

# Higher-Order Evidence in Aesthetics

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*In this introduction, I explain the notion of higher-order evidence and explore its bearing on aesthetic judgement. I start by illustrating how reflection on cases involving higher-order evidence engages with well-established concerns in aesthetics—specifically, how it might reveal tensions within and between widely recognized aesthetic ideals governing aesthetic judgement. Next, I show how attention to higher-order evidence in relation to aesthetic judgement might expose limitations or assumptions of theories in epistemology, where the nature and significance of higher-order evidence with respect to belief is the focus of much recent attention. The aim is not to resolve the issues but to demonstrate the significance of higher-order evidence in aesthetics and, in doing so, encourage work on the topic in and across aesthetics and epistemology.*

### 1. Aesthetic ideals

Consider:

Ananya judges that a film is bad.<sup>1</sup> And it is bad. But Ananya has reason to think that her judgement is influenced by her antagonistic relationship with the filmmaker. Is it reasonable for Ananya to maintain her judgement?

Betty judges truly that a painting is beautiful. The painting conveys morally problematic attitudes. Having studied aesthetics, Betty has misleading evidence that these attitudes undermine the aesthetic value of the work.<sup>2</sup> Should Betty revise her judgement?

Carlita judges that The Beatles are better than The Rolling Stones. As it happens, she is right. But, according to the testimony of her peers, The Stones are better. Is Carlita required to change her judgement?

Dagmar judges that a recent building is admirable. While that judgement is in fact a response to its admirable qualities, Dagmar is aware that its architectural style is in vogue at present and might not survive the test of time. Is Dagmar justified in sticking to her judgement?

In each case, the subject makes an aesthetic judgement regarding an object but gains evidence that seems to support a higher-order judgement that their initial judgement is in some way unsupported by or unresponsive to the aesthetically relevant features of the object. This raises a question as to whether and how the evidence for the higher-order

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1 This talk of aesthetic judgement is deliberately non-committal. In §2, I consider what it might involve.

2 I assume that moralism about aesthetic value is false for illustrative purposes only. For discussion, see Carroll (1996), D'Arms and Jacobson (2000b), Gaut (2007), Eaton (2012), Harold (2011), Paris (2019), Song (2018), Stear (2020).

judgement—the *higher-order evidence*—bears on their lower-order judgement. Does the higher-order evidence in some way undermine or count against the aesthetic judgement? If so, how? If not, why not?

With respect to the different examples, I formulated the issue in different ways—in terms of what it is *reasonable* for the subject to do, what they *should* do, what they are *required* to do, and what they are *justified* in doing. Insofar as these expressions or the contexts in which they are used invoke different standards, the answers to the questions might vary. Having registered this, I will continue to be loose in my choice of terms of normative appraisal, since the aim here is not to resolve the issues but to introduce them and to convey their importance.

Issues parallel to those in aesthetics introduced by examples such as those of Ananya through to Dagmar are the focus of much recent debate in epistemology, where the phrase ‘higher-order evidence’ originates.<sup>3</sup> Consider:

Erica believes that a certain candidate is the best qualified for a job on the basis of their CV and interview. As a matter of fact, that is true. But a colleague points out that the candidate is Erica’s close relative. Given this evidence of bias, should Erica drop her belief or, at least, lower her confidence?

Frida believes that God does not exist after reflecting on the problem of evil. As it happens, the existence of evil in the world really does rule out God’s existence. But Frida is aware that she was raised by atheist parents and is surrounded by atheist friends and colleagues, which might have influenced her assessment of the problem and the proposed solutions to it. Is Frida justified in maintaining her belief?

Higher-order evidence is of interest in epistemology in part because established theoretical frameworks seem not to capture it. Suppose that, given the threat of bias, Erica should not believe that the candidate is the best qualified. However, the threat of bias is not evidence against the proposition that the candidate is the best qualified—it indicates nothing about their training or experience, for example. Nor does the threat of bias undercut the evidence that the candidate is the best qualified—it does not suggest that the CV was fabricated, for example, or that the interview was rigged. Insofar as countervailing and undercutting evidence exhaust the standard options for explaining why the evidence that the candidate is the best qualified is insufficient in Erica’s case, reflection on higher-order evidence seems to call for revisions or supplementations to received thinking.<sup>4</sup>

While the phrase ‘higher-order evidence’ might be unfamiliar in aesthetics—or, at least, a lot less familiar than it is in epistemology—the phenomenon it picks out and many of the issues surrounding it are of central and long-standing concern in the field. Theorizing those issues in aesthetics under the heading of higher-order evidence brings into view their connections to structurally similar issues in epistemology that might

3 Kelly (2005), I believe, introduced it. At the same time, Feldman (2005) spoke of ‘second-order evidence’. For overviews of the debate in epistemology, see Horowitz (2022), Whiting (2020). For a recent collection of essays on the topic, see Skipper and Steglich-Petersen (2019).

4 The received view is due to Pollock (1970). For the point that higher-order evidence complicates it, see Christensen (2010), Lasonen-Aarnio (2014).

otherwise be invisible. At the same time, it serves to draw together related debates in aesthetics that might otherwise proceed in relative isolation.

By way of illustration, consider the ideal of *autonomy*.<sup>5</sup> As a first pass, this ideal requires that a person's aesthetic judgement be their own, that the judgement be expressive of and informed by their preferences and values as brought to bear by the person on the object of their judgement in light of its aesthetically relevant features. In exploring and assessing this ideal, aestheticians have, in recent years, devoted considerable attention to its bearing on cases involving aesthetic disagreement<sup>6</sup> and on cases involving aesthetic testimony.<sup>7</sup> In doing so, they have engaged with some of the many issues that higher-order evidence raises, if not in those terms. Consider: If a person were to revise their aesthetic judgement in the face of disagreement—say, if Carlita were to suspend her judgement that The Beatles are better than The Stones because her peers judge otherwise—that would seem to render their aesthetic judgement heteronomous. Likewise, if a person were to make an aesthetic judgement on the basis of another's testimony—say, if Carlita were to go on to judge that The Stones are better because her peers say so—that too would seem to violate the ideal of autonomy. While in Carlita's case, the relevant disagreement and testimony might serve as first-order evidence that The Stones are better, they serve also as higher-order evidence that Carlita's original judgement that The Beatles are better was, in some way, unresponsive to the aesthetic qualities of the music in question. So, the ideal of autonomy might seem to suggest that higher-order evidence ought not to be bear on aesthetic judgement.

To be clear: I am not here endorsing the ideal of autonomy.<sup>8</sup> Again, the point is to show that the issues that reflection on higher-order evidence raises engage with established—arguably, deep-seated—ways of thinking about the aesthetic domain. Moreover, as I will now explain, reflection on higher-order evidence in aesthetics might reveal tensions within such ways of thinking and thereby suggest that the relevant ideals are not ones to which aesthetic judgement is really answerable.

For an aesthetic judgement to be autonomous in the relevant sense, it is not enough that it be free of external influence; it must also result from the right kind of internal influence. It is difficult to give a positive characterization of what the 'right kind' of influence is, but for present purposes, it is enough that there are paradigmatic cases in which it is absent. Consider: Having watched a film, Ananya judges that it is bad. While this is true, her judgement is distorted by her animosity toward the filmmaker, which is manifested when she watches the film. This blinds Ananya to the aesthetically relevant features of the film, including the very features that make it bad. In this version of the case, Ananya's

5 This ideal is often traced back to Kant. However, accepting autonomy as an ideal does not—at least, not without further ado—commit one to accepting other aspects of Kant's aesthetic theory. For discussion of that theory and of the role of autonomy in it, see [Gorodeisky \(2010\)](#), [Guyer \(1983; 2014\)](#), [Hopkins \(2001\)](#), [Lopes \(2021\)](#), [Matherne \(2019\)](#).

6 See [Gorodeisky and Marcus \(2018\)](#), [Lopes \(2017\)](#), [Marques \(2016\)](#), [McGonigal \(2006\)](#), [Robson \(2014\)](#), [Schafer \(2011\)](#), [Sundell \(2011\)](#).

7 See [Fileva \(Forthcoming\)](#), [Gorodeisky \(2010\)](#), [Hills \(2022\)](#), [Hopkins \(2011\)](#), [Lord \(2016\)](#), [Meskin \(2004\)](#), [Nguyen \(2017\)](#), [Robson \(2015; 2022\)](#), [Whiting \(2015\)](#).

8 For my attempt to do some justice to it, see [Whiting \(Forthcoming\)](#).

judgement falls short of the ideal of autonomy, even though the heteronomy comes from within, as it were, not from without. In turn, this might suggest that, were Ananya to be made aware of the bias, or were she to get information that suggests she is likely subject to it, she ought to revise her judgement about the film.<sup>9</sup> So, the ideal of autonomy might seem to suggest that higher-order evidence ought to be bear on aesthetic judgement.

But now it seems that autonomy makes inconsistent demands. On the one hand, it requires a person to accommodate higher-order evidence when making aesthetic judgements—insofar as it is evidence of heteronomy. On the other hand, it requires a person *not* to accommodate higher-order evidence when making aesthetic judgements—insofar as doing so would itself be heteronomous.

Of course, it is possible that any inconsistency here will turn out on inspection to be merely apparent or superficial. Be that as it may, further reflection on cases involving higher-order evidence might seem to reveal another inconsistency—one between, rather than within, aesthetic ideals. To illustrate, suppose that autonomy (only) requires subjects to ignore higher-order evidence in making aesthetic judgements. In line with this, and in the face of peer disagreement, Carlita maintains her judgement that The Beatles are better than The Stones. In addition, and on the basis of the higher-order evidence that this disagreement provides, Carlita forms the higher-order judgement that her aesthetic judgement is likely unresponsive to the aesthetic qualities of the music in question. But this combination of attitudes seems incoherent—Carlita is fragmented or at odds with herself. By her own standards, Carlita's aesthetic judgement is problematic.<sup>10</sup>

More generally, while autonomy might require a person to remain steadfast in their aesthetic judgements in the face of higher-order evidence,<sup>11</sup> it might also permit them to respond to that evidence in forming non-aesthetic judgements, including judgements about the status or standing of their aesthetic judgements. In that case, the ideal of autonomy might permit—perhaps even require—a person to make an aesthetic judgement that fails to cohere with their own self-assessment.

In recent debates at the intersection of epistemology and ethics, it is commonplace to query why a person's having attitudes that fit together should matter. One way of pressing this question is to ask why we should care about 'psychic tidiness' or 'pretty patterns' among a person's attitudes.<sup>12</sup> Insofar as the epistemic and ethical domains are organized

9 For this verdict in relation to another source of bias to which aesthetic judgement is susceptible—namely, snobbery—see Kieran (2010; cf. Patridge 2018). See also Zoë Johnson King's (2023) contribution to this special issue. For discussion of evidence of other irrelevant influences on aesthetic judgement and its significance, see Dorsch (2014), Kieran (2011), Lopes (2014), Meskin et al. (2013), Robson (2014).

10 In the jargon, Carlita's combination of attitudes is *akratic*. For discussion of epistemic akrasia in cases of higher-order evidence, see Coates (2012), Horowitz (2014), Worsnip (2018). For discussion of its aesthetic counterpart, see Herzog (2000), Silvers (1972), Thériault (2017). It is the focus of Irene Martínez Marín's (2023) contribution to this special issue.

11 This notion of steadfastness is borrowed from the debate on peer disagreement, from which the contemporary debate on higher-order evidence emerges. For volumes on disagreement in epistemology, see Christensen and Lackey (2013), Feldman and Warfield (2013).

12 For these phrases, and for discussion of the sentiment expressed, see Kolodny (2008, p. 367), Worsnip (2022, p. 315).

around values such as truth and welfare, respectively, it might seem that such things do not matter, or—more cautiously—that they do not matter for their own sakes. But the rhetorical question has a quite different force when raised in the aesthetic domain. After all, tidiness and prettiness are aesthetic qualities (Sibley, 2001, p. 2). More generally, coherence is an—on some accounts, *the*—aesthetic value (Collingwood, 1925; Beardsley, 1958; Kieran, 2013; Westerman, 2018).

Coherence might obtain—or fail to obtain—among the features of the object of an aesthetic judgement. But it might also obtain—or fail to obtain—among those judgements themselves—or among those judgements and a person's other attitudes. In this way, a constellation of attitudes in which an aesthetic judgement figures might itself be a legitimate object of aesthetic judgement.<sup>13</sup> To return in light of this to the issue at hand: Granting that the ideal of autonomy is internally consistent, reflection on cases involving higher-order evidence might seem to reveal a clash between it and another aesthetic ideal, namely, coherence.

Is it really the case that the relevant ideals—individual or joint—make inconsistent demands on aesthetic judgement? If so, is that a reason to reject one or both? Resolving these issues calls for careful scrutiny, not only of the content and credentials of the relevant ideals, but also of the nature and range of higher-order evidence and of the lower- and higher-order attitudes on which it might be thought to bear. To make progress, aestheticians can (and should) draw on the principles and theories that have been developed in epistemology.<sup>14</sup> But the direction of traffic need not (and should not) be one way. Generalizing those principles and theories from the epistemic to the aesthetic domain promises to reveal limitations or implications that would not otherwise be apparent, as I will now illustrate.

## 2. The aesthetic domain

To start with, note that the epistemic domain is primarily—on some accounts, exclusively—the domain of cognitive states, in particular, of beliefs.<sup>15</sup> So far, with respect to the aesthetic domain, I have spoken blandly of judgements. It is natural to think that aesthetic judgements express or issue in beliefs about aesthetic matters, just as meteorological judgements express or issue in beliefs about meteorological matters. However, there is a tradition according to which aesthetic judgements express not beliefs but feelings.<sup>16</sup> On

13 This point touches on ideas in both Platonic and Buddhist traditions about the beauty of 'inner' harmony or virtue (see, respectively, Norton, 1995; Cooper, 2017). With additional, and no doubt controversial assumptions, it might support the Nietzschean call to make oneself a work of art (Nehamas, 1985; Ridley, 2007).

14 It is a theme in epistemology that reflection on higher-order evidence reveals that epistemic ideals make competing and irreconcilable demands (see Christensen, 2010).

15 Also degrees of belief. For simplicity's sake, I set this aside.

16 For different versions of this view, see Ayer (1936), Gibbard (1990), Gorodeisky and Marcus (2018), Todd (2004). Meta-normative issues have not been so prominent in debates in epistemology concerning higher-order evidence, although there are some notable exceptions (for example, Greco, 2014; Schoenfield, 2014).

this view, when Dagmar judges that the building is admirable, she in fact expresses admiration for the building, not a belief about its aesthetic qualities.

Such a view might itself be motivated by reflection on the ideal of autonomy. Very roughly, aesthetic judgements are governed by autonomy, but beliefs are not. It is fine—perhaps even ideal from an epistemic point of view—for a person to form or update their meteorological judgements in response to the testimony of meteorologists, say, or on the basis of disagreement with the meteorological community. This difference in the ideals governing them suggests, one might think, that aesthetic judgements do not express beliefs. That does not yet establish that they express feelings instead, but it is a step in that direction.<sup>17</sup>

Of course, ‘non-cognitivism’ in aesthetics is controversial, as is the motivation for it. But, whether or not affective responses are expressed by aesthetic judgements, it is clear that such responses stand in a robust relationship to the subject matter of aesthetic judgements. Aesthetic qualities are the proper objects of aesthetic emotions—we are delighted by the delightful, dulled by the dull, stunned by the stunning, disgusted by the disgusting, pleased by the pleasing, and so on.<sup>18</sup> It is instructive, then, to consider how proposals about the function of higher-order evidence with respect to a person’s beliefs about non-aesthetic matters might extend to higher-order evidence with respect to a person’s feelings towards items of aesthetic interest.<sup>19</sup>

Consider the suggestion that higher-order evidence provides *a reason for withholding belief*.<sup>20</sup> In general, reasons for withholding need not be given by evidence for or against the truth of a proposition, or by something that undercuts such evidence. For example, although they recall from their training days that cutting the red wire will turn off the mechanism, the fact that the bomb will explode if they are mistaken is a reason for the bomb disposal expert to withhold belief so as to secure a second opinion. More generally, the (expected) costs of error can be a reason for suspending belief.<sup>21</sup> In a similar fashion, so the suggestion goes, the evidence that Erica’s assessment of the candidate is likely biased is a reason for Erica to suspend her belief as to the candidate’s suitability for the job. Insofar as suspended belief is an alternative to belief, the higher-order evidence is thereby a reason against belief. If that reason outweighs the reasons Erica has for believing that the candidate is best qualified given by her first-order evidence—the CV and interview—Erica ought to suspend.

17 For discussion of this line of thought, see [Hopkins \(2001\)](#), [Gorodeisky and Marcus \(2018\)](#), [Todd \(2004\)](#). See also [Jon Robson and Neil Sinclair’s \(2023\)](#) contribution.

18 This connection leads many to develop response-dependent theories, according to which aesthetic qualities consist (at least in part) in powers or dispositions of objects to elicit aesthetic emotions ([Beardsley, 1982](#); [Budd, 1995](#); [Goldman 1998](#); [Levinson, 1996](#); [McDowell, 1983](#); [Pettit, 1983](#); [Stecker, 1997](#); [Wiggins, 1987](#); also, [Sibley, 2001](#), Ch. 6). For some pushback, see [Watkins and Shelley \(2012\)](#), [Tropman \(2022\)](#). For discussion of how such views might explain the bearing of higher-order evidence on aesthetic judgement, see [Christy Mag Uidhir and Luis Oliveira’s \(2023\)](#) contribution.

19 For a different way of developing the themes to follow, see [Javier González de Prado Salas’s \(2023\)](#) contribution.

20 For this suggestion, see [Lord and Sylvan \(2021\)](#).

21 For this idea, see ([Schroeder, 2012a](#)). It is contentious, of course, but for present purposes I grant it.

As proponents of the suggestion under consideration agree, withheld belief is not the mere absence of belief (Friedman, 2013b). Rishi Sunak does not believe that I ate cereal for breakfast today, but he is not in a state of withheld belief with respect to whether I did so. If withheld belief is a positive state in its own right, what sort of state is it? A plausible suggestion is that it is an attitude toward a question—in Erica’s case, whether the candidate is best qualified—to which believing one way or another embodies or constitutes an answer (Friedman, 2013a; Booth, 2014).

Now suppose that Ananya dislikes a film—again, whether or not her aesthetic judgment expresses that dislike—but has evidence that this dislike is influenced by her antagonistic relationship with the filmmaker. Might this higher order be a reason for Ananya to suspend her dislike? The problem is that it is not clear that there is such a thing as withheld or suspended dislike. That is because there seems to be no question to which feeling one way or another embodies or constitutes an answer.<sup>22</sup> One candidate is the question of whether the film is bad. But a person’s answer to questions of the form *whether p* is given by their believing *that p* or *that not-p*. Another candidate is the question of whether to dislike the film. But a person’s answer to questions of the form *whether to φ* is given by their deciding *to φ* or *not to φ*. If there is nothing that stands to feeling as withheld belief and withheld decision stand to belief and decision, respectively, then the suggestion that higher-order evidence is a reason to withhold does not generalize.

This is not an attempt to engage seriously with the suggestion from epistemology, let alone to refute it. The point is just to illustrate how reflection on higher-order evidence in aesthetics might test and thereby problematize the theoretical frameworks of epistemology.

To give another example, consider the suggestion—tailored to the epistemic domain—that higher-order evidence is the *wrong kind of reason* to bear on what to believe (Whiting, 2017; see also DiPaolo, 2018).<sup>23</sup> An influential way to unpack the distinction between reasons of the right kind and those of the wrong kind is in terms of the fittingness of the response on which they bear. A reason of the right kind reveals a respect in which a response is fitting—in which it fits its object, such that its object merits or is worthy of that response. A reason of the wrong kind does not do this—although it might reveal a respect in which desiring that response is fitting. To illustrate: The fact that there is evil in the world is the right kind of reason for Frida to believe that God does not exist—it indicates that what Frida believes, the object of her belief, is true, hence, that it is fitting to believe it. In contrast, the fact that it improves Frida’s relationship with her atheist colleagues is a reason of the wrong kind for her to believe that God does not exist—it indicates something about her state of believing, not about what she believes, namely, that it is desirable from a prudential point of view.

To return to higher-order evidence, the suggestion is that the fact about Frida’s atheist upbringing and environment is a reason of the wrong kind against believing that God

22 For related points in different contexts, see Sharadin (2016); Way (2007).

23 For discussion of the wrong/right kind of reason distinction, see (D’Arms and Jacobson, 2000a; Hieronymi, 2005; Howard, 2016; Parfit, 2001; Piller, 2006; Rabinowicz and Ronnow-Rasmussen, 2004; Schroeder, 2012b; Sharadin, 2016; Way, 2012).



does not exist, since it indicates, not that her belief is false—hence, unfitting—but that it is the result of influences that bypass her rational faculties, which is undesirable from an epistemic point of view.

How does this proposal fare when applied to the aesthetic domain? Note, first, that the aesthetic domain is a domain, not only of feeling, but also of action, in a way that the epistemic domain is usually thought not to be.<sup>24</sup> If the walls are dull, that is a reason to paint them. If the sculpture is stunning, that is a reason to preserve it. If the music is delightful, that is a reason to listen to it. More generally, aesthetic qualities are reasons for action.

In view of this, consider a revised version of Dagmar's case. Having looked at the admirable building, she is deliberating as to whether to purchase it on behalf of an architectural preservation society. One might think that the higher-order evidence that Dagmar's deliberations are swayed by shifting fashions and, as a result, are likely unresponsive to the aesthetic qualities of the building is a reason for her not to purchase it (at least, not before taking measures to correct for or mitigate the irrelevant influence). But it is not a reason of the wrong kind against purchasing the building. The right-/wrong-kind distinction, as glossed here, does not apply to reasons for acting.<sup>25</sup> Actions, unlike beliefs and feelings, do not have objects.<sup>26</sup> Hence, actions, unlike beliefs and feelings, cannot be fitting or unfitting in the relevant sense. Thus, there can be no reasons of the wrong kind for or against acting.

This is, at most, a first pass. Again, the aim here is not to mount a serious challenge to the proposal in epistemology that higher-order evidence is a reason of the wrong kind, but to show more generally that it is instructive to explore how such proposals might generalize to the aesthetic domain. This serves at the very least to make explicit assumptions on which they rest that might otherwise remain implicit. It is an open question—and an important one—whether an account of higher-order evidence that holds across domains is feasible and desirable.<sup>27</sup>

### 3. Conclusion

I have tried to show that aestheticians should care about higher-order evidence—indeed, that they already do so, if not under that description—hence, that aestheticians stand to benefit from engagement with extant work in epistemology on the topic. At the same time, I have tried to show that epistemologists should care about how their proposals, tailored as they are to the specificities of the epistemic domain, might apply to the aesthetic domain with its distinctive features. It is the aim of this special issue of the *British*

24 On the practicality of aesthetics, see King (2018), Lopes (2018, Ch. 2), Ridley (2016), Whiting (2021). Ema Sullivan-Bissett and Michael Rush (2023) explore this in relation to higher-order evidence in their contribution.

25 That is controversial. For defense, see Heuer (2011), Hieronymi (2013), McHugh and Way (2022b, Ch. 7).

26 Of course, decisions have objects—namely, actions. But it is up for debate whether reasons to act reduce to reasons for decisions. For opposing views on this issue, see Heuer (2018), McHugh and Way (2022a).

27 Another domain to consider is the moral domain. For a collection exploring higher-order evidence in relation to moral philosophy, see Klenk (2020).



*Journal of Aesthetics* to facilitate, encourage and showcase work on the topic of higher-order evidence in aesthetics, work that feeds from and into epistemology.<sup>28</sup>

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