On Snobbery

This is a paper about the nature of snobbery and the undermining import of a charge of snobbery. On my account, snobs sincerely attempt to identify and correctly evaluate the aesthetically-relevant features of an object, but they get things wrong, and their getting things wrong is explained by the fact that they under-value that which they associate with being lower-class. We can see the need for this account by reflecting on examples, and can distinguish it from existing accounts of snobbery by thinking about when and why evidence of snobbery constitutes higher-order evidence against one’s aesthetic judgments. Existing accounts either are consistent with snobs’ aesthetic judgments being flawless, and thus not undermined by evidence of snobbery, or they imply that the canonical reasoning-process for arriving at aesthetic judgments has been bypassed altogether. On my account, by contrast, snobbery does not bypass the canonical aesthetic reasoning-process but distorts it in systematic and predictable ways.

*You ain’t got a clue, let’s be honest.*

-- Stormzy, ‘Vossi Bop’

1.

This is a paper about the nature of snobbery and the undermining import of a charge of snobbery.

I situate my views on these matters by comparison with two existing papers on snobbery. According to Matthew Kieran (2010), an aesthetic judgment is snobby when it is formed out of an interest in being trendy, setting oneself above the masses, or otherwise securing social capital, rather than a sincere interest in identifying and evaluating an object’s aesthetically-relevant features. And according to Stephanie Patridge (2018), snobbery comes in two further varieties. You can be a snob even if you sincerely attempt to identify and correctly evaluate an object’s aesthetically-relevant features, provided that you think your ability to do so – your carefully-honed powers of aesthetic discernment and refined taste – makes you better than other people. And you can be a snob even if you lack these self-aggrandizing beliefs *and* you correctly identify and evaluate an object’s aesthetically-relevant features, provided that you do so in a context in which this exercise of your appreciative skills calls attention to a background “socio-appreciative hierarchy” (*ibid.*, p.251) that devalues the object and the social practices in which it is embedded.

I have no beef with these accounts. I think that they identify real phenomena and that it makes sense to use the word “snobbery” to refer to these phenomena. But none captures what I take to be the paradigm case of snobbery: *aesthetic evaluation distorted by classism*. On the fourth account that I develop here, snobs sincerely attempt to identify and correctly evaluate an object’s aesthetically-relevant features, but they *get things wrong*, and their getting things wrong is explained by the fact that they under-value that which they associate with being lower-class. We can see the space for this fourth account, and can understand how the kind of snobbery that interests me differs from the three kinds that have previously been theorized, by thinking about when and why evidence of snobbery constitutes higher-order evidence against the snob’s first-order aesthetic judgments. That is the point of this paper.

The next section summarizes the three varieties of snobbery that have already been theorized and offers two paradigmatic instances of snobbery that are not covered by any of these three accounts. Section 3 then offers a diagnosis of these overlooked phenomena, employing the concept of higher-order evidence to make the point: I introduce a distinction between types of higher-order evidence that is familiar from contemporary epistemology, apply this distinction to aesthetic judgments, and show that evidence of snobbery does not constitute higher-order evidence of a certain familiar type on any of the three extant accounts. What is missing, I argue, is an account of a variety of snobbery that consists in reasoning *poorly* – that is, in the reasoning-process by which one arrives at one’s aesthetic judgment being *distorted* in systematic and predictable ways – rather than (a) reasoning correctly or (b) not reasoning at all, or at least not in the right sort of way for one’s aesthetic judgment to be properly based. Section 4 then develops the missing account in greater detail and discusses a variety of ways in which aesthetic evaluation can be distorted by classism.

2.

Here is how Matthew Kieran defines snobbery (2010, p.244): [[1]](#footnote-2)

A snobbish judgement or response is one where aesthetically irrelevant social features play a causal role in S’s appreciative activity in coming to judge the value of x *qua* aesthetic object, so that how they are formed, along with any concomitant rationalization, is explained more fundamentally in terms of S’s drive to feel or appear superior in relation to some individual or group.

Kieran’s example is of a group of people who will only drink a particular brand of coffee, not because they prefer the taste, but because they “desire to be the kind of person associated with the brand” (p.243) in virtue of the social capital that they think this association will accrue.

Snobs in Kieran’s sense may still reach correct aesthetic judgments. Indeed, Kieran opens his paper with the observation that “snobs can and do get aesthetic judgments right” (p.243). He later elaborates on why this is the case (pp.245-246):

Whilst proper appreciation is concerned with doing justice to the work, snobbery involves making use of it for the sake of social demarcation. The aesthetic appreciator has to be able to pick out the relevant aesthetic features, apprehend them in the appropriate ways and bring to bear all sorts of relational considerations. The snob has to call on many of the same capacities so as to be attuned to which markers set off the ‘right’ social signals. Furthermore, to do this well the snob has to attend to many of the same things and in the same sort of ways as proper aesthetic appreciators do.

In short, insofar as trendiness overlaps with genuine aesthetic value and is grounded in the same features of objects, snobs (in Kieran’s sense) will attend to features of objects that are genuinely aesthetically relevant. They might incidentally acquire quite a bit of evidence that in fact supports their aesthetic judgments throughout this process. But the problem, according to Kieran, is that snobs attend to these objects’ aesthetically-relevant features for entirely the wrong reasons and do not base their judgments on their evidence in the appropriate way (p.254):

True appreciators care about their experience with a work for itself. Hence they approach a work with critical sympathy and ask if they are doing justice to it in their appreciation. Snobs, in contrast, appreciate or pronounce on some aesthetic object in so far as doing so enables them to appear socially superior with respect to some individual or group.

In short: no matter what the quantity or quality of the snob’s evidence for her aesthetic judgments may be, she ignores all this evidence and just forms whatever sorts of aesthetic judgments will (she thinks) enable her to appear socially superior.

Stephanie Patridge (2018)[[2]](#footnote-3) introduces the term *social-contagion snobbery* for snobbery in Kieran’s sense, arguing that we should recognize two further varieties of snobbery: *attitudinal snobbery* and *contextual snobbery*. Attitudinal snobs are people who have a snobby attitude toward their own aesthetic judgments. They think that their ability to correctly aesthetically evaluate the right sorts of things makes them better than other people (p.245):

Rather than liking this or that because it will separate one from the herd, as the social-contagion snob does[,] attitudinal snobs tend to see themselves as separated from the herd because of their ability to appreciate this or that (rightly or wrongly)… Such snobs see themselves as more socially valuable, or more socially worthy, or just a better sort of person than their perceived appreciative inferiors, and they do so in light of the perception that they have superior appreciative skills.

Patridge’s example is of someone who thinks that his “refined taste” renders him superior to others because “*they* do not know a Bordeaux from a Beaujolais” (*ibid.*, emphasis original). It is this “snobbish self-satisfaction” (p.248) that is the attitudinal snob’s mistake. Patridge allows that attitudinal snobs may genuinely be good aesthetic appreciators of the objects of their refined taste – they may genuinely be, say, “a good judge of wine” (*ibid.*) – but holds that they are wrong to think that this licenses them to look down their noses at others.

Contextual snobs, on Patridge’s account, are people who fail to see that the nuances of a social context affect which judgments it is appropriate for them to form and express (p.250):

For snobbery to manifest itself in this way there must be a shared background presumption that the appreciative skills that the snob deploys are generally seen as ‘socially higher’ in some way than the appreciative activity (or object) at hand, which is generally seen as ‘socially lower’. In such cases, when one appeals to appreciative-relevant considerations to ground a rejection of an appreciative object there is a very real danger that this will also serve as a rejection of the particular social activity, and so the participants of that activity of which the appreciative object is part.

Patridge’s example is of a cicerone – a professional beer taster – who goes to a backyard barbecue, is offered a Budweiser, and declines, recognizing that “Budweiser is a pretty bad beer” (p.249). In doing so, Patridge says, the cicerone risks giving the impression that she is rejecting the whole social activity of a Bud-fueled backyard barbecue and thereby insulting the other barbecue attendees. Even if *she* does not think that her refined palate for beer makes her superior to the other attendees, there exists a background social hierarchy according to which that is the case. And the cicerone’s rejection of the Budweiser renders this background hierarchy salient. The salience of the background hierarchy, according to Patridge, is why behaviors like the cicerone’s refusal of a Budweiser seem snobby and feel “cringe-worthy” (*ibid.*).

Patridge writes in terms of “appreciative” judgments, skills, sensibilities, and activities, rather than aesthetic ones. And she acknowledges that, like attitudinal snobs, contextual snobs might be excellent evaluators of the objects of their refined tastes – “after all”, she says, “Budweiser *is* a pretty bad beer” (p.249, emphasis added), and the cicerone discerns this. Patridge’s point is not that the cicerone is mistaken about Budweiser but rather that “[t]here are cases where the fact that the beer is bad is simply not an appreciative relevant fact (or, perhaps, is less weighty than it otherwise would be)” (p.251). I gather that her view is that the appreciatively-relevant is not exhausted by the aesthetically-relevant, such that non-*aesthetic* factors – especially social factors – can affect the all-*appreciatively*-relevant-things-considered appropriateness of the cicerone’s refusal, perhaps by reducing the weight of the reason to refuse the beer provided by its badness or perhaps by rendering the beer’s quality entirely irrelevant (in this particular context) to the question whether to accept or refuse it.[[3]](#footnote-4) It is these non-aesthetic factors, according to Patridge, that a contextual snob fails to determine and respond to correctly.

I think that these three accounts of snobbery — social-contagion snobbery, attitudinal snobbery, and contextual snobbery — all describe real phenomena. And I have no problem with using the term ‘snobbery’ to refer to these phenomena. However, none of these three accounts captures what I take to be the paradigm of snobbery. To see what I mean, consider these examples:

Juicy: Felicity sees someone wearing a Juicy Couture tracksuit, hoop earrings, long fake nails, a slicked-back ponytail, and heavy makeup. She forms the aesthetic judgment that this outfit is *chavvy* and therefore *ugly*.

Merry and Bright: Charlotte drives past a house that is thoroughly covered in Christmas decorations, including brightly-colored lights, large inflatables, and a flashing “Santa stop here!” sign on the roof. She forms the aesthetic judgment that these decorations are *tacky* and therefore *ugly*.

These need not be cases of social-contagion snobbery, attitudinal snobbery, or contextual snobbery. Felicity and Charlotte may be sincerely “concerned with doing justice” to the outfit and the decorations. Indeed, they may believe that they *are* doing these things justice when they judge that they are ugly, paying no attention to the social consequences of their forming these judgements. So, these judgments need not exhibit social-contagion snobbery. Moreover, Felicity and Charlotte need not believe that (what they think is) their ability to determine the ugliness of the outfit and decorations makes them better than other people. It would be natural to assume that they believe that these aesthetic abilities make them better than the people whose outfits and decorations they are evaluating, but we can also imagine versions of the cases in which they lack any such beliefs.[[4]](#footnote-5) So, their judgments need not exhibit attitudinal snobbery. And, finally, Felicity and Charlotte may keep their aesthetic judgments private, silently forming them while walking past the person and driving past the house but allowing no trace of these judgments to appear in their facial expressions or behavior. They may thus avoid giving any impression of rejecting the social practices of which the outfit and decorations are a part. So, their judgments need not exhibit contextual snobbery. For all that the three extant accounts of snobbery tell us, then, these judgments may be entirely snobbery-free.

And yet these are clearly snobby judgments. Indeed, when I think of snobbery, judgments like these are the first thing that comes to mind. Felicity sincerely employs the concept chavvy, which is a concept whose social function in the United Kingdom has been to denigrate that which is associated with being working-class.[[5]](#footnote-6) And Charlotte sincerely employs the concept tacky, which is less well-theorized, but seems to be used to denigrate the things that working-class or middle-class people do when they want to look fancy (with the implication being that these things are not in fact fancy and that the people have erred either because they are insufficiently sophisticated to know what is really fancy or because they know what is really fancy but cannot afford it). Moreover, and importantly, Felicity and Charlotte are *wrong*. Their aesthetic judgments are mistaken; tracksuits and hoop earrings are fierce, not ugly, and over-the-top Christmas decorations are silly and fun, not ugly. A natural interpretation of these examples is one according to which Felicity and Charlotte get their aesthetic evaluations wrong *because* they under-value that which they associate with being lower-class. And that, I think, would be the paradigm of snobbery. To contrast it with social-contagion snobbery, attitudinal snobbery, and contextual snobbery, we might call this phenomenon *straight-up classist snobbery*.

Here are five things to note about straight-up classist snobbery. First: the concepts in these examples are dispensable. The fact that someone is disposed to sincerely employ a classist concept like chavvy or tacky is good evidence that they hold classist attitudes, just as the fact that someone is disposed to sincerely employ the concept slutty is good evidence that they hold sexist attitudes. But someone can hold problematic attitudes without having specialist concepts with which to express them. If Felicity and Charlotte under-value that which they associate with being lower-class, and if this classist under-valuing explains why they get certain aesthetic judgments wrong, then these judgments are instances of straight-up classist snobbery regardless of the concepts in which they are couched.

Second: the class associations that explain someone’s under-valuing certain things can be represented more or less explicitly. They are sometimes represented fairly explicitly — as, for instance, in women’s magazines featuring images of celebrities with a “ring of truth” calling attention to their alleged visual imperfections, which often include captions pithily describing the alleged imperfections, and which sometimes do so using terms with obvious class associations like ‘cheap’ and ‘trashy’. At other times, people ostend the features of objects that they devalue because of class associations, but they leave implicit the fact that a class association is the basis for their devaluing — as, for instance, on some occasions when someone says “you’re not wearing *that*” or “I wouldn’t have *that* in *my* house”. And at still other times, both the devaluing and its basis are conveyed through subtle non-verbal cues like raised eyebrows, curled lips, and awkward pauses in conversation. In these cases, the fact that a class association drives the speaker’s devaluing may be opaque even to the speaker. They may be aware that they have a low aesthetic opinion of the object but unaware that class associations drive this low opinion. And this opacity may be partial; for instance, one person might think that they *just don’t like* the food at Gregg’s, with no basis for their dislike represented whatsoever (full opacity), while another might say that they think the food at Gregg’s *tastes synthetic*, unaware that they think that it tastes synthetic because they associate Gregg’s with being lower-class and/or that they dislike the taste that they call “synthetic” because they associate it with being lower-class (partial opacity).

Third: the class associations that explain someone’s under-valuing can be inaccurate. In other words, the things that people devalue because *they* associate them with being working-class need not actually *be* statistically more common within working-class communities than outside of them. For instance, people sometimes confuse geographical or racial markers with class markers, taking something to be a sign of being lower-class when it is in fact equally common across class lines among those who grew up in a certain area or belong to a certain racial group. Associations are mental representations, which, like other mental representations, may or may not have a close relationship with reality. But as long as what explains someone’s inaccurate aesthetic judgment is that she devalues that which *she* associates with being lower-class, her judgment is an instance of straight-up classist snobbery, even if the correlation between that which she devalues and being lower-class is not in fact particularly strong.

Fourth: in this paper I focus on examples of people whose aesthetic judgments are distorted because they under-value things that they associate with being *working*-class. But I think that what is recognizably the same phenomenon arises for that which is associated with being *middle*-class (witness the concepts nouveau-riche and kitschy). And I think that this, too, constitutes straight-up classist snobbery. I use the neutral term “lower-class” so as to include both sorts of cases.

Fifth: when I say that Felicity and Charlotte under-value that which they associate with being lower-class, I mean that they take these things to have less value *than they actually have*. (I will say more about this in the next section.) They might also take these things to have less value *than they would have taken them to have, had they not associated them with being lower-class*. The two overlap in all cases besides those in which someone would have *over*-valued something had they not associated it with being lower-class, but their class associations bring their aesthetic evaluations back into line. That would be a curious further phenomenon, worthy of discussion in its own right. But it is not my topic here.

I will say more about the forms that straight-up classist snobbery can take in section 4. First, I have to say more to distinguish the operations of straight-up classist snobbery from those of the three varieties of snobbery that have already been theorized. That is my task for the next section.

3.

We can illuminate the key difference between the variety of snobbery that I am interested in and the three other varieties by thinking about *higher-order evidence.*

Each type of reasons-responsive mental state has a canonical way of being formed. There is a type of consideration to which mental states of the relevant type are properly responsive, and there is a way of assessing those considerations on which a mental state of that type must be based if it is to be properly formed. For example, beliefs are canonically formed in response to evidence for and against a proposition and are canonically formed by identifying and weighing the evidence. Moral judgments are canonically formed in response to moral reasons and are canonically formed by identifying and weighing those reasons. And so on. This is what makes reasons-responsive mental states susceptible to being undermined by higher-order evidence; someone gains higher-order evidence against a reasons-responsive mental state when she learns something that indicates that it is not supported by, or not appropriately responsive to, the sorts of considerations on which it must be based if it is to be properly formed.

But different types of higher-order evidence work differently. Some higher-order evidence indicates that you were *reasoning poorly* when you formed a certain mental state. Other higher-order evidence indicates that you were *not really reasoning at all, or at least not in the canonical way for forming the sort of mental state that you're in*. And higher-order evidence of the former variety – the one that indicates that you were reasoning poorly – comes in a wide range of subvarieties, targeting different components of the reasoning-process that constitutes the canonical way of arriving at your mental state.

For illustration, contrast the following cases:

Loan Calculation 1: You are wondering whether you can afford to take out a loan. You do some research online, jot down some calculations, and proudly announce to your roommate that you think you can afford a certain loan that is being offered at a special rate. Your roommate sighs and rolls their eyes. They then show you an extensive range of psychological research indicating that people’s assessments of which loans they can afford are skewed by an extreme form of wishful thinking: no matter what evidence they have gathered, when forming beliefs about which loans they can afford, people completely ignore their evidence and just form whatever beliefs feel comforting to them without being too outlandish to be credible.

Loan Calculation 2: You are wondering whether you can afford to take out a loan. You do some research online, jot down some calculations, and proudly announce to your roommate that you think you can afford a certain loan that is being offered at a special rate. Your roommate sighs and rolls their eyes. They then show you an extensive range of psychological research indicating that people’s assessments of which loans they can afford are skewed by a subtle-but-pervasive form of wishful thinking: when forming beliefs about which loans they can afford, people’s projections of their future income tend to be just a tad optimistic, while their estimations of substantial costs that they will incur during the repayment period tend to be just a little on the low side. The cumulative effect of these overestimations and underestimations, according to the research, is that people often think they can afford a loan when they actually can’t.

In both cases you acquire higher-order evidence against your belief that you can afford the loan. But the cases work differently.

In Loan Calculation 1 the studies indicate that, when you formed your belief that you can afford the loan, you were not really reasoning at all – or, at least, not in the canonical way for forming beliefs. You were not weighing the evidence you had gathered but rather forming a belief in response to considerations of personal comfort, which are (let’s assume) entirely unrelated to the truth of the proposition that you can afford the special-rate loan. We might see this process as a piece of *practical* reasoning, whose content is something like “I want to feel comforted, and this belief will make me feel comforted, so I’ll adopt it!”. Or we might see it as a causal process that produces beliefs but does not really count as *reasoning* at all.[[6]](#footnote-7) Either way, it is not the canonical reasoning-process by way of which beliefs are properly formed.

In Loan Calculation 2, by contrast, you formed a belief in the canonical way: you identified and weighed the evidence for and against the relevant proposition. What the studies indicate is not that this canonical belief-forming reasoning-process was *bypassed altogether* (as in Loan Calculation 1), but rather that its operations were *subtly distorted* by systematic and predictable factors to which people are habitually subject.[[7]](#footnote-8) Higher-order evidence of this sort usually identifies a particular component of the reasoning-process that was distorted and one or more distorting factors. In this case, what was distorted were your estimations of the weight of certain pieces of evidence – you were overly generous in assessing evidence about your projected income, affording it more than its actual weight, and stingy in assessing evidence about your projected costs, affording it less than its actual weight – and the factor that did the distorting is a kind of optimism, as described in the studies.

Other subvarieties of this second sort of higher-order evidence target other components of the reasoning-process(es) by which you arrive at your mental state(s). It might not be your ability to *determine the weight of reasons* that is undermined, but your ability to *identify reasons* in the first place. For example, other studies might indicate that, when reasoning about whether they can afford a loan, people systematically fail to think of things that they will have to spend substantial amounts of money on in future. Alternatively, it might be your ability to *identify interaction effects* between reasons that is undermined. For example, yet more studies might indicate that people systematically fail to revise predictions about their future credit score in line with revisions to their plans regarding housing and jobs. These subvarieties all fall within the same broad variety of higher-order evidence – the variety that indicates that you formed your mental states through a version of the canonical reasoning-process for those states, but that this process was distorted in some specific way — that we see in Loan Calculation 2.

Aesthetic judgments are reasons-responsive mental states. They are canonically formed following direct acquaintance with the object, which makes the agent aware of the object’s aesthetically-relevant features.[[8]](#footnote-9) And they are canonically formed by identifying and assessing these aesthetically-relevant features as they interact in the object. Like moral reasoning, aesthetic reasoning is often *ordered* from the descriptive through the thick(er) to the thin(ner); for example, just as someone might judge that an action’s descriptive features make it kind and respectful, which in turn makes it good, so too might she judge that an object’s descriptive features make it balanced and graceful, which in turn makes it beautiful.[[9]](#footnote-10) But these judgments are all highly *context-sensitive*; just as an action’s descriptive features can only constitute kindness in the right surrounding context, so similarly can an object’s descriptive features only constitute balance in the context of the object as a whole. Moreover, some aesthetic merits (such as an artwork’s being satirical or groundbreaking) are only recognizable as such in light of facts about the surrounding social context and/or genre conventions. This context-sensitivity makes aesthetic considerations highly *defeasible*, such that an object with features that typically conduce to beauty can still fail to be beautiful overall – as, for instance, when an object that is balanced is nonetheless not especially beautiful overall because it is also plain and boring. Even combinations of features that each individually tend to increase an object’s aesthetic value may decrease its value when they are combined – as, for instance, when a hat and jacket that look fantastic individually nonetheless detract from an outfit’s aesthetic value when worn together because they clash. Well-formed aesthetic judgments are based on assessments of this complex interplay between all of the object’s aesthetically-relevant features.[[10]](#footnote-11)

To be clear: this canonical aesthetic reasoning-process is not always carried out in an explicit, effortful, and conscious way. On the contrary, the mechanisms through which we identify and respond to aesthetic reasons are often buried within the subpersonal, and, as a result, difficult to detect introspectively. When we engage aesthetically with an object and have certain positive or negative experiences in response, it is often difficult for us to describe articulately, accurately, and precisely just what it is about the object to which we are responding (hence frequent appeals to the allegedly-inscrutable faculty of “taste”). The same goes for our beliefs and moral judgments, though. The mechanisms through which we identify and respond to evidence and moral reasons are also often buried within the subpersonal and difficult to detect introspectively and describe accurately. Judgment-formation does not have to be explicit, effortful, or conscious in order for it to be reasons-responsive – although it *can* be all of these things.[[11]](#footnote-12)

I assume that aesthetic reasoning and aesthetic judgments are assessable for correctness. In other words, I assume that there are facts about which features of objects are aesthetically relevant, about how much weight each of these features carries in an overall determination of the object’s aesthetic value, and about complex interaction effects between these features that go beyond a mere summing of their weights.[[12]](#footnote-13) Aesthetic judgments are correct to the extent that they reflect their objects’ actual aesthetic value. And aesthetic reasoning is correct to the extent that it involves correctly identifying the aesthetically-relevant features of the object, correctly assessing these features’ weights and any interaction effects between them, and thus forming a correct judgment about the object’s aesthetic value.

This means that aesthetic judgments can be undermined by higher-order evidence. In particular, aesthetic judgments can be undermined by evidence indicating that you incorrectly identified an object’s aesthetically-relevant features, that you incorrectly determined those features’ aesthetic significance, or that you were insensitive to complex interaction effects between them. This is the sort of undermining that goes on in Loan Calculation 2, but for aesthetic judgments. And, of course, aesthetic judgments can also be undermined by higher-order evidence indicating that they were formed in a way that is completely unresponsive to the aesthetic significance of the object’s aesthetically-relevant features. That would be the sort of undermining that goes on in Loan Calculation 1, but for aesthetic judgments.

Return, now, to snobbery.

Evidence of social-contagion snobbery constitutes higher-order evidence of the sort seen in Loan Calculation 1. Kieran’s snob invests time and effort into determining which aesthetic judgments will enable her to “feel or appear superior”, and may incidentally acquire quite a bit of evidence that in fact supports her aesthetic judgments through this process. But, when forming her judgments, she makes no attempt to determine the aesthetic significance of the object’s features and to consider any potential interaction effects between them, and thus to reach an accurate view of the objects’ aesthetic value. Instead, the snob ignores her evidence of aesthetic significance and just forms whatever aesthetic judgments will (she thinks) enable her to appear socially superior. The canonical aesthetic-judgment-forming process is bypassed altogether. So, evidence that you have been a snob in this sense is evidence that, in forming your aesthetic judgments, you were not really reasoning at all – or, at least, not in the canonical way for forming aesthetic judgments.

By contrast, evidence of attitudinal snobbery does *not* constitute higher-order evidence against your aesthetic judgments. That is because attitudinal snobs are often entirely correct in identifying objects’ aesthetically-relevant features, assessing those features’ aesthetic significance, determining the interaction effects between them, and thus forming aesthetic judgments about the objects. It is the attitudinal snob’s higher-order judgment that her aesthetic judgments separate her from “the herd” that is mistaken. So it is this higher-order judgment that is undermined by evidence of attitudinal snobbery. The snob’s aesthetic judgments themselves might be in perfectly good standing, and so those judgments are not undermined. Similarly, evidence of contextual snobbery does not undermine (the subset of appreciatively-relevant judgments that are) your *aesthetic* judgments. While the cicerone’s judgment is inappropriate for its appreciative context, it is correct about Budweiser being a bad beer. If it were made in a different context, there would be nothing wrong with it. Again, then, this sort of snobbery does not constitute higher-order evidence against your aesthetic judgments – though it does indicate that you should not have expressed, or perhaps even formed, those judgments while you were in the relevant social contexts.[[13]](#footnote-14)

Here is something striking, then: of the three types of snobbery theorized thus far, none of them suggests that evidence of snobbery constitutes higher-order evidence of the familiar sort seen in cases like Loan Calculation 2. Two of the three accounts — Patridge’s two accounts — allow that snobs may exercise carefully-honed powers of aesthetic discernment and thus be correct in their aesthetic judgments, with their snobbery consisting in other things. And the third account — Kieran’s original account — suggests that evidence of snobbery constitutes higher-order evidence of the sort we see in cases like Loan Calculation 1, indicating that the canonical aesthetic reasoning-process was bypassed altogether. Kieran’s snobs are not “concerned with doing justice to the work” (*op. cit.*), whereas Patridge’s snobs are concerned with doing justice to the work and succeed in doing so.[[14]](#footnote-15) We do not have an account of snobbery according to which snobs are *concerned* with doing justice to their objects of evaluation but *failing to actually do justice to them*, with the canonical aesthetic-judgement-forming reasoning-process being distorted in systematic and predictable ways.

Not until now, anyway.

Straight-up classist snobbery *is* a phenomenon whereby the canonical aesthetic reasoning-process is distorted in systematic and predictable ways, rather than being bypassed altogether. Juicy and Merry and Bright provide the most straightforward illustrations of how this can work. In these cases, class associations lead Felicity and Charlotte to take certain features of the outfit and the decorations to detract from their aesthetic value, when in fact those very features enhance the objects’ aesthetic value. To clarify: the version of these cases that I have in mind is one on which Felicity and Charlotte do correctly identify some aesthetically-relevant features of their objects of evaluation, such as the size and shape of the earrings and the brightness of the Christmas lights, but they are incorrect about the *valence* of these features’ aesthetic significance – as we can see from the fact that they take these features to instantiate (what they take to be[[15]](#footnote-16)) the negatively-valenced properties of chavviness and tackiness. They thus form mistaken aesthetic judgments. And they do so because they devalue that which they associate with being working-class; namely, the very features of the outfit and the decorations that they are assessing in order to determine these objects’ aesthetic value. Evidence of this sort of snobbery therefore constitutes higher-order evidence of the familiar variety seen in Loan Calculation 2. It suggests that your aesthetic judgments were formed through the canonical aesthetic reasoning-process, but that this process was subtly distorted by your classism.

4.

Given the complex nature of aesthetic reasoning, the straightforward mistakes in Juicy and Merry and Bright are far from being the only way in which classism can distort a component of the canonical reasoning-process for arriving at aesthetic judgments. Someone can exemplify straight-up classist snobbery even if they are correct about the *valence* of an object’s aesthetically-relevant features (in the surrounding context), if they are nonetheless incorrect about the *weight* of these features’ aesthetic significance – taking them to be good, but less good than they actually are – because they devalue that which they associate with being lower-class. In addition, someone’s ability to track the *interaction effects* between objects’ aesthetically-significant features may be distorted by classism. For example, Felicity may fail to notice the way in which the elements of the outfit together create a whole “look”, or Charlotte may fail to consider the fact that brightly-colored decorationsgo better with other brightly-colored decorations than they would with Scandinavian minimalist ones.

In other cases, classism may cause someone to fail even to *identify* the aesthetically-relevant features of their object of evaluation. Consider:

Ironic. Poppy is asked whether she likes Little Simz and says that she doesn’t listen to Simz’s music because she doesn’t like “rap”. When pressed as to why she doesn’t like rap, Poppy claims that it is because of the misogyny endemic in the genre. In reality, though, the reason why Poppy dislikes the music that she categorizes as “rap” is that she associates it with being working-class.

Frustrating. Fiona listens to the song “Jobseeker” by Sleaford Mods. She says that she doesn’t like it, and, when pressed as to why, says that the lyricist is “just shouting”. Fiona is unfamiliar with the signing-on process that the song satirizes, as a result of which she is unable to understand the narrative — she does not catch the parts of the lyrics that are nods to real phenomena and does not realize that there is satire here that she is missing. Fiona never bothered to learn about the signing-on process because she thinks that things she associates with being working-class are not important to learn about.

Ironic is ironic because Little Simz is a black feminist icon. But Poppy is unable to identify not only the feminist character of Simz’s lyrics in songs like “Boss” and “Woman”, but also all of the other aesthetically-relevant features of her music — the harsh abrasiveness of “Dead Body”, the gritty confidence of “Wings”, and so on — and instead incorrectly imputes disvaluable features of other artworks to Simz’s tracks.[[16]](#footnote-17) Poppy makes these mistakes because she is unwilling to engage with Simz’s music at sufficient length to learn which features it actually has. Since this unwillingness is explained by the fact that Poppy devalues that which she associates with being working-class, the resultant inaccurate aesthetic judgments are instances of straight-up classist snobbery. A similar failure is at play in Frustrating; here Fiona does engage with her object of evaluation – she is listening to the song – but she remains unable to identify its aesthetically-relevant features. The jokes go over her head. She thus forms an unduly low opinion of the song’s aesthetic value, having failed to recognize the things that make it valuable. Since Fiona’s inability to identify the song’s aesthetically-relevant features is also ultimately explained by the fact that she devalues that which she associates with being working-class, the resultant inaccurate aesthetic judgments are again instances of straight-up classist snobbery.

Now, here is a borderline case:

Keep it 100. It is 2019, and Olivia has been asked to compare Kano’s *Hoodies All Summer* with Stormzy’s *Heavy Is the Head*. Being unfamiliar with the conventions of grime, she is unable to contrast the genre-bending musical risks and newfound political bent of Kano’s later work with Stormzy’s classic sound. She realizes that she lacks this expertise and declines to pass judgment on the two albums. But the ultimate explanation of why Olivia is unfamiliar with grime is that she characterizes it as “rap”, dislikes the music she categorizes as “rap” because she associates it with being working-class, and so does not listen to it.

In Keep it 100, Olivia technically *cannot* exhibit straight-up classist snobbery as I have characterized it. That is because she forms no aesthetic judgments about Kano and Stormzy’s albums whatsoever, and so she cannot form judgments that are inaccurate as a result of her devaluing that which she associates with being lower-class. Unlike Poppy and Fiona, Olivia recognizes that there are certain artworks that she is in no position to evaluate. And she declines to evaluate them on this basis. This seems like good self-knowledge rather than snobbery. However, Olivia’s opinions – or lack thereof – on *Hoodies All Summer* and *Heavy Is the Head* are still affected by her classism; her classism ultimately explains why she has no opinion on these works by explaining why she is in no position to evaluate them, which in turn explains why she (sensibly) chooses not to evaluate them. So, while this is not a case of straight-up classist snobbery as I have characterized it, it seems like a borderline case. There are no snobby aesthetic judgments here, since there are no aesthetic judgments, but there is something snobby in the background that explains the agent’s inability to pronounce on the works. We might think of this as a snobby *set of preferences* or a snobby *pattern of attention* as opposed to a snobby set of judgments. Classism is a broad characterological vice rather than a purely epistemic phenomenon, so it can show up in other ways besides leading people to form inaccurate judgments.[[17]](#footnote-18)

Here it is important to note that I have simply stipulated, in my descriptions of the cases, that it is because of negative class associations that Poppy and Olivia dislike the music they call “rap”. In other versions of these cases, the agents’ evaluations of Simz, Kano and Stormzy’s works could instead be affected by associations pertaining to properties of the artists besides their class backgrounds – their racial backgrounds or Simz’s gender, for instance. An unduly negative evaluation would then determinately *not* be an instance of straight-up classist snobbery. It would instead be an instance of racism or sexism.

Still other kinds of case are also determinately *not* instances of straight-up classist snobbery, though they may resemble it. For example, suppose that someone finds herself in a new social environment and desperately tries to suss out the aesthetic standards that predominate in this environment, so as to be socially accepted. Even if the predominant standards are themselves snobby, this person does not exhibit straight-up classist snobbery so long as she does not herself form sincere aesthetic judgments in line with these standards. If she is just trying to survive, but neither internalizes nor endorses the snobby standards to which she conforms, then she is not (yet) snobby. Nor does it constitute snobbery for someone to form aesthetic judgments that happen to track class lines, if she herself does not associate that which she disvalues with being lower-class. If the person in a new social environment internalizes its snobby standards without realizing that they are driven by class associations and without herself forming any class associations, then she is not (yet) snobby, although her subsequent behavior may inadvertently reinforce the snobbery of her surrounding environment. Lastly, if someone devalues that which she associates with being lower-class *and* forms mistaken aesthetic judgments about those same things, buther mistaken aesthetic judgments are causally unrelated to the class associations – their shared objects are just a coincidence – then this still does not constitute snobbery in my sense. Someone exhibits straight-up classist snobbery just in case she forms mistaken aesthetic judgments *because* she devalues things that she associates with being lower-class.

5.

Kieran and Patridge’s papers on snobbery touch on class issues but do not place them front and center, allowing any old social hierarchy to take the place of class hierarchy in explaining what makes an aesthetic judgment snobby. I think this is an oversight. To my mind, the paradigm of snobbery is an ineliminably classist phenomenon – snobbery just is classism within the aesthetic realm. It is true that there is now a broader use of the term ‘snob’ that extends it to anyone whose carefully-honed taste leads her to approach certain aesthetic objects in roughly the way that classists approach that which they associate with being lower-class. This is a legitimate use of the term and it is fine to theorize about it. So, to repeat: I have no beef with the three extant accounts of snobbery. But I think that the primary phenomenon should be theorized too. That is what I have tried to do in this paper.

In closing, let me return to the issue of higher-order evidence. Now that my account is on the table, we can see that there is a sense in which evidence of straight-up classist snobbery is *stronger* higher-order evidence than evidence of social-contagion snobbery, attitudinal snobbery, or contextual snobbery. For evidence of attitudinal and contextual snobbery, as previously noted, need not undermine your first-order aesthetic judgments at all. And, while evidence of social-contagion snobbery does indicate that your aesthetic judgments are responsive to the wrong kinds of reasons, it does not show that they are inaccurate. Indeed, since trendiness and genuine aesthetic value can overlap (as previously discussed, and as Kieran observes), social-contagion snobs can be reliable aesthetic evaluators. But straight-up classist snobs are not reliable aesthetic evaluators – they *under*-value that which they associate with being lower-class. They might coincidentally happen to get some aesthetic judgments right; they might under-value things due to class associations when those things are genuinely ugly, and thus might be wrong about why they are ugly (and how ugly they are) but correct that they are ugly. To count as straight-up classist snobs, though, people must get some of their aesthetic judgments wrong: they must under-value certain features of objects in a way that is ultimately explained by class associations. Straight-up classist snobbery therefore *consists in* inaccuracy of a certain sort. So, there is a sense in which the undermining power of evidence of straight-up classist snobbery is greater than that of evidence of social-contagion snobbery: it is only a charge of snobbery in my sense that entails that you are getting things wrong.[[18]](#footnote-19)

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1. All references to Kieran in this paper, except the one in footnote 15, are references to Kieran (2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. All references to Patridge in this paper are references to Patridge (2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. I would venture that this view can be helpfully understood as analogous to a *doxastic wronging* view in epistemology (see Basu 2019, Basu and Schroeder 2019, White and Marušić 2018). On such views, the epistemic is not exhausted by the alethic, and a belief’s all-things-considered *epistemic* status can be affected by non-*alethic* factors — especially moral, social, and political factors. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. It is essential to my cases that Felicity and Charlotte are classist, take the people who wear the outfit and display the decorations to be lower-class, and are themselves upper-class. So, by stipulation, Felicity and Charlotte do take themselves to be superior to these people. However, they need not believe that their superiority is *grounded in their superior aesthetic sensibilities*. So they need not be attitudinal snobs. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. For readers who are not native speakers of mid-2000s British English: the noun ‘chav’ is a slur for working-class people that has many connotations besides those pertaining to people’s outfits – for example, one urban myth is that it is an acronym of “council house and violent” (see Jones 2011 for an excellent overview of the history of the term and the degrading uses to which it has been put). The adjective ‘chavvy’, by contrast, is predicated primarily of people’s appearances and sometimes also of the appearances of interior décor or household objects. It is used pejoratively to suggest that someone has the appearance of a chav or that a place has the appearance of a place where chavs live. If a wealthy person were to wear the outfit described in Juicy as a costume – as does sometimes happen, sadly – then her friends might say that she *looks* chavvy. While ‘chav’ is not an aesthetic term, then, ‘chavvy’ does appear to be one. Thanks to [redacted] for urging me to clarify this about the term. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. The it’s-not-really-reasoning view might appeal to those who think that, since belief’s constitutive standard of correctness is truth, we can only reason our way to beliefs based on considerations that indicate a proposition’s truth or falsity (see Wedgwood 2002, Shah 2003, Shah and Velleman 2005). Thanks to [redacted] for helpful discussion of this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Not all higher-order evidence indicates the presence of systematic and recurrent distorting influences. For instance, if your roommate simply double-checked your loan calculations and got a different total (as in the classic bill calculation case from Christensen 2007), this might indicate that you have done your maths wrong as a one-off blip. But lots of higher-order evidence does point to systematic, predictable, recurrent distorting influences. Here I am interested in classism, which is among them. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. The literature on aesthetic testimony discusses the canonicality of aesthetic judgment-formation based on acquaintance with the object. For a recent defense of the sort of view that I am assuming here, see Hills (2022). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. One might think that the judgment that an object is beautiful is thin*ner* than the judgment that it is, say, balanced, and yet still not completely *thin* (in the way that the judgment that an action is morally good is completely thin). Readers who think this way are encouraged to substitute “aesthetically valuable” whenever I say “beautiful” and “aesthetically disvaluable” whenever I say “ugly”, or to simply assume that the agents in my cases judge not only that their objects of evaluation are ugly but also that this in turn makes them aesthetically disvaluable. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. I take this account to be similar to the influential account of aesthetic reasoning found in the work of Frank Sibley; see his (1959, 1965, 1974, 1983), and for interpretations of Sibley to which I am congenial see Bender (1995) and Kirwin (2011). Compare also the ordered picture explored in Zangwill (2002). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. For more on the reasons-responsiveness of subpersonal mechanisms, see Arpaly (2000). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Note that this is all consistent with aesthetic properties’ being response-dependent (on which I take no stand). Any credible response-dependence theory will say, following Hume (1757), that aesthetic properties produce certain responses in appreciators *under the right conditions*. One way to be mistaken about such properties, then, is to be mistaken about whether you are under the right conditions. And Hume himself famously included the absence of “prejudice” – presumably including classism – as among the right conditions. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. I am unsure whether Patridge thinks that contextual snobbery can exist unexpressed. What seems “cringe-worthy” is the impression that the cicerone conveys to the other barbecue attendees. So I am unsure whether it is forming or merely expressing the judgment that is supposed to be snobby in this case. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. In an intriguing footnote (p.250, fn.26), Patridge considers the possibility that social contexts like that of the barbecue can literally alter the aesthetic significance of objects’ features: she allows that perhaps “the social context has made it so that Budweiser is not a bad beer”. In that case, the cicerone is *not* doing justice to the work and her judgment is indeed mistaken. But it is only mistaken while she is at the barbecue. Once she returns to work, she can continue to judge that Budweiser is a bad beer and do so correctly. By contrast, straight-up classist snobbery involves context-invariant inaccuracy in snobs’ aesthetic judgments. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. My sense is that most straight-up classist snobs who employ the concepts chavvy and tacky take chavviness and tackiness to *necessarily* decrease objects’ aesthetic value. Something about this is mistaken, but it’s not clear what. We might say that chavviness and tackiness are real aesthetic properties but ones that are *not* in fact necessarily negatively-valenced and that actually enhance objects’ aesthetic value in many contexts. Alternatively, we might deny that chavviness and tackiness are genuine aesthetic properties, holding that these terms refer to defective concepts (much like slutty). I take no stand on this matter. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. I say “disvaluable” rather than “aesthetically disvaluable” because I do not want to wade into the dispute over whether moral failures necessarily decrease a work’s aesthetic value (see Sauchelli 2016 for a summary, and Posner 1997, Anderson and Dean 1998, Carroll 1998, Kieran 2003, Stecker 2005, and Gaut 2007 for key contributions). My view is that misogyny is always *pro tanto* aesthetically disvaluable. But this is not the place to defend that view. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. Kieran and Patridge’s varieties of snobbery also reflect broader characterological vices that can show up in other ways besides their impact on the agent’s judgments. For example, the social-contagion snob’s concern with being part of the “in” crowd can show up in her patterns of attention, directing her toward sources of information about the latest trends. And the attitudinal snob’s pomposity can show up in her preference for spending time waxing poetic at fancy wine tastings in the company of others with equally refined taste. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. This paper has benefited enormously from the careful stewardship of Daniel Whiting, who has provided detailed comments on multiple drafts. I owe my biggest debt of gratitude to him. I am also grateful to four anonymous referees for their formative feedback, and to Rima Basu, Amy Flowerree, Georgi Gardiner, Liz Jackson, Alex King, Claire Kirwin, Cat Saint-Croix, and Keshav Singh for helpful discussion of various of the ideas in the paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)