates holds this version to be false given that you can achieve aesthetic knowledge of *W* based on an experience of an aesthetic surrogate of *W*. But the objection assumes that to experience an aesthetic surrogate of *W* is not to experience *W* first-hand or for yourself,

and I see no reason why this assumption should be granted. Suppose you judge one of the Brahms sextets to be beautiful based on your experience of a good recording and I judge the same sextet to be beautiful based on your testimony. Obviously, my judgment is not based on my own first-hand experience, but is not yours? After all, it is not as if you are judging on the basis of the recording's first-hand experience. You are judging on the basis of your own first-hand experience, which the recording makes available to you.³ Indeed, to acknowledge that there are adequate aesthetic surrogates is to acknowledge that there are experiences which are *first-hand* and *your own* but which are not *live* or *face-to-face* or *in-the-flesh*. But I will not insist on this way of carving things up should anyone object. All sides agree on the essential point, which is that adequate aesthetic surrogates are aesthetically acquainting in just the way the AP demands. We may of course stipulate that surrogate-mediated experience not count as first-hand or for oneself, but even then it would not follow that we must introduce a surrogacy clause. What would follow is that the experience the AP demands need be neither first-hand nor for ourselves.

For these reasons, I think that no interpretation of the AP ever need make mention of aesthetic surrogates. Indeed, I think that no *person* need ever have made mention of aesthetic surrogates. Suppose you call a friend on the phone. The phone is a means by which you talk to your friend, a means by which your otherwise unavailable friend is made available to you. But your phone is not a surrogate of your friend. It is not as if, given that you cannot talk to your friend in person, you just have to settle with talking to your phone, which just happens to sound a lot like your friend. And so for reproductions, photographs, and recordings. They make available that which otherwise is not. But they no more stand in or substitute for that which they make available than your phone stands in or substitutes for your friend.⁴

We arrive therefore at a final formulation of the AAP:

(AAP***) You must base your judgments of aesthetic value on *adequate* first-hand experience if they are to make aesthetic knowledge available to you.

In one respect the difference between this formulation and the original is small, consisting only in the addition of the word *adequate*.

In other respects, the difference is large. The original formulation presupposes a binary account of acquaintance; the present presupposes a gradualist account. The original version awaits the insertion of the aesthetic surrogate clause; the present has banished it. These two innovations – the gradualist account of acquaintance and the rejection of any surrogacy clause – will be preserved in the alternative interpretation of the AP for which I am arguing.

2.2. THE OBJECTION FROM NON-AESTHETIC DESCRIPTIONS

The objection from non-aesthetic descriptions holds that we can achieve aesthetic knowledge of things not by experiencing them for ourselves but merely by having their non-aesthetic properties described to us. Whether this objection succeeds is thought to turn on the supposedly controversial question whether there are cases in which we achieve aesthetic knowledge on the basis of non-aesthetic descriptions. But I am unable to find this question controversial. Aristotle (1984, 1450b, 1453b) suggests one uncontroversial case: you can know whether a tragic plot is beautiful merely by having the incidents that make it up described to you. Does this show the AAP*** to be false? Only if a description of the incidents that make up a tragic plot does not acquaint you aesthetically with that plot, which is exactly what it does. In some well-known philosophical contexts, *acquaintance* and *description* oppose one another, and this must explain why some have thought that any aesthetic knowledge you acquire by description cannot also be aesthetic knowledge you acquire by acquaintance. But the truth is that a good description of a tragic plot is as aesthetically acquainting as a good reproduction of a painting or a good recording of a musical work. Indeed, I suspect it is because we take it as analytic that descriptions cannot acquaint that we have come to think that works of conceptual art are counterexamples not only to the AP but also to the thesis that works of art are essentially aesthetic.⁵

Hence, the objection from non-aesthetic descriptions goes through only if there are cases in which we achieve aesthetic knowledge on the basis of non-acquainting, non-aesthetic descriptions, such as we would were we to achieve aesthetic knowledge by inferring something's beauty on the basis of a non-aesthetic description of it. But it is hard to say whether there are cases in which we do this, since any description sufficiently rich to support an inference to aesthetic knowledge might also be sufficiently rich to provide a measure of aesthetic acquaintance. I think you cannot read Rilke's poem *Archaic Torso of Apollo* with understanding without gaining some aesthetic knowledge of the torso described in that poem. Must we say that this is knowledge gained by inference? Mightn't it be that Rilke's poetic gifts are such as to make the torso available to us an object of acquaintance? Of course, I am not claiming that reading Rilke's poem acquaints you with the torso as an in-the-flesh encounter would. It is clear that an in-the-flesh encounter can acquaint you with the torso in ways Rilke's poem cannot, for all its descriptive power. But it should be equally clear that, unless you have the kind of critical vision Rilke has, a reading of the poem can acquaint you with the torso in ways your in-the-flesh encounter will not, for all its perceptual immediacy.

Indeed, once we recognize that the kind of experience the AP prescribes need not be in-the-flesh, that it can be more and less acquainting, and that description can make it possible, it becomes difficult to regard aesthetically

acquainting descriptions as at all exceptional. I am inclined to think it an aim of much criticism – and here I make no distinction between reviewing and criticism proper – that it give us a measure of aesthetic acquaintance with its objects in advance of any in-the-flesh encounter. I therefore suspect that Arnold Isenberg (1973) overstates when he says that ‘[r]eading criticism, otherwise than in the presence, or with direct recollection, of the objects discussed, is a blank and senseless employment’ (p. 337.) Anyone who believes in the power of criticism, as Isenberg does, must regard aesthetic acquaintance as gradual. If an in-the-flesh encounter with *The Burial of Count Orgaz* did not bring about less than full acquaintance, reading Goldscheider could not augment it. But if reading Goldscheider on *The Burial* can augment an acquaintance achieved by an in-the-flesh encounter, I do not see why an in-the-flesh encounter cannot augment an acquaintance achieved by reading Goldscheider.⁶

2.3. THE OBJECTION FROM AESTHETIC TESTIMONY

To my mind, the objection from aesthetic testimony is decisive. One formulation of it – supplied by Robert Hopkins (2011) in his ground-breaking paper ‘How to be a pessimist about aesthetic testimony’ – takes as its starting point ‘the homely thought that we often take the recommendations of others on aesthetic matters, and that we are right to do so’ (p. 153). Suppose that a friend of mine recommends a certain film. Under the right circumstances, I can be acting rationally in going to see that film, as opposed to others I might see, based on her recommendation. But I can be acting rationally in acting on her recommendation only if I have a warranted belief that the film is worth seeing based on her testimony. Since there is nothing to prevent that warranted belief from being true, it must be that I can have aesthetic knowledge based on testimony.⁷

3. *The UAP*

It is with this version of the objection from aesthetic testimony in mind that Hopkins introduces the UAP,⁸ according to which

(UAP) You must base your judgments of aesthetic value on first-hand experience if they are to make aesthetic knowledge *usable* by you to form aesthetic belief.

At first blush, it may seem that the UAP fares no better against the objection from aesthetic testimony than does the AAP. We have just seen that you can form a true warranted aesthetic belief on the basis of testimony and that you can rightly rely on that belief in deciding which film to see. How, then, could the UAP be true?

Hopkins's reply is that the UAP is governed by the higher-level norm *ought implies can* and so lapses whenever you cannot have first-hand experience, as you cannot, for example, when a work no longer exists or when too many works exist for you to experience them all first-hand. As an illustration, Hopkins has us imagine the following case. Suppose I want to see a film, there are more films showing than I can possibly experience first-hand, and I have it on a friend's good authority that one is particularly worth seeing. Since I cannot determine on the basis of my own experience which film to see, the UAP lapses and I have testimonial license to use my friend's recommendation to form a belief. Hopkins stresses, however, that such license is 'purely *por tempore*.' 'Once I have seen the film for myself,' Hopkins (2011) maintains, '[my friend's] view should count nothing in my assessment' (p. 154).

Though I think there is much to recommend in this way of interpreting the AP, I begin by registering three reservations. The first reservation is that saying that '[o]nce I have seen the film for myself [my friend's] view should count nothing in my assessment' makes too much of the event of my seeing the film. For one thing, and as already indicated, I see no reason why you cannot have a measure of aesthetic acquaintance with a film before having seen it. Aristotle not only suggests that you can become acquainted with a tragic plot merely by having the incidents that make it up described to you, he also seems to think that to gain acquaintance with the plot of *Oedipus the King* is to gain some acquaintance with *Oedipus the King*. I do not see why the same would not hold, say, of *Unforgiven* or of *Fargo*. More importantly, it is unclear to me why we should say that once I have seen the film for myself, I am thereby aesthetically acquainted with it to the extent that the AP demands. I grant that when I see a film for myself, I gain aesthetic acquaintance with it that otherwise I could not have. But I am confident that I have managed to see many films without thereby becoming acquainted with them in any meaningful way. This makes me hesitant to think there is something special that happens every time I see a film such that afterward I can no longer give weight to my friend's assessment, no matter how thorough her acquaintance and how superficial mine. Of course, if you hold a binary account of acquaintance, you may think otherwise. If acquaintance is something you have either in full or not all, and if you have it in full once you have seen a film (whatever 'seeing a film' comes to), then it does seem that once you have seen the film, you no longer need rely on your friend's acquaintance. Your acquaintance is as good as hers – as good, indeed, as acquaintance gets. But we have already resolved to reject the binary account and the implausible consequences now before us should only reinforce that resolve.

A second reservation concerns the difficulty of making sense of the thought that testimony might make knowledge available to me that I may not use to form belief. Consider the following altered version of Hopkins's

illustration. I have it on my friend's good authority that the only film showing, a film I can easily see, is worth seeing. Although I judge that my friend's testimony makes available to me knowledge that the film is worth seeing, the UAP bars me from using that knowledge to form the belief that the film is worth seeing. But how exactly am I to judge that my friend's testimony makes available to me knowledge that the film is worth seeing without already forming the belief that the film is worth seeing? Surely I cannot *judge* that my friend's testimony makes available to me knowledge that the film is worth seeing without thereby *believing* that my friend's testimony makes available to me knowledge that the film is worth seeing. And if I believe that my friend's testimony makes available to me knowledge that the film is worth seeing, and I believe that knowledge is factive, then surely I believe that the film is worth seeing. But then the very belief that the UAP bars me from forming would seem to be one I already have.⁹

The third and final reservation concerns negative aesthetic testimony. Assuming that the UAP is governed by *ought implies can*, it does not forbid reliance on aesthetic testimony when first-hand experience is impossible. What the UAP does forbid, whether or not it is governed by *ought implies can*, is reliance on aesthetic testimony when first-hand experience is possible. If the UAP forbids anything, it forbids that. So the UAP is in trouble if there are cases in which we can have first-hand experience but are nevertheless entitled to rely on aesthetic testimony to form aesthetic belief. And there are such cases. Consider yet another altered version of Hopkins's illustration. Instead of relying on a friend's testimony to decide which of several currently playing films to see, I rely on a friend's testimony to decide *not* to see the only film currently playing. Perhaps I am on a long flight, and though I had been hoping to see a film, I have a warranted true belief, based on a friend's testimony, that the only film screening is definitely not worth seeing. It is uncontroversial, I think, that I can be justified in relying on my friend's testimony in deciding not to see the film. The defender of the UAP may therefore want to regard this as yet another case in which the UAP lapses. But the UAP's lapsing here obviously cannot be explained by appeal to *ought implies can*, since I can see the film. Nothing stops my seeing it except my decision not to, based on my friend's testimony. The same holds of any case in which I have a justified true belief, based on testimony, that an object has no aesthetic value. I need never experience that object for myself. I can rely on that belief forever.

How might the defender of the UAP reply? One strategy is to cast about for some other higher-level norm – some norm other than *ought implies can* – to explain why the UAP lapses when judgments of aesthetic value are not affirmative. But what higher-level norm might do this? It makes sense to regard *ought implies can* as a genuinely higher-level because it governs a multiplicity of lower-level norms. But what higher-level norm – what norm governing a multiplicity of lower-level norms – explains why the UAP

lapses only when testimony is negative? The phenomenon to be explained seems too local to be explained by appeal to any norm that is genuinely higher level.

It therefore seems a better strategy to recast the UAP such that it refers only to judgments affirming aesthetic value:

(UAP*) You must base your judgments *affirming aesthetic value* on first-hand experience if they are to make aesthetic knowledge usable by you to form aesthetic belief.

The problem now, however, is that it is hard to see how a norm of belief formation could exhibit this kind of asymmetry. It is, at the very least, generally true that whatever can give me the right to form the belief that not-p can give me the right to form the belief that p, and vice versa. If seeing that the glass is not full can give me the right to rely form the belief that it is not full, then seeing that it is full can give me the right to form the belief that it is full. If being told that the rose is not red can give me the right to form the belief that it is not red, then being told that the rose is red can give me the right to form the belief that it is red. We have established that being told that a movie is not good can give me the right to form the belief that it is not good. How then could being told that the movie is good fail to give me the right to form the belief that it is good?

I am therefore inclined to think that the argument from aesthetic testimony is as fatal to the UAP as it is to the AAP. Whenever aesthetic testimony makes aesthetic knowledge available, it makes aesthetic knowledge usable too.

4. *The VAP*

This suggests that if there is an adequate interpretation of the AP, it will explain both:

- (+) why you have reason to experience a work first-hand even when you have it on good authority that it has aesthetic value, and
- (−) why you have no reason to experience a work first-hand when you have it on good authority that it lacks aesthetic value.

Advocates of the AAP and UAP fasten exclusively on (+), and this permits the assumption that precludes their explaining (−). That assumption is that there is something wrong with aesthetic testimony. If you have it on good authority that a work has aesthetic value, yet you still have reason to experience it for yourself, this, so they argue, must be because aesthetic testimony fails. It must fail either to transmit knowledge that the work has aesthetic value or to transmit license to use that knowledge to form aesthetic

belief. But we have seen that no such failure occurs when you have it on good authority that a work lacks aesthetic value. Negative aesthetic testimony transmits knowledge and license. Why should positive aesthetic testimony be any different?

Suppose that it is no different. How might we then explain (+)? A friend tells you that a work has aesthetic value. Her testimony makes knowledge that the work has aesthetic value both available to you and usable by you. What reason have you to still experience the work for yourself?

I propose that the answer has to do with what you know when you know that a work has aesthetic value. Recall the case Hopkins describes in which positive aesthetic testimony makes aesthetic knowledge both available and usable. This is the case in which the UAP allegedly lapses, the case in which so many films are screening that you cannot see them all and in which you have it on good authority that one film is good. What, according to Hopkins (2011), do you know when you know that that film is good? You know that it is worth seeing (p. 154). But if that is so, there is no need to assume that there is something wrong with aesthetic testimony to explain why you have reason to see a film when you have it on good authority that it is good. You have reason to see it because what you have on good authority is that you have reason to see it.

The point may be generalized. When you know that a work has aesthetic value, what you know is that it is such as to merit acquaintance. The difference between positive and negative aesthetic testimony, then, is not that negative transmits whereas positive does not. The difference is in the content of what each transmits. When you have it on good authority that a work has aesthetic value, what you have on good authority is that it is such as to merit your first-hand experience. That is why you have reason to experience it for yourself. When you have it on good authority that a work lacks aesthetic value, what you have on good authority is that it is not such as to merit your first-hand experience. That is why you have no reason to experience it for yourself.

We have explained (+) and (–). One thing that follows from our explanations is that the AAP and the UAP misunderstand the relation between acquaintance and judgments of aesthetic value. Those interpretations treat acquaintance as a means to judgments of aesthetic value. According to them, you must experience works for yourself in order to make a knowledge-yielding or belief-licensing judgment to the effect that they have or lack aesthetic value. But surely aesthetic knowledge and licensed aesthetic belief are not ends in themselves. The meaning of aesthetic life is not the compilation of aesthetic data. Of course you do need to know which things have aesthetic value, but this only because you need to know which things to experience for yourself. Acquaintance with the aesthetically valuable is the end to which judgments of aesthetic value are the means.

This may make it seem as if you can arrive at a correct formulation of the AP simply by reversing the order of explanation:

(JAP) You must make knowledge-yielding judgments of aesthetic value if you are to know which things you ought adequately to experience first-hand.

I endorse this principle. I just do not recognize it as a formulation of the AP. The AP does not enjoin making judgments of aesthetic value. It enjoins acquainting yourself with things having aesthetic value. The AAP and the AUP appeal to judgments of aesthetic value only for the purpose of explaining why acquaintance is necessary. Once we have determined that judgments of aesthetic value fail to explain this, we have determined that they have no place in the AP, at least not the place we took them to have. What, then, does the AP state? Perhaps we need say no more than:

(VAP) You ought to experience first-hand the aesthetically valuable as such.

I append the words *as such* because merely experiencing the aesthetically valuable is insufficient. Consider the tourist who, having been told that Vermeer is a great painter, sets out to have himself photographed next to every Vermeer in the world. Posing next to every Vermeer presumably requires having first-hand experience of every Vermeer, but it obviously does not require experiencing every Vermeer having aesthetic value as having the aesthetic value it has, which is what the VAP presumably requires.

These considerations will prompt the objection, however, that the VAP is overly broad, applying to everything that can be experienced first-hand, whether or not it possesses aesthetic value. For surely we ought to experience a crooked smile as having the crookedness it has, a coarse countertop as having the coarseness it has, a drop of vinegar as having the acidity it has, and so on. I grant all this. What I do not grant is that we ought to experience a smile because it is crooked, a countertop because it is coarse, a drop of vinegar because it is acidic. Aesthetic value differs from crookedness, coarseness, and acidity in this regard. If a Vermeer is beautiful, then we ought to experience it as having the beauty it has if we experience it, but, beyond that, *we ought to experience it*. We might express this by saying that the *ought* in the VAP applies to you unconditionally, irrespective of your present circumstances.¹⁰ If a Vermeer is beautiful and you are not presently experiencing it as having the beauty it has, then you ought to alter your circumstances so that you can take up experiencing it as having that beauty. If a Vermeer is beautiful and you are currently experiencing it as having the beauty it has, then you ought to remain in your circumstances so that you can continue experiencing it as having that beauty.¹¹

Though we have arrived at the VAP by gradually altering Wollheim's formulation, the difference between it and Wollheim's is sufficient to raise the

question whether we can rightly regard it as an interpretation of the AP. For one thing, Wollheim named the AP, and that the principle he named tells you that you must base judgments of aesthetic value on first-hand experience. The AAP and the UAP, whatever their faults, tell you this. The VAP does not.

Wollheim did of course name the AP. What he did not do is stipulate its content. Rather, he attempted to articulate the content of a principle that was, by his own lights, already 'well-entrenched in aesthetics.' I see no reason, therefore, to treat Wollheim's articulation as authoritative. Moreover, the AP is not true as Wollheim articulates it. You need not base your judgments of aesthetic value on first-hand experience. If there is a true principle that enjoins first-hand experience, I do not see what prevents our regarding it as an interpretation of the AP.

Perhaps a stronger challenge to the VAP's status holds that the AP must do more than explain (+) and (-). It must explain why you are prohibited from saying that O is beautiful (or otherwise aesthetically good or bad) unless you have experienced O for yourself. The AAP, whatever its faults, does this by appeal to the widely accepted principle that you are prohibited from asserting what you do not know.

It is unclear to me why an interpretation of the AP must explain why you are prohibited from saying that O is beautiful unless you have experienced O for yourself. What is clear is that if the AAP is false, it cannot explain it. What then does? Here, I can at best gesture at an answer. If the VAP is true, then when you tell me that O is beautiful, you are telling me, in effect, that I ought to do something, namely, to experience O as having the beauty it has, which will often require that I undertake certain actions, develop certain skills, and even cultivate certain virtues. That means that you are shouldering a responsibility toward me, one that both gives you reason to make clear on whose authority you shoulder it and me reason to want this made clear. There is a difference, after all, between the way you stake yourself when you vouch personally for O's beauty and the way you stake yourself when you merely pass on information that O is beautiful. If you pass on information that O is beautiful when it is not, you give me reason to question your judgment about whom to trust. But if you assert, on the basis of your own experience, that O is beautiful when it is not, you give me reason to question something that goes deeper in you than your capacity to judge whom to trust: the very traits and capacities that make you the person you are. It therefore makes sense that we would evolve a conversational norm signaling when we are speaking on the authority of our own experience and when we are not.¹²

Yet another objection to the VAP's status holds that an interpretation of the AP must do more than enjoin first-hand experience. It must explain why first-hand experience is enjoined. The AAP and the UAP, whatever their faults, undertake to tell you *why* you ought to have first-hand experience.

Otherwise, you will not have aesthetic knowledge or licensed aesthetic belief. The VAP just tells you that you ought to have first-hand experience of the aesthetically valuable as such. It says nothing about why.

I do not deny that, for everything that has aesthetic value, there is something that explains why you unconditionally ought to experience it first-hand as having that value. But why look to a philosophical principle to tell you what this is? There is something that explains why you should have adequate first-hand experience of each Brahms sextet, something else that explains why you should have adequate first-hand experience of *The Burial of Count Orgaz*, and something else that explains why you should have adequate first-hand experience of the archaic torso that transfixed Rilke. You may discover what those things are by listening to the sextets, by inspecting *The Burial* and the torso, and by reading Hanslick, Goldscheider, and Rilke. You will not discover what they are by reading Wollheim, Mothersill, Tormey, Livingston, Hopkins, or me. If the VAP refrains from arrogating to philosophy what belongs to art criticism, I do not see why this should disqualify it as an interpretation of the AP.

But others may see things differently. If someone wishes to insist that the AP has to explain why we must experience aesthetic objects first-hand, or why judgments of aesthetic value must be based on first-hand experience, or why aesthetic testimony is weak, or anything else the VAP does not explain, I have no interest in insisting otherwise. If the VAP is not an interpretation of the AP, that is so much the worse for the AP. Let us be rid of it. We have the VAP instead.

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NOTES

¹ See, for instance, the non-imperative interpretation developed by Dominic McIver Lopes (2014, pp. 169–176).

² Elsewhere, however, Mothersill (1986) affirms that first-hand experience is gradual (pp. 331–334).

³ The point does not depend on the example's being aural. Suppose you judge some Vermeer to be beautiful based on your experience of an excellent reproduction and I judge the same Vermeer to be beautiful based on your testimony. Obviously, my judgment is not based on my own first-hand experience, but is not yours? After all, it is not as if you are judging on the basis of the reproduction's first-hand experience. You are judging on the basis of your own first-hand experience, which the reproduction makes available to you. I thank Robert Hopkins for pushing me on this point.

⁴ These considerations, if correct, have consequences for Dominic McIver Lopes's (2014) non-imperative interpretation of the AP, according to which experiential judgments of aesthetic value cannot be transmitted from person to person except by aesthetic surrogates (p. 175). I have been arguing that aesthetic surrogates, so-called, do not stand in for their objects but make those objects available. But if that is so, one person does not transmit her experiential judgment to another by means of a so-called surrogate. Rather, she makes the object of her experiential judgment available to another by means of a so-called surrogate, such that the other can make her own experiential judgment of aesthetic value. Hence, Lopes's interpretation should be truncated so as to hold simply that experiential judgments of aesthetic value are intransmissible.

⁵ For more on works of conceptual art as aesthetic objects, see Shelley (2003) and Costello (2013).

⁶ I have been indebted, throughout this section, to conversations with Kelly Jolley.

⁷ C. Thi Nguyen has recently offered a novel argument against the objection from aesthetic testimony whose subtleties I cannot do justice to here. Much too briefly stated, Nguyen's (2017) argument, as I understand it, rests on two observations: first, that while I can act on my friend's recommendation to see the film, I cannot claim to know that it is aesthetically good until I have seen it for myself (pp. 29, 31), and, second, that I can claim to know on the basis of my friend's testimony that the film merits being found aesthetically good even if I have not seen it (p. 31). These observations lead Nguyen (2017) to posit two separate properties – the subjective property of being aesthetically good, knowledge of which does not transfer via testimony, and the objective property of meriting being found aesthetically good, knowledge of which does transfer via testimony (pp. 30–32). I agree with both of Nguyen's observations, but wonder if positing two separate properties is the best way to account for them. I at least am struggling to see how a film could merit being found aesthetically good except by being aesthetically good. And this has me struggling to see how I could know that the film has the former property without also knowing that it has the latter, even if some conversational norm forbids my saying so. I speculate briefly on the nature of this conversational norm in the last section of this paper.

⁸ Although Hopkins introduces and defends the UAP, he stops short of endorsing it.

⁹ I thank an anonymous editor of this journal for bringing this objection to the UAP to my attention.

¹⁰ To say that you ought *unconditionally* to do something in the sense employed here is not to say that you ought *overridingly* to do it. If *View of Delft* is beautiful, you have an unconditional yet defeasible reason to see it as having the beauty it has. I follow both Katalin Makkai (2010, p. 405) and Richard Moran (2012, pp. 304–305) in regarding judgments of beauty as unconditional in this sense.

¹¹ Presumably, this is what Kant (2000) was on to when he remarked that 'we linger over the consideration of the beautiful' (p. 222).

¹² The account I am gesturing toward bears some resemblance to the account developed by Jon Robson (2015). I agree with Robson that the norm that forbids saying 'O is beautiful' unless you have experienced O for yourself is conversational merely. But whereas Robson explains the evolution of this norm by appeal to the speaker's desire that others regard her as possessing the skills and virtues required grasp O's beauty, I explain it by appeal to the speaker's desire to make clear to others the kind of responsibility she bears toward them.

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