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Can We Visually Experience Aesthetic Properties?[1]

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Which properties can we visually experience?[2] This question has been the subject of much debate in recent philosophy of perception. There are some properties that pretty much everyone agrees we can visually experience: for example, colour, shape, and size. These are typically called 'low-level' properties. There are others that everyone agrees that we cannot visually experience: for example, pitches, tastes, and the property of being composed of carbon, hydrogen, and oxygen atoms. The disagreement is about so-called 'high-level' properties, which are neither obvious nor implausible candidates for properties that we can visually experience. These include biological kind properties (e.g., being a pine tree), artifactual kind properties (e.g., being a table), semantic properties of words,[3] causal properties,[4] dispositional properties (e.g., being edible),[5] others' mental states (e.g., being sad),[6] moral properties (e.g., being morally wrong, being kind), and aesthetic properties (e.g., being graceful).[7]

Those who think that we *can't* visually experience high-level properties don't deny that we can *see that* something is a banana, or that a movement is graceful. They simply deny that we can see (or, for that matter, visually experience) something's property of being a banana, or a movement's property of being graceful.[8] There is a distinction between seeing an object and its properties, on the one hand, and seeing *that* an object has a given property, on the other. To borrow an

[1] Thanks to audiences at the Centre for Aesthetics at the University of Leeds, the Conference on Philosophy of Perception and Aesthetics at the University of Antwerp, the Conference on Evaluative Perception at the University of Glasgow, the University of London Institute of Philosophy Lunchtime Seminar, the University of York Mind and Reason seminar, and a symposium on Perception of Aesthetic Qualities at the 2014 Pacific APA for helpful questions and comments. Thanks also to the editors of this volume and an anonymous referee for their useful suggestions.

[2] Of course, analogous questions could be raised with respect to experiences in other sense modalities. I will restrict the focus to visual experience in order to keep it clear that the issue here is *not* whether we experience aesthetic properties via a *sui generis* modality (as opposed to the five traditional sense modalities). More on this shortly.

[3] See, e.g., Susanna Siegel, 'Which properties are represented in perception?', *Perceptual Experience*, eds. Tamar Gendler and John Hawthorne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). In the literature on experience of high-level properties, what I'm calling 'biological kind properties' are usually called 'natural kind properties'. However, one might think that *colors* are natural kind properties, in which case the claim that we experience at least some natural kind properties would be uncontroversial. (Thanks to Nico Silins for raising this point.) So I think the controversy at issue is best captured by the question of whether we experience *biological* kind properties.

[4] E.g., Susanna Siegel, 'The Visual Experience of Causation', *Philosophical Quarterly* 59 (2009), 519-540.

[5] E.g., Bence Nanay, 'Do We See Apples as Edible?', *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 92 (2011), 305-322; and Bence Nanay, 'Action-oriented Perception', *European Journal of Philosophy* 20 (2012), 430-446.

[6] E.g., John McDowell, 'Criteria, Defeasibility, and Knowledge', *Proceedings of the British Academy* 68 (1982), 455-479.

[7] I don't know of anyone who argues for the claim that moral or aesthetic properties can be specifically *visually* experienced (as opposed to experienced in a *sui generis* sense modality; see note 2 above and the discussion below). However, these claims are often not distinguished.

[8] The distinction between seeing and visually experiencing will be discussed in section 4.

example from Susanna Siegel, I can see that my neighbour is on holiday, in the sense that I have *visual evidence* affording me knowledge that she is (the dark interior of her house, the mail spilling out of her mailbox). But this doesn't involve seeing my neighbor or her property of being on holiday.[9] Roughly, those who deny that we can visually experience high-level properties think that seeing that something is a banana, or that a movement is graceful, is more like seeing that my neighbour is on holiday, and unlike seeing that the banana before me is yellow and crescent-shaped.

More precisely, what's at issue in this paper is whether (a certain family of) high-level properties are experienced *via the modality of vision*. A related yet distinct issue is whether they are experienced in some more *general* sense of 'experience' that *isn't* solely a matter of experiencing via one or more of the five traditional sense modalities. For example, one might think that there is a *sui generis* mode of experiencing aesthetic properties, which is an amalgam of (e.g.) sensory, imaginative, and emotional capacities.[10] We can distinguish three kinds of theses:

1. High-level properties can be visually (or auditorily, or gustatorily…etc.) experienced.
2. High-level properties can be experienced via *sui generis* perceptual modalities.
3. Awareness of high-level properties is an entirely post-perceptual affair (i.e., it manifests in judgment, belief, and so forth).

The focus of this paper is on arguments for and against the visual version of (1).

Note that what exactly visually experiencing a property amounts to depends upon your theory of perceptual experience. For example, according to Intentionalism, it amounts to visually representing the property as instantiated.[11] According to Naive Realism, it amounts to either perceiving an instance of the property, or whatever is going on in cases of non-veridical experience (e.g., according to Martin, having an experience that is subjectively indiscriminable from one in which you perceive an instance of the property).[12] We will return to this issue in section 4.

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[9] Op. cit. note 3, 481.
[10] Cf. Robert Audi, *Moral Perception* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).
[11] E.g., Michael Tye, *Consciousness, Color, and Content* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000).
[12] e.g., M.G.F. Martin, 'The Limits of Self-Awareness', *Philosophical Studies* 120 (2004), 37-89.

The general debate about whether we can visually experience high-level properties can be broken down into more specific debates concerning each type of high-level property at issue. So, for example, one might focus on more specific theses such as the following:

(K) We can visually experience biological kind properties.
(A) We can visually experience aesthetic properties.[13]

The focus of this paper is potential arguments for and against (A). Some working in aesthetics seem to take it for granted that we can visually experience aesthetic properties, but as I implied above, some philosophers of perception would regard that claim as one in need of argument. Nevertheless, the debate amongst philosophers of perception tends to focus on other high-level properties. In this paper, I will explore whether arguments for and against (K) can be adapted to apply to (A). Then, I will consider whether a certain feature specific to at least some aesthetic properties yields a unique kind of argument for (A).

1. Arguments for (A) from phenomenological and epistemic considerations

There are at least two broad ways of constructing a case for (K) or (A). First, one could argue that such a claim is required to adequately account for the *phenomenal character* of experience. Second, one could argue that such a claim is required to adequately account for the *epistemological role* of perceptual experience.

Let us begin with a paradigm example of the first strategy—Susanna Siegel's 'phenomenal contrast' argument for (K). It begins with the claim that there is intuitively a difference between having a visual experience prior to developing a certain recognitional capacity (e.g., the capacity to recognise pine trees), and having a visual experience of something with exactly the same color, shape, size, and so forth after developing the capacity. Siegel then argues that that this difference is best explained in terms of a phenomenological difference between the experiences, and one which stems from the fact that only one of them involves experiencing a high-level property—for example, the property of being a pine tree.[14]

[13] I confess uncertainty about precisely what makes a property an *aesthetic* one. I will assume that we have a good enough grip on the notion by way of paradigm examples (e.g., gracefulness, delicacy, gaudiness and so forth).
[14] Op. cit. note 3, 491.

This style of argument could be used to support (A) as follows.[15] Suppose you start out knowing nothing about ballet, and then at some point you start going to the ballet regularly. Over time, you acquire a capacity to recognise graceful pirouettes. Let E1 be a visual experience of a graceful pirouette you have before you develop this capacity, and E2 be an experience of a graceful pirouette you have afterward. We can argue for (A) as follows:

0. The overall experience of which E1 is a part differs from the overall experience of which E2 is a part.
1. If the overall experience of which E1 is a part differs from the overall experience of which E2 is a part, then there is a phenomenological difference between the visual experiences E1 and E2.
2. If there is a phenomenological difference between the visual experiences E1 and E2, then there is a difference in the properties experienced in the course of having E1 and E2.
3. If there is a difference in the properties experienced in the course of having E1 and E2, it is that in E2 you experience the property of gracefulness but in E1 you don't.
4. In E2 you experience the property of gracefulness but in E1 you don't.

Premise 1 claims that the difference between your overall mental state is a difference between E1 and E2 (as opposed to, say, a difference in belief, desire, or emotional state). Premise 2 claims that the difference between E1 and E2 is a difference between the *properties* you experience (as opposed to, say, a difference in a non-representational 'raw feel'). Premise 3 claims that if there is a difference in the properties you experience, it is a difference in which *aesthetic* properties you experience (rather than a difference in which low-level properties you experience). Premise (0) is accorded the status of an intuition which we are invited to share, and Siegel argues for the others by arguing against alternative explanations of the differences at issue.

I share the intuition underlying (0). However, I'm sceptical of premises (1), (2), and (3). My scepticism about premises (2) and (3) stems from the plausibility of explaining the phenomenal difference in terms of a difference in how you distribute your *attention* over visual scenes involving dancers. (This suggestion is inspired by an analogous one made by Richard Price with respect to (K).[16]) Plausibly, one who has developed a capacity to recognise graceful pirouettes attends differently to the details of dancers' movements than one did before developing it. This

[15] I should note that the argument to come is an extension of Siegel's strategy, not an argument she gives herself (although presumably she would be sympathetic to it).
[16] Richard Price, 'Aspect-switching and Visual Phenomenal Character', *Philosophical Quarterly* 59 (2009), 516.

point can be developed into an objection to either (2) or (3). If differences in attention can make a phenomenal difference all on their own, without making for a difference in the properties one experiences (as suggested by, e.g., David Chalmers),[17] then we have an alternative explanation of the phenomenal contrast to the one given by premise (2). Alternatively, if the difference in how you attend to dancers' movements makes for a difference in which low-level properties you experience (e.g., highly determinate arrangements of dancers' limbs), then we have an alternative explanation of the phenomenal contrast to the one given in premise (3). I won't pursue the question of which is the better way to develop the point about attention here. For present purposes, it's sufficient to note that the point is plausible, and would undermine the phenomenal contrast argument one way or the other.

The type of objection just outlined can also be raised against Siegel's argument for (K).[18] My reason for scepticism about premise (1), on the other hand, is specific to the argument for (A). In defending the analogous premise (1) in her argument for (K), Siegel argues against the alternative hypothesis that the phenomenal contrast consists in the expert enjoying a feeling of familiarity, which may or may not be realised in terms of a difference in *doxastic* states (e.g., a difference in occurrent judgments).[19] Let us suppose that Siegel's arguments against such an alternative hypothesis also work in the case of the argument for (A). Nevertheless, there is *another* alternative hypothesis available in this case that isn't plausible in the case of the argument for (K)—namely, that the phenomenal contrast consists in a difference in *emotional* states. It is likely that, in a typical subject, seeing a pirouette that she takes to be graceful is reliably connected with a broad sort of emotional response (presumably some form of pleasure). If that's right, then we could account for the phenomenal contrast by saying that the experience you have after you acquire the capacity to recognise pirouettes as graceful engenders an emotional response with its own phenomenal character, whereas the experience you have before acquiring this capacity does not.[20]

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[17] David Chalmers, 'The Representational Character of Experience', *The Future for Philosophy*, ed. Brian Leiter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[18] See op. cit. note 16 and Heather Logue, 'Visual Experience of Natural Kind Properties: Is there any Fact of the Matter?', *Philosophical Studies* 162 (2013), 5.

[19] Op. cit. note 3, 492-497. Another possibility is that the phenomenal contrast could be explained by a difference in "seemings" that are neither experiential nor doxastic (e.g., see Indrek Reiland, 'On Experiencing High-Level Properties', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 51 (2014)). It's not clear to me that seemings are really distinct from what Siegel takes perceptual representation to be; but elaborating this worry would take us too far afield.

[20] This alternative hypothesis isn't plausible in the case of the argument for (K)—we don't usually get emotional about pine trees (or biological kind properties in general).

Now, one might object that a subject can *recognise* gracefulness without being *moved* by it (i.e., without feeling any associated emotions). That seems plausible, but also irrelevant to the dialectic—for it's far from clear that there would be a phenomenal contrast in such a case. To attend to the dancers' movements in each case in a robotic, emotionless manner (to control for the phenomenal contributions made by emotions) would be to engage with dance in a rather peculiar way. Typically, dance, and art more generally, is supposed to prompt emotional engagement (among other things). As a result, I find it impossible to clearly imagine the cases at issue; and I doubt I'm alone in encountering this imaginative resistance. Given that verdicts about phenomenal contrasts stem from imagination of putative contrast cases, we have no way of even getting a verdict on the cases at issue. In short, all that matters is that whenever we have the phenomenal contrast, we also have the emotional difference. Although it seems possible to recognise gracefulness without emotional engagement, it is not clear how one could establish that there is a phenomenal contrast between this case and one in which the subject lacks the recognitional capacity.

So it appears that the phenomenal contrast strategy doesn't yield a decisive case for (A).[21] Let us see whether an appeal to epistemic considerations fares any better. Perceptual experiences are supposed *justify beliefs* about, and thereby afford *knowledge* of, one's environment. Accordingly, a proponent of (A) might suggest that an experience could justify your belief that a dancer's movement is graceful, and thereby afford knowledge of this fact, only if it involves your literally visually experiencing the movement's property of being graceful.[22]

As with the phenomenal contrast strategy, this method of arguing for (A) requires dispensing with alternative explanations. And here's an alternative explanation of how your experience justifies your belief and affords knowledge: you literally visually experience low-level properties only (e.g., certain size, shape, and motion properties), but you're *also* in a non-experiential mental

[21] Of course, the alternative explanations of the phenomenal contrast that I've offered undermine the argument for (A) only if they are at least as parsimonious as the explanation in terms of perceptual experience of gracefulness. (Thanks to Dustin Stokes for pressing this point.) It would take us too far afield to flesh out all the explanations in enough detail in order to compare them on this score conclusively; for now it must suffice to say that I see no reason to suspect that the alternatives I've proposed will turn out to be less parsimonious.

[22] First, note that this argument for (A) is precarious in light of the possibility that we experience gracefulness via a *sui generis* sense modality (see above). However, one might argue that the explanation in terms of *visual* experience of gracefulness is to be preferred on grounds of parsimony. Second, at least as far as I'm aware, no one actually defends an analogous argument for (K). Presumably, this is because the alternative explanation analogous to the one I'm about to propose is even *more* plausible in that case.

state with the content that a movement with these low-level properties is graceful. These two states *together* justify the belief and afford knowledge that the dancer's movement is graceful.[23]

There are two broad ways of developing this alternative. On the first (which I'll label 'accessibilism'), the non-experiential mental state is an introspectively accessible justified belief. On the second (which I'll label 'reliabilism'), the non-experiential mental state is an introspectively inaccessible component of a reliable belief forming process that takes you from experiences of low-level properties to judgments about gracefulness.[24] I won't pursue the question of which is the better way to develop the alternative here. However, it is worth noting that if principles linking low-level properties to aesthetic properties are difficult to articulate (which is plausible in many cases), and states with contents that the subject cannot easily articulate are disqualified from being beliefs (which isn't so obvious), then the reliabilist way of developing the alternative is superior.

Either way, one might worry that the *contents* of the states that the alternatives posit (i.e., the principles linking low-level properties and aesthetic properties) are *false*. For although '…aesthetic words apply ultimately because of, and aesthetic qualities ultimately depend upon, the presence of features which, like curving or angular lines, color contrasts, placing of masses, or speed of movement, are visible, audible, or otherwise discernible without any exercise of taste or sensibility…there are no non-aesthetic features which serve as *conditions* for applying aesthetic terms'.[25] That is: there's no true proposition of the form if x is F, G, and H, then x is A (where F, G, and H are low-level properties and A is an aesthetic property). So, for example, '…we cannot make *any* general statement of the form 'If the vase is pale pink, somewhat curving, lightly mottled, and so forth, it will be delicate, cannot but be delicate'.[26] If there are no true propositions of this form, then one might object that the non-experiential states may not be fit to do the epistemological work I'm asking of them: either they are false beliefs (in which case they would be questionable foundations for knowledge), or it's not clear that the belief forming processes of which they are components would be reliable (further work would be required to show that the process is reliable *in spite of* involving a state with a false content).

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[23] One might worry that this explanation commits us to the view that 'thick' aesthetic properties (such as gracefulness) can be analysed in terms of descriptive properties (i.e., visible low-level properties) plus an evaluative component. (For a helpful discussion of thick aesthetic concepts, see Anna Bergqvist, 'Thick Aesthetic Concepts: Giving Sibley his Due' (forthcoming.).) However, the epistemology of thick aesthetic properties doesn't dictate their metaphysics. It could be that we come to *know* that thick aesthetic properties are instantiated by relying upon generalisations mentioning specific descriptive properties, even though they cannot be *analysed* in terms of these descriptive properties. Indeed, the fact (discussed below) that there aren't any visible low-level properties that are necessary for gracefulness precludes such an analysis.

[24] Cf. Nico Silins, 'The Significance of High-Level Content', *Philosophical Studies* 162 (2013), 29-30.

[25] Frank Sibley, 'Aesthetic Concepts', *Philosophical Review* 68 (1959), 424.

[26] Op. cit., note 25, 426.

However, this worry is misguided. First, we need not hold that the contents of the states at issue are conditionals of this form. Rather, we can say that the contents are claims that admit of *exceptions*, e.g. the claim that pale pink, slightly curving, and lightly mottled vases are *usually* delicate (i.e., such vases are delicate much more often than not). On the face of it, a belief with this content, in conjunction with an experience of a vase as being pale pink, slightly curving, and lightly mottled, would be sufficient to justify the belief and afford knowledge that the vase is delicate. And a belief forming process involving a state with *this* content doesn't face the worry about reliability just outlined (provided that it *is* generally the case that pale pink, slightly curving, and lightly mottled vases are delicate). Second, reliabilism is in the clear as long as the unqualified claim is *usually* true. If the unqualified claim is false in general but true in most cases, there's no cause for concern about how a state with that content can figure in a process that produces true beliefs most of the time.[27]

In summary, it appears that the arguments for (A) from the phenomenal character of experience and its epistemological role are on shaky ground at best.[28] Let us now turn to a potential argument against (A).

2. An argument against (A) from illusion

One main source of resistance to (K) is the worry that it misclassifies some veridical experiences as illusions.[29] An experience is illusory if the subject sees something as having a property it doesn't really have. For example, if one can experience the biological kind property of being a banana, then an experience of a yellow, crescent-shaped *plastic* thing as being yellow, crescent-shaped, and a *banana* is illusory. But one might insist that there's nothing illusory about this experience—intuitively, the error rests in the beliefs one is likely to form on the basis of this misleading experience, rather than in the experience itself.[30] So given that the experience under discussion shouldn't be classified as illusory, then one cannot experience the property of being a

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[27] Thanks to Jack Lyons and Jennifer Corns for this suggestion.

[28] The situation with the epistemological argument is more complicated than I've let on. My considered view is that the rival explanation recommended above doesn't quite work as it stands—it needs to be supplemented by according an epistemological role to relevant emotional responses. However, exploring this issue would take us too far afield for present purposes (although I take it up in a work-in-progress). Suffice it to say that if we were to go through this epicycle, it would still turn out that there is a perfectly adequate and arguably simpler explanation of our aesthetic knowledge in terms of experiencing low-level properties.

[29] Something along the lines of this objection can be found in Alex Byrne, 'Experience and Content', *Philosophical Quarterly* 59 (2009), 449.

[30] Perhaps some readers don't share this intuition (thanks to an anonymous referee for encouraging me to mention this). I'm very sympathetic to this reaction; as I will go on to argue below, such intuitions aren't to be trusted in this dialectical context anyway.

banana after all. In order to adapt this argument to the case of (A) and the property of gracefulness, we need a claim of the following form: if one can experience the property of gracefulness, then an experience of an F, G, H movement as being F, G, and *graceful* is illusory. As with the analogous claim in the argument against (K), H should be a property that disqualifies the movement from being graceful. Now, I see no reason to think there isn't such a claim (although I don't know enough about gracefulness to formulate it myself). But an interesting disanalogy between the arguments against (K) and (A) emerges at this point.

The argument against (K) trades on the fact that being a banana (and in general, having a certain biological kind property) requires having a particular biological constitution. Since whether or not something has such a constitution isn't something that can be seen by the naked eye, it's possible that a thing could have visible low-level properties typically associated with being a banana (e.g., yellowness, crescent-shapedness) and not be a banana. By contrast, being graceful is more *superficial* than being a banana. Plausibly, the only properties of a movement that play a role in determining whether or not it is graceful are visible low-level properties.[31] Hence, whatever we fill in for H would be a visible low-level property that disqualifies the movement from being graceful. Of course, just because the disqualifying property is *visible* doesn't mean that it's actually *seen*—for example, unfavorable viewing conditions may prevent perception of a disqualifying low-level shape property.[32]

In any case, this disanalogy doesn't block the formulation of the argument against (A). One could argue as follows: if one can experience the aesthetic property of gracefulness, then an experience of an F, G, and *H* thing as being F, G, and *graceful* is *illusory*. But arguably, there's nothing illusory about this experience—intuitively, the error rests in the beliefs one is likely to form on the basis of this misleading experience, rather than in the experience itself.

Of course, the plausibility of this argument turns partly on how we fill in the placeholder letters (which, as I've admitted above, requires an aesthetic expertise that I lack). But we don't need to fill them in to see that the argument is deeply problematic. For it seems likely that our intuitions about whether the experiences are illusory stem from our *prior beliefs* about which properties we

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[31] Note that this claim is compatible with Sibley's observation that no set of visible low-level properties is sufficient for any aesthetic property (see section 1). For it could be that an aesthetic property supervenes on visible low-level properties in an *anomalous* manner; cf. Donald Davidson, 'Mental Events', *Experience and Theory*, eds. L. Foster and J. Swanson (Humanities Press, 1970). Also, see section 4 for a discussion about how to modify this claim in order to accommodate the idea that aesthetic properties are response dependent.

[32] Thanks to John Kulvicki for this observation.

can visually experience. And if that's right, both the argument against (K) and the one against (A) are ultimately question-begging—the intuitions would depend upon the assumption that the high-level properties cannot be visually experienced, which is precisely what is at issue. So it seems that intuitions about which experiences count as illusory cannot be regarded as non-negotiable starting points in this dialectical context; at least, not as long as the possibility that the intuitions come from prior question-begging beliefs hasn't been ruled out.[33]

In summary, it seems that the (K)-inspired arguments for and against (A) are not very promising. However, the disanalogy between the arguments against (K) and (A) suggests other forms of argument *for* (A)—ones that appeal to features that seem to be unique to aesthetic properties (among the high-level properties). In the next two sections, I will outline and evaluate arguments of this sort.

3. An argument for (A) from 'observationality'

As noted above, one's visual evidence can suggest that a movement is graceful when it really isn't—as in a case where unfavourable viewing conditions prevent one from seeing a feature that renders a movement ungraceful. But what if the viewing conditions are favourable, and (what's better) one's visual system is functioning properly, and one has the chance to view the movement from all angles? Given that such conditions are satisfied, it's very hard to imagine how a movement could *seem* to be graceful on the basis of visual evidence without actually *being* graceful. This seems to be a feature that gracefulness shares with uncontroversial cases of low-level properties—and one which is *lacked* by properties we can't visually experience, as well as by other high-level properties. One might suggest that this feature marks the divide between the properties we can visually experience and those that we can't. In this section, I will flesh out this line of thought into an argument for (A), one which is inspired by Christopher Peacocke's discussion of *observational* concepts.[34]

Consider the low-level property of *being a square*. It is not possible that someone has the capacity to visually recognise squareness, *and*:

- '…from all the different angles from which an object may be seen,
- [on the basis of visual evidence, it appears to be] square,

[33] Cf. op. cit. note 18, 6.

[34] Christopher Peacocke, *Sense and Content* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983, chapter 4). Thanks to Keith Allen for suggesting an argument along these lines.

- his perceptual mechanisms are operating properly,
- the circumstances of perception (the environment in which the causal processes take place) are normal,
- the object is constant in shape, and yet
- that presented object [is not] square'.[35]

Given that these conditions obtain, we cannot even begin to fathom how the object could fail to be square after all. How on earth could it *not* be? Try as we might, we couldn't conjure up an explanation of how it could appear to be square in such conditions, but nevertheless not be square. For the only kinds of explanations we could appeal to have been ruled out by the conditions stated (e.g., 'one's perceptual system isn't working properly', 'the lighting is weird', 'the subject is looking at the thing from a weird angle', and so on).

Strictly speaking, I suppose it's possible that there could be a brute, *inexplicable* failure of the subject's recognitional capacity. That is, perhaps there is a bizarre possible world in which the object appears to be square on the basis of visual evidence and yet isn't, and there is simply no explanation for the mismatch to be had. For our purposes, we can set this kind of case aside; what is of interest is that, by and large, something's appearing to be square on the basis of visual evidence in 'ideal' perceptual conditions (whatever those amount to, exactly) goes hand-in-hand with its being square.[36]

By contrast, consider the high-level property of *being a banana*. In a sense, it is easier to go wrong about whether something is banana just on the basis of vision. In particular, a subject with a properly functioning visual system who has the capacity to visually recognise bananas could see one from every possible angle in normal viewing conditions, such that it appears to be a banana on the basis of visual evidence; nevertheless, it is possible that it isn't a banana. It is easy to

[35] Op. cit. note 34, 99 (bullets mine). While it is handy to quote Peacocke's conditions at length, it should be noted that the notion he is after differs from the one I'm in the process of delineating here. His notion concerns concepts, i.e., ways of thinking about properties (op. cit., note 34, 89), rather than properties themselves; and what's epistemically possible for one who possesses a given concept, rather than what's metaphysically possible. It would take us too far afield to discuss the relationship between the notions here.
Moreover, note that, in light of the dialectic under discussion in this paper, it's crucial that we understand the appearance mentioned as merely *epistemic* (i.e., something's seeming to be the case on the basis of evidence). For when it comes to the case of gracefulness, understanding the appearance as specifically *visual* would amount to begging the question in favour of (A) (insofar as visual appearances of F-ness are visual experiences of F-ness). Peacocke's concerns are different; in the chapter cited, he assumes that high-level properties can be visually experienced (op. cit. note 34, 88).

[36] Of course, spelling out the notion of *ideal* perceptual conditions is a non-trivial endeavour: what are *normal* circumstances? And what qualifies as *proper* operation of one's perceptual mechanisms? But let us grant that this can be done for the sake of argument.

fathom how the thing could fail to be a banana, in spite of all of the specified conditions being met: to borrow an example from the previous section, it could simply be a *plastic* thing that happens to have all the low-level properties typical of bananas. There is a straightforward explanation of how the thing could appear to be a banana on the basis of visual evidence, and yet fail to be one, namely: as noted in the previous section, we simply *can't see* what disqualifies it from being a banana, no matter how closely we look at it (well, without a microscope).

Let us take stock. The property of being a square has a certain feature that the property of being a banana lacks. Specifically, in ideal visual conditions, if something appears to be F on the basis of vision, it is F (brute failures aside). Let us call this feature *observationality*, in recognition of the power it accords to perceptual observation: perceptual observation of a property with this feature *rules out* all the situations in which the thing observed *doesn't* have the property, except for those resulting from fallibility of perceptual observation itself (i.e., situations in which the observation is non-ideal in some respect).

Observationality seems to be a hallmark of low-level properties—for example, it seems to hold for colour and location.[37] So, in our attempt to figure out whether (A) is true, it is natural to ask whether any aesthetic properties are observational in this sense.[38]

As I hinted above, it seems that gracefulness is. On the face of it, it doesn't seem possible that someone has the capacity to visually recognise graceful pirouettes, and:

- from all the different angles from which a movement may be seen,
- it appears to be graceful on the basis of visual evidence,
- her perceptual mechanisms are operating properly,
- the circumstances of perception are normal,
- the movement is constant in aesthetic quality, and yet
- the movement isn't graceful.

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[37] Of course, we must recognise that things have different *subject-relative* locations from different points of view; so we can't use Peacocke's specification of the relevant conditions exactly as stated.

[38] I should note that Peacocke wouldn't use observationality (in his sense, as a feature of concepts) to sort the properties we can perceptually experience from those that we can't. On his view, it isn't the case that all and only concepts of properties that can be perceptually experienced are observational. For example, he thinks that we can visually experience the property of being a tomato, but also that that the concept *tomato* is non-observational (op. cit. note 34, 92-94). So on his view, there are some properties that can be visually experienced such that our concepts of them are non-observational.

Just as in the case of squareness, given that these conditions obtain, we cannot even begin to fathom how the movement might actually fail to be graceful after all. For how on earth could it *not* be? Try as we might, we couldn't conjure up an explanation of how it could appear to be graceful in such conditions, but nevertheless not be. For the only kinds of explanations we could appeal to have been ruled out by the conditions stated (e.g., 'one's perceptual system isn't working properly', 'the subject is looking at the movement from a bad angle', and so on).

Now, as in the case of squareness, we must allow for the possibility of *brute failures* of the capacity to recognise gracefulness. But one might wonder whether such a situation is as bizarre as a brute failure of the capacity to recognise squareness. After all, the capacity to recognise gracefulness requires rather more specialised training than the capacity to recognise squareness. One has to be sensitive to fine-grained low-level properties, as well as evaluative interactions between them (e.g., a certain low-level property might disqualify a movement from being graceful only when co-instantiated with certain other low-level properties). As a result, there seems to be more room for occasional anomalies, thanks to minor 'glitches' or imperfections in the subject's grasp of the complicated connection between low-level properties and gracefulness. (If the anomalies aren't just occasional, then the subject wouldn't count as having the capacity.) So the idea of an inexplicable failure in this case seems somewhat less bizarre—recognising gracefulness when one sees it is no mean feat, and so it seems more plausible that attempts to do so might just inexplicably go wrong once in a while.

However, it's not clear whether a situation involving glitches in one's capacity to recognise gracefulness is one in which one's perceptual mechanisms are operating *properly*. Whatever 'ideal' conditions amount to, they include such a 'proper functioning' condition. And while it's not entirely clear what *that* condition amounts to, a situation in which there's a *glitch* in one's capacity isn't obviously one in which it's functioning *properly*. (Note that it can't be assumed in this dialectical context that the capacity to recognise gracefulness isn't a *perceptual* capacity—that's part of what's up for debate.) But more importantly, even if there can be relatively ordinary inexplicable failures of the capacity to recognise gracefulness, this fact doesn't undermine the claim that gracefulness is observational. Plausibly, it's still the case that *by and large*, in ideal conditions, you don't get appearances of gracefulness on the basis of vision in the absence of gracefulness—it doesn't really matter how bizarre the exceptions are, provided that they're few and far between.

We've just seen a case for the claim that gracefulness, like squareness, is an observational property. One might hope to parlay this similarity into an argument for (A). In particular, as hinted above, one might suggest that observationality marks the line between the properties we can visually experience and those we can't. So given that gracefulness is observational, then (A) is true—there is at least one aesthetic property we can visually experience.

However, it's not clear that observationality has this significance. For the claim that we cannot visually experience gracefulness is *compatible* with the claim that it is observational. For example, we noted that gracefulness seems to be superficial, in that the only properties that determine whether or not a movement is graceful are visible low-level properties. Now, it could be that while we don't literally visually experience gracefulness, it nevertheless counts as observational simply in virtue of the fact that its instances are determined by instances of properties that are themselves observational. It stands to reason that if one can't easily go wrong in ideal conditions about the instances of low-level visible properties on which gracefulness depends, then one can't easily go wrong in ideal conditions about gracefulness, either (provided that one has the capacity to recognise it in the first place, of course). In other words, gracefulness is observational because it is superficial, but a property's superficiality (i.e., the mere fact that its instantiation is determined by the instantiation of visible low-level properties) doesn't obviously entail that it can be visually experienced.

In short, I cannot quite see how to support the move from a property's observationality to the claim that it can be visually experienced. So the argument for (A) from observationality is inconclusive as it stands.

4. An argument for (A) from the metaphysics of aesthetic properties

In the previous two sections, we've encountered the idea that at least some aesthetic properties (like our test case, gracefulness) are *superficial*—more precisely, that whether or not something has the property at issue is determined by which visible low-level properties it instantiates. But what is the metaphysical 'cash value' of this claim? And, more to the point, might the metaphysics of superficial aesthetic properties bear on the truth of (A)? In this section, I will sketch such a metaphysics, and discuss an argument for (A) based upon it.

The selection of metaphysical options will be familiar from discussions of the metaphysics of mind and colour. The rough idea is that such properties supervene on more 'basic' properties—

in these cases, properties characterised in scientific terms, and ultimately, in the language of fundamental physics. In the case of aesthetic properties, we're not drilling down quite so deep: the idea is simply that at least some aesthetic properties supervene on colour, shape, location, and/or motion properties.

Note that I am not suggesting that *all* aesthetic properties supervene on such visible low-level properties. For example, some aesthetic properties have a historical dimension to them. Whether or not a painting counts as inventive presumably depends partly on its relation to paintings that have come before it. If that's right, there is no subset of a painting's low-level properties that determines whether it is inventive. The suggestion is simply that at least *some* aesthetic properties are superficial, in the sense that whether they are instantiated is determined by the instantiation of visible low-level properties.

In short, the type of question we're asking is familiar from other domains: how exactly are superficial aesthetic properties related to the more 'basic' properties that determine them? Let us call the more basic properties 'base properties', and the properties supervening upon them 'target properties'. With that terminological convention in place, here is our familiar menu of options:

- *Type-identity*: the target properties are identical to base properties (cf. pain is identical to C-fibre firing; redness is identical to a specific surface spectral reflectance profile).
- *Token-identity*: instances of the target properties are identical to instances of the base properties (cf. instances of pain are identical to instances of C-fibres firing, or instances of other base properties; instances of redness are identical to instances of various kinds of surface spectral reflectances), and the properties themselves are disjunctions of the various base properties.
- *Role-based accounts*: the target properties are characterised in terms of a specific role that is realised by the base properties.
    - *Role-identity*: the target properties are identical to the role (cf. pain is identical to the role of being caused by bodily damage…etc.; redness is identical to the role of being disposed to cause a certain kind of experience in a certain kind of perceiver)
    - *Realiser-identity*: the target properties are identical to the realisers of the role (cf. pain is identical to whatever realises the role of being caused by bodily damage…etc.; redness is identical to whatever realises the role of being disposed to cause a certain kind of experience in a certain kind of perceiver)

- *Brute supervenience*: the target properties supervene on the base properties, but not in virtue of any further relationship between them (such as the identity claims just mentioned)[39]

Now, in the case of gracefulness (and, plausibly, superficial aesthetic properties in general), the type-identity option is off the table—obviously, we can't give an analysis of gracefulness in terms of visible low-level properties, for gracefulness is *multiply realisable* by a wide variety of combinations of such base properties. For example, the property of gracefulness can be realised by one complex of shape, location, and motion property instances in one case, and a completely different complex of low-level property instances in another.

This fact can be accommodated by any of the other options. But arguably, the role-identity option is the frontrunner; for it is the only one that can accommodate the plausible idea that aesthetic properties are *response-dependent*.[40] The property of gracefulness would be identical with the role of being disposed to cause a certain kind of aesthetic response in certain kinds of viewers, and its instances would be identical with instances of specific complexes of low-level visible properties. (By contrast, on the token-identity and realiser-identity options, gracefulness is a rather motley disjunction of various visible low-level property complexes.)

I should note that accommodating the claim that aesthetic properties are response-dependent requires qualifying the characterisation of superficial aesthetic properties. We need to allow for possibilities in which the connections between complexes of visible low-level properties and dispositions to cause aesthetic responses are different—e.g., the possibility that a certain kind of aesthetic response is typically caused by different complexes of visible low-level properties than it actually is. This possibility means that (e.g.) whether a movement instantiates gracefulness isn't *entirely* determined by which visible low-level properties it instantiates—it's also determined by the contingent connections between complexes of visible low-level properties and dispositions to cause the relevant aesthetic response. But there is still a sense in which gracefulness is superficial: if we *hold fixed* the connections between complexes of visible low-level properties and dispositions to cause aesthetic responses, *then* whether a movement instantiates gracefulness is just a matter of which visible low-level properties it instantiates.

[39] There is, of course, a dualist/emergentist option, but our interest here is restricted to metaphysics on which the instantiation of an aesthetic property is *determined* by the instantiation of visible low-level properties.
[40] Thanks to Dan Cavendon-Taylor for raising this issue.

In any case, nothing in the argument for (A) I have in mind depends on which of the options outlined above (besides brute supervenience) is correct. All that matters for the argument is that there are at least some aesthetic properties such that their instances are token identical to instances of low-level property complexes. Given this sort of metaphysics, there is a straightforward route to the conclusion that we can see instances of aesthetic properties: if one sees an instance of a low-level property complex, and this instance is *identical* to an instance of an aesthetic property, then one sees the instance of the aesthetic property.

However, it's not obvious that perception of a property instance is sufficient for perceptual *experience* of that property.[41] We must distinguish perception, which is a relation between a subject and mind-independent entities, from perceptual experience, which is a state a subject can be in even when she doesn't bear this relation to any mind-independent entities (as in total hallucination). The precise connection between perception and perceptual experience is a subject of dispute. Naïve Realism is naturally interpreted as claiming that at least some experiences that involve the obtaining of the perceptual relation (i.e., veridical experiences and illusions) are simply *identical* to that very state of affairs. So, for example, my veridical experience of the banana on my desk just is my perceiving the banana on my desk.[42] By contrast, others think that the connection isn't quite this tight. For example, intentionalists think that all kinds of perceptual experience consist in *representing* one's environment as being a certain way (e.g., as containing a yellow, crescent-shaped thing). Of course, representing one's environment as being a certain way is something one can do even if one isn't perceiving anything in it (as in a case of total hallucination). So on this view, perceptual experience, including veridical experience, is distinct from the obtaining of the perceptual relation.

Now, *if* veridically experiencing F-ness *just is* perceiving an instance of F-ness, then veridically perceiving an instance of F-ness is sufficient for visually experiencing it. *If* that's right, then we have an argument for (A)—at least from the Naïve Realist perspective. Given that an instance of gracefulness is identical to an instance of a low-level property complex, and that one sees the instance of the low-level property complex, then one sees the instance of gracefulness. And

[41] Thanks to Nico Silins and Fiona Macpherson for pressing this point (in different ways).

[42] As for hallucinations, these must consist in something else—this is why Naïve Realism goes naturally with *disjunctivism* about perceptual experience, which is roughly the view that veridical experiences and at least hallucinations are fundamentally different. For a detailed characterisation of disjunctivism, see (e.g.) Heather Logue, 'Disjunctivism', *Oxford Handbook of the Philosophy of Perception*, ed. Mohan Matthen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

given that seeing an instance of gracefulness amounts to visually experiencing it, then we can visually experience an aesthetic property.

However, if the metaphysics of aesthetic properties described above is true of any aesthetic property at all, a Naïve Realist *shouldn't* claim that seeing an instance of a property is sufficient for visually experiencing it. For seeing an instance of a low-level property complex that is in fact an instance of gracefulness *before* one learns anything about ballet would be sufficient for *visually experiencing* gracefulness. I take it that no party to the debate over experience of high-level properties would want to claim that a ballet appreciation *novice* visually experiences gracefulness in the case described. This claim entails that visual experience of gracefulness can be phenomenologically and epistemically *inert*. It's agreed on all sides that the novice isn't in a position to recognize graceful pirouettes, and that she doesn't enjoy any phenomenology associated with gracefulness—this is (part of) what makes her a ballet appreciation *novice*.[43] So if a novice *does* visually experience gracefulness in virtue of perceiving what is in fact an instance of it, this doesn't make any distinctive contribution to the novice's epistemic position or the phenomenal character of her overall mental state. In short, the fact that one visually experiences gracefulness would have no phenomenal or epistemic upshot whatsoever.

One might reasonably suggest that a visual experience with no phenomenal or epistemic upshot whatsoever is no visual experience *at all*—for part of what it is to be a visual experience is to have such an upshot. I won't insist on this claim; this isn't the place to get tangled up in claims about the essence of visual experience. At the very least, the sense in which the novice visually experiences gracefulness is rather *uninteresting*.[44] The fact that she visually experiences gracefulness doesn't do any explanatory work; it just drops out as a consequence of a certain kind of metaphysics of aesthetic properties and a particular metaphysics of perceptual experience. This seems like a rather hollow victory for a proponent of (A).

To summarize: the argument for (A) and the Naïve Realist account of veridical experience in terms of perception don't mesh well—the former is built upon a metaphysics of aesthetic properties that, in conjunction with the latter, yields the implausible result that aesthetic *novices*

[43] I suppose that one could say that the novice does enjoy such phenomenology, but lacks the training required to exploit it in order to recognize gracefulness when she sees it. But it's not clear how one could support this claim—a novice wouldn't be able to recognise the phenomenology by introspection, and it strikes me as dubious that experts could distinguish between learning to recognise phenomenology they've always had, on the one hand, and acquiring the capacity to enjoy new phenomenology, on the other.

[44] Thanks to David Chalmers for this thought.

perceptually experience aesthetic properties. So the Naïve Realist argument for (A) cannot get off the ground. And without Naïve Realism, the proposed metaphysics can get us *perception* of aesthetic properties; but it cannot get us all the way to *perceptual experience* of them. For that, we'd need to appeal to phenomenological or epistemological considerations—but as we've seen, the arguments that do that are inconclusive at best.

5. Conclusion

In previous work, I have argued that we should take seriously the possibility that there is no fact of the matter as to whether we can visually experience biological kind properties.[45] My worry is that the arguments for and against (K) are inconclusive as they stand, and I can't see a clear path towards settling the matter one way or the other. Thus, I suspect that the line between perceptual and post-perceptual states is not as sharp as we tend to assume. It may well be that it's simply *indeterminate* whether we visually experience biological kind properties, given that we can account for the relevant phenomenological and epistemological data either way.

This paper was borne out of the hope that the matters are different when it comes to aesthetic properties. Although I think that the arguments for and against (A) analogous to the ones pertaining to (K) are also inconclusive, we can formulate arguments for (A) that trade on a feature that seems to be unique to aesthetic properties among high-level properties (what I've been calling their *superficiality*). Alas, it seems that these arguments are also inconclusive. I think that the argument from observationality deserves further elaboration and consideration, but at present I find myself drawn towards the conclusion that there's no fact of the matter with respect to (A), either.

[45] Op. cit. note 18.