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**Comments on Errol Lord's  
"The Nature of Perceptual Expertise and the Rationality of Criticism"**

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Lord's paper articulates a novel and interesting strategy for dissolving the famous tension between perceptualism about aesthetic judgement and the rationality of our practice of citing low-level features in support of aesthetic judgements. To achieve this aim, he appeals to a rich content account of aesthetic perception supplemented by his favoured interpretation of that account's epistemic consequences. A second, subsidiary aim of the paper is to draw abductive support for his account of aesthetic perception from how it helps with dissolving the tension.

Accordingly, there are two axes along which we might evaluate Lord's proposal. On the one hand we could ask how it compares with other attempts to address the tension between perceptualism and rationalism in aesthetics. Alternatively, we could ask how his proposed view of enriched perceptual contents fares with the particular case of aesthetic properties.<sup>1</sup> My comments will do no more than very briefly raise some questions about both these sets of issues.

I begin with a brief summary of the paper below, after which I will address the two sets of issues mentioned in reverse order by (1) considering how Lord's general schema of high-level perception (in terms of "Enrichment States" and "Corresponding Features") fits with the case of aesthetic perception in particular, and then (2) flagging the extent to which the resulting resolution of the tension in aesthetics is revisionary with respect to a naive understanding of critical practice. None of what I have to say will constitute an argument against Lord's view, but hopefully I could push him to clarify or say a little more.

### **Summary**

In the attempt to accommodate critical practice's claim to rationality, Lord's paper follows other perceptualists in giving a non-evidential reading of the relationship between critical reasons and

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<sup>1</sup> As Lord rightly sets a broader defence of a rich contents account of perception aside in this paper, I will not address general skepticism about higher-level perceptual contents. For what it is worth, I am sympathetic with the move of understanding aesthetic perception within a rich perceptual contents framework.

aesthetic judgements. Like Sibley (1965) and Hopkins (2007), he endorses the thought that successful criticism amounts to a kind of “perceptual proof” or “perceptual guidance”. The novelty of his approach lies in how he extracts the pertinent notion of perceptual guidance from his account of aesthetic perception—an account he gets by applying a general version of the rich content view of perception to aesthetic properties in particular.

On the version of the rich content view he holds, the inclusion of at least some high-level perceptual contents depends on antecedent perceptual learning, where perceptual learning is a matter of extending one’s perceptual capacities. Lord calls contents that require such learning “enriched” contents, and posits that their representation by perceptual states depends on the activation of underlying “Enrichment States” in the perceiver—states that take lower-level<sup>2</sup> perceptual contents as their inputs and yield the pertinent high-level perceptual representations as outputs. (He leaves it open that not all higher-level perceptual contents are enriched contents, but suggests, plausibly, that all aesthetic contents are contingent on enrichment states. Other examples of enriched contents in the paper include kind properties like “human-ness” and, in the longer version, Siegel’s standard example of “pine-hood”.)

The interesting thing about perceptual states with enriched contents, on Lord’s view, is that their justifying force depends on the epistemic status of the *inputs* to the enrichment states from which they arise. This dependence is characterised as follows:

“one loses *ex ante* justification to believe the high-level contents when one loses *ex ante* justification to believe the (corresponding) low-level contents.” (p. 6, conference version, parenthesis added)

That is, enriched states may be properly perceptual, but they lack the immediate or intrinsic justifying force that traditional foundationalism (what Siegel (2011) calls “dogmatism”) accords to perceptual experiences in general. In Lord’s terms, enriched states give us direct but *non-foundational* access to the higher-level properties they represent. Among perceptual states, only those representing low-level (and perhaps non-enriched high-level) contents can have foundational justifying force.

This picture allows Lord to navigate the tension in aesthetics by holding on to the claim that aesthetic judgements are essentially perceptual, and grounding the rationality of critical practice

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<sup>2</sup> I use “lower-level” as the examples used often implicate some kind-properties among the low-level corresponding features of a higher-level perception. Presumably there is a hierarchy going all the way down to some set of basic sensible properties.

in a dependence relation between the justifying force of an aesthetic perception, and the justifying force of perceptions of “corresponding” low-level properties.

### 1.

The application of Lord’s general scheme for enriched high-level perception to aesthetic properties is *prima facie* plausible, and it nicely tracks some features of aesthetic perception, but it is conspicuously silent about *differences* between perceptions of aesthetic and other high-level properties. Consider the non-aesthetic examples used to illustrate enriched perception. In the case of perceiving the property of being human, the claim is that “I need to experience the low-level features that link up with humanness before I can have an experience of humanness. [...] The presence of the humanness in the content of the experience depends on the presence of the low-level features” (p. 4, conference version). In the long version of the paper Lord calls the low-level properties pertinent to a particular high-level percept its “Corresponding Features”.

In cases like human-ness and pine-hood it is easy to see what could count as corresponding lower-level features, and how someone could, over the course of a summer of tagging pines, acquire an enrichment state that links representations of pine-hood with representations of some of its corresponding features. This is because there are reliable general correlations between instances of pine trees’ corresponding features and instances of pine-hood. These same correlations allow conceptual inferences from lower-level corresponding features to pine-hood. And these same correlations give us a ready explanation of why a perceiver’s *ex-ante* justification for believing something’s needles are bunched may be connected to their *ex post* justification for believing it is a pine.

The point to take from this is that enrichment states seem to be mechanisms operating according to general principles that tie high-level contents to lower-level contents. Although they may implement these principles in a way that enables our perceptual system to bypass conceptual inference, they nonetheless plausibly require general regularities that would in principle make inferences from instantiations of sufficient corresponding features to instantiation of higher-level feature possible. But recall that one of the two commitments of perceptualism as Lord construes it, is some form of particularism or denial that there are any regular correlations between non-aesthetic and aesthetic features like the ones postulated for features like human-ness and pine-hood. How, in aesthetic cases, should we construe the work that an enrichment state plausibly does for a perceiver in non-aesthetic cases of high-level perception, in the absence of any general correlations according to which such a state might operate? And if instead there are some general correlations (even very domain specific ones), what reason do we have to continue to endorse a version of perceptualism that incorporates wholesale particularism about aesthetic judgement?

Of course, none of this is to say that the enrichment state schema could not be made to work for aesthetic perception. But it suggests that perhaps a little more might be required to make sense of the notion of an aesthetic enrichment state than is required for understanding the notion of an enrichment state in non-aesthetic cases.

## 2.

The paper's central contention is that if we accept Lord's account of aesthetic perception, we get an easy "middle path" between perceptualism and rationalism. As his account, if successful, preserves both of the perceptualist's central commitments (p. 5, long version), the question then becomes whether it does justice to the insights about critical discourse that motivate rationalists like Dorsch (2013).

In the other recent attempt at a middle path in this debate, Hopkins (2007: 139–143) frames the rationalist insight as requiring that "conclusions" of critical arguments (i.e. the aesthetic judgements that critics seek to support) satisfy what he calls the "principle of rational sufficiency". Aesthetic judgements, if they are to fit a naive understanding of criticism as reasoning, should at least in principle be the kinds of things that the critic's activity alone can make rational to accept. Lord makes it clear, however, that his proposal is not intended to satisfy this picture of criticism-as-argumentation; instead, his middle path aims closer to the perceptualist side of the tension than Hopkins's.

But if not argumentation, in what sense, then, is the critic's activity a rational one? The suggestion is that what critics do by citing lower-level features, instead of presenting arguments, is to "elucidate the structure of their justification" and "point the consumer to features one needs to process in order to see the aesthetic features for oneself" (p.17, long version). This indeed sounds like something in the region of what Sibley must have had in mind with a "perceptual proof" and "perceptual guidance".

But the justification being elucidated is, on the strong perceptualism Lord is trying to preserve, only available to the critic and, as such, is of little use to the consumer. Moreover, the guidance being offered can only help the consumer see the aesthetic features if they already have the capacities grounded in the pertinent enrichment state. Presumably directing one's focus to these lower-level features is supposed to help with the necessary perceptual learning, but here we return to the problem I tried to raise in the previous section. How can the necessary perceptual learning start from familiarity with instantiations of an aesthetic property's corresponding features if there are no general regularities from one instance to the next? Without more on how

the links between aesthetic properties and their corresponding lower-level features can be learnt by the consumer's perceptual system (i.e. without more on how the pertinent enrichment states are acquired in aesthetic cases) it would seem that the critic's activity is rational in just a very attenuated sense. This threatens to leave those disposed to rationalism about aesthetic criticism with little more satisfaction than Sibley's perceptualism provided.

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As a final, speculative thought: if my reading of Lord's "middle path" is correct—that he retains perceptualism but gives up substantial ground on the notion of criticism-as-argumentation—I would be interested in the prospects of a middle path that falls closer to the rationalist by retaining something like Dorsch's rationalist commitments about critical practice, but doing more to accommodate the intuitions behind perceptualism in aesthetics. It is not entirely clear to me that perceptualism of the radical kind that Lord sketches in his setup of the tension deserves our unquestioning loyalty, even if something close to it has been popular in aesthetics for a long time. Perhaps we can do justice to the deeply perceptual or experiential basis of our aesthetic lives without divorcing them completely from kinds of reasoning that seem to be in perfectly good standing in most other human practices.

### References:

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