

### How to be a Pessimist about Aesthetic Testimony

1. Testimony is an important source of knowledge. In many areas, a good deal of what an individual knows, she knows on the word of others. This holds even if we concentrate (as we will) on pure cases of testimony – those in which the audience H learns that  $p$  on the basis that her informant T claims that  $p$ , and independently of any evidence that T offers for that claim. Indeed, in general, where there is something to know, testimony provides a legitimate way to acquire that knowledge. Of course, one cannot believe just anybody. Gullibility is to be avoided, and informants who themselves lack knowledge cannot, perhaps, instil knowledge in their audience – even if what they say is true. But, provided one is suitably careful, on most issues taking the word of others is a legitimate way to come by belief.

There are, however, putative exceptions. Aesthetic matters provide a prominent example. If you tell me that some film you have seen is excellent, it is far from clear that I can legitimately adopt your view. Your testimony might motivate me to watch the film, but it does not give me the right to the belief that the film is excellent. I won't have that right until I've seen the film myself. Or so, at least, some think.<sup>i</sup> Others disagree.<sup>ii</sup> They suggest that there need be nothing wrong with taking testimony on aesthetic matters. As before, one must act responsibly in choosing whom to believe. Perhaps aesthetic matters require greater caution than some others. But there is nothing wrong in principle with acquiring aesthetic knowledge in this way.

Call *pessimists* those who deny the legitimacy of using testimony as a source of aesthetic belief, and *optimists* those who accept it. If their debate were merely over how often, or under what conditions, aesthetic matters admit of testimony, it would be hard to marshal. A range of positions would be available, forming a sliding scale between thinking that testimony is never a legitimate source of belief and thinking that it is always so, or at least as often as in other matters. Fortunately, the issue can be focussed by appeal to the idea of a difference in kind. Can I legitimately take another's word on an aesthetic issue? Pessimists say 'no': aesthetic matters differ in kind, in this respect, from most others. Optimists disagree: one can take aesthetic testimony, and any difference here is merely one of degree.

Aesthetics is not the only area in which something like this debate occurs. There are pessimists about moral testimony, and pessimists about testimony in mathematics. It is easy to imagine pessimists about comedy. Although my topic is pessimism about aesthetic testimony, and that is what I will mean by 'pessimism', it will sometimes prove illuminating to compare it with analogous positions elsewhere.

Whatever the area, the disagreement between pessimists and optimists turns, in key part, on conflicting intuitions over whether in particular cases it would be legitimate to take the testimony one is offered. Such conflicts are hard to resolve. Either side struggles to persuade the other that its description of the case gives the wrong result, and stalemate threatens. But even if we are stuck with this disagreement, neither side should simply ignore the intuitions it rejects. Any account of aesthetic testimony should seek to explain why intuitions divide in this way. One of my goals is to offer

such an explanation. My main ambition, however, is to explore the forms that pessimism might take, and in particular the form that in some ways is most promising.

2. Although there has been quite extensive discussion of pessimism, it has gone unnoticed that it might take two forms. According to the pessimist, something prevents testimony from being a legitimate source of aesthetic knowledge. The question naturally arises: what? There are two possibilities. As a rough first pass, we might say that the obstacle to reliance on testimony in aesthetic matters might be epistemic or it might be aesthetic. On the first sort of view, aesthetic testimony fails to meet the conditions that, quite generally, govern testimony's ability to act as a source of knowledge. Something or other prevents our aesthetic claims from offering knowledge to those to whom they are directed. Since the epistemology is wrong, there is no knowledge to be had from such testimonial transactions, and that is why it is illegitimate for the listener to let what she is told shape her aesthetic belief. The alternative account, in contrast, accepts that, at least in favourable circumstances, aesthetic claims can meet every condition governing whether testimony yields knowledge. The obstacle to taking aesthetic testimony instead lies in some further norm specific to the aesthetic case. Since the epistemology is (sometimes) right, testimony does offer us aesthetic knowledge. Some other norm, however, renders it illegitimate to make use of that resource.<sup>iii</sup>

So far, we know almost nothing about what this further norm might be. All we know is that it is not one of the norms governing whether testimony in general is a source of knowledge. It is possible, therefore, that the content of this norm is in some way

epistemic—for instance, that it limits legitimate aesthetic beliefs in terms of the methods by which they are formed, or the nature of our justification for them. And it's possible that the source of this norm, the considerations that explain why it holds, do not in any clear sense count as aesthetic. Below we will see that both possibilities prove real. It is in some ways misleading, then, to think of the contrast as between epistemic and aesthetic obstacles to aesthetic testimony. Better, I suggest, to characterise it as between *Unavailability* and *Unusability*, between accounts on which testimony does not make aesthetic knowledge available, and those on which, though it does, it is not acceptable to make use of that knowledge to form belief.

3. If pessimism can take either form, which is more plausible? *Prima facie*, there are two grounds for preferring *Unusability*.

The first is that none of the obvious *Unavailability* accounts succeed. Such accounts seek to specify how exactly aesthetic testimony fails to make knowledge available.

There is no space here to discuss these views in the detail they deserve. Still, since some of these accounts will occur to many a reader, it may help to have the briefest sketch of how they fail. One radical position holds that testimony cannot be a source of aesthetic knowledge for the simple reason that there is no aesthetic knowledge.

Aesthetic judgements cannot be true, and perhaps are not even truth-apt. Instead, we should adopt some sort of error theory or expressivism concerning them.<sup>iv</sup> The

problem this explanation faces is that it is in tension with other things the pessimist will say. Pessimists deny us the right to form aesthetic beliefs on testimony. What do they offer us instead? They exhort us to settle matters for ourselves. In the aesthetic

case, this usually involves exposing ourselves to whatever object the judgement concerns, and trying to come to our own view of its qualities and quality. But what is the point of settling the issue for ourselves, if there is nothing for aesthetic testimony to pass on? If our own investigations are valueless, there is no point conducting them; and if they bring some benefit, why can that not be passed on via testimony?

Another Unavailability account appeals to the extent of disagreement in aesthetic matters. Where informants disagree, some must be unreliable. The more disagreement there is in an area, the more unreliable we must take informants on those matters to be. Aesthetic testimony fails to deliver knowledge because it is too difficult to identify reliable informants.<sup>v</sup> The problem for this account is to explain the failure of aesthetic testimony without mandating agnosticism. The more widespread disagreement, the less reason there is to think that *anyone* is a good judge in the matter in hand—oneself included. Thus it is unclear how this account justifies resisting testimony without requiring one to eschew aesthetic belief altogether.<sup>vi</sup>

The second reason to prefer Unusability accounts is that under the right conditions testimony simply must make aesthetic knowledge available (assuming there is any such knowledge). One way in which testimony can be a source of knowledge is if the recipient is able to form a Humean argument for believing what she is told. Such an argument reasons to the truth of the informant's claim that *p* from the type of informant and the type of topic on which he is offering a view; the past correlation, as experienced by the recipient, between testimony by such informants on such matters and the truth of their claims; and the prior probability, for the recipient, that *p*. A Humean argument is thus an instance of inductive reasoning. Assuming that inductive

inference can yield knowledge, i.e. setting aside scepticism about induction, there are conditions under which a Humean argument, as applied to aesthetic testimony, will be knowledge-yielding. We merely need the claim testified to to be true, the experienced correlation to come out sufficiently high, and the subject's prior probability that  $p$  not to be too low. Even if such conditions never actually obtain, surely they could do. What will the pessimist say about that possible situation? Of course, anyone with doubts about the legitimacy in general of taking testimony on aesthetic matters could at this point fold. There is nothing wrong with taking testimony under conditions in which it, coupled to the availability of a sufficiently strong Humean argument, would yield knowledge. But I suspect that many of a pessimist persuasion will feel that there is something wrong with taking aesthetic testimony, even under conditions as favourable as this. For such folk the only resort is Unusability. *Ex hypothesi* knowledge is made available by this testimony, yet taking it remains illicit. The source of that illegitimacy can only lie in some norm other than those determining whether knowledge is available. Since there is nothing special about this case other than the degree to which it favours knowledge, that other norm presumably stands in the way of all aesthetic testimony.

4. Those drawn to Unavailability will no doubt object to both these reasons for preferring Unusability. To the first, they will respond that there is no clear advantage here until some satisfying Unusability account has been developed. Perhaps it is difficult to provide a satisfying detailed view of either form. If so, while pessimism might be in trouble, neither variant fares better than its rival. I accept this reply. There

is as yet no proven benefit to Unusability. Later I will explore some of the ways in which it is indeed unclear what the details of a decent Unusability account might be.

The response to the second point in favour of Unusability is more complex. The possibility of an ideal Humean argument shows that aesthetic testimony can, in principle, yield knowledge. But it does not show that such testimony, even under ideal conditions, exhibits the epistemology of testimony in general. For some think that testimony does not, in general, yield knowledge by Humean means. In the standard case, H does not learn from T that *p* in virtue of the fact that a persuasive Humean argument for *p* is available to H. Rather, H has some default right to believe what her informants tell her. That default can be overridden, if the conditions are unfavourable—for instance, if the informant gives grounds for suspicion. H must conduct herself responsibly, if she is to retain that right—eg, she must be sensitive to such indications that T is untrustworthy. And, even where H has the right to believe T, her acquiring knowledge turns on things beyond her control. In particular, she will acquire knowledge only if T has it to pass on—only, that is, if T knows the claim to which he testifies. But if all this is in place, H inherits the knowledge that T offers her. Given the right framing conditions, testimony offers a way to transmit knowledge from one person to another, regardless of the availability to the recipient of an argument for believing what she is told. The case of the perfect Humean argument shows nothing about whether this form of epistemological interaction is possible in aesthetics. It shows that aesthetic testimony can, under ideal conditions, yield knowledge, but not that it can do so via the means standard for testimony on other matters. The case thus leaves it open that aesthetic testimony differs in kind from

testimony on other matters, and that the difference lies in its epistemology.

Unavailability has not been disproved.

The idea that testimony does not, in general, offer knowledge via Humean means is attractive. Alternative accounts invoking the idea that, given the right framing conditions, knowledge is transmitted to the recipient, have been moderately well worked out.<sup>vii</sup> Further, the distinction between Humean and transmission accounts of testimony promises another benefit to the proponent of Unavailability. It offers her a way to explain the conflict in intuitions over aesthetic testimony with which we began. She can interpret the intuitions that drive optimism as reflecting the fact that aesthetic testimony can, in principle, yield knowledge, via Humean inductive arguments. And she can do this while taking the pessimistic intuitions as reflecting an awareness that aesthetic testimony nonetheless fails to reproduce the epistemic situation that obtains for testimony on other matters. Even when it does make knowledge available, it does not do so by the means standard for other sorts of testimony.

Nonetheless, I am not persuaded by this response. First, it is not clear that appealing to the distinction between Humean and Transmission models preserves more than the letter of Unavailability pessimism. For, while the resulting view is able to claim an epistemic difference in kind between testimony on aesthetic and on other matters, it no longer tells us what is wrong with the former. Claiming that such testimony does not make knowledge available by transmission leaves open that it does so by Humean means. After all, nothing the view has said provides reason to deny that appropriate Humean arguments are widely available and that such arguments are legitimate



sources of aesthetic belief. If so, there is nothing wrong with taking our aesthetic beliefs from others. Unless supplemented by quite distinct claims concerning the difficulty in aesthetic matters of providing Humean arguments, the account thus does not explain what is wrong with aesthetic testimony. Of course, the view might nonetheless provide the correct description of the epistemic facts. Perhaps aesthetic testimony does make knowledge available, but only by Humean means. However, a second point is that we have as yet to be given any reason for believing this. Why think that aesthetic testimony fails to operate in the way Transmission accounts describe? Until we have an answer, the response has been sketched, not developed.<sup>viii</sup> It is true that the view already promises to do some work, in explaining the conflict in intuitions over aesthetic testimony. Perhaps that gives us some reason to believe it. But my final point is that this explanation is less satisfying than one in terms of Unusability.

Is it really plausible that our conflicting intuitions reflect a dim awareness of differing epistemologies of testimony? At least one of the epistemologies, that in terms of transmission, is somewhat *recherché*. We might expect our intuitions to track whether testimony yields knowledge; it is another thing to claim they track the various means by which that knowledge is yielded. Contrast what Unusability views will say about the conflict of intuitions. Such views need not be at all sniffy about the prospects for aesthetic testimony's making knowledge available. They can be open-minded about the range of conditions under which such testimony might do this, and about how often those conditions actually obtain. So they can acknowledge that something important is right in the intuitions that drive optimism. What optimists are picking up on is that there is nothing epistemologically wrong with aesthetic testimony. What the

intuitions driving pessimism reflect is that there something wrong with it, nonetheless. Some further norm renders it illegitimate to make use of the knowledge such testimony offers us. This elegant account of the conflict demands, of those in the grip of the intuitions, rather less in the way of philosophical insight than its rival. To my mind, that makes it more plausible.

Unusability thus has two advantages over Unavailability. It offers a more straightforward way to accommodate the thought that under some conditions aesthetic testimony must make knowledge available. And it offers a more plausible explanation of why intuitions over aesthetic testimony conflict. In the rest of this paper, I propose to examine the nature of, and prospects for, Unusability accounts.

5. I begin with a threat to the very coherence of such views. One might wonder whether it is possible for belief to be governed by norms of the kind Unusability postulates. Belief aims at truth, and aspires to the status of knowledge. Epistemic norms determine whether it hits this target. How can belief be governed by non-epistemic norms, norms that govern something other than whether it counts as knowledge? If someone's testimony offers one knowledge, how can one fail to mould belief to fit? *Ex hypothesi* the claim being made is true and the situation is such as to put one in a position to know it. What room is there for a norm governing belief that requires one to refuse the knowledge thus offered? It seems that knowledge is not merely a goal of belief, but *the* goal. Epistemic norms are thus the only ones that should govern its formation.

These thoughts motivate a rather different position on testimony from any considered above. Belief may be governed only by epistemic norms, but assertion is certainly subject to other demands. In deciding who is responsible for the recent mishap, one should seek to be responsive only to factors determining whether one's conclusion will count as knowledge. One's assertions on the matter, in contrast, may be ruled by quite other considerations, including tact, prudence and concern for the feelings of others. It is what we go on to say, not what beliefs we form, that is governed by norms other than those determining whether our belief would count as knowledge. Thus, if the epistemology is right, we can legitimately let testimony guide aesthetic belief; it is assertions of that belief that are proscribed by some non-epistemic norm.

This position is too weak to count as pessimism. Nonetheless, it fits some of the pessimistic intuitions perfectly well. For some of the most striking phenomena suggesting that there is something problematic about aesthetic testimony involve conversational implicature. Suppose I do take your word on the excellence of some film. There is something strange in my then saying to a third party '*Doubt* is great', yet the oddness is dispelled if I preface that claim by 'According to a friend of mine, ...'. One explanation of this is that the former claim conversationally implicates, as the latter does not, that I have come to my own view on the merits of the film. Since implicature essentially concerns assertion, not belief, the new account is perfectly positioned to capture these phenomena.

In fact, however, I think the pessimist can draw on intuitions that concern belief.<sup>ix</sup> If so, the moderate position just described does not do justice to the full range of pessimist intuitions. More importantly, those attracted to Unusability are not forced to

retreat to that position. For the thoughts that motivated that retreat are misplaced.

Belief can be governed by non-epistemic norms. Or so I shall now argue.

First, notice that the Unusability pessimist is not claiming that one can form belief in response to non-epistemic norms. That would be to form it in part without a view to its truth or its status as knowledge, and that may indeed be inconsistent with the goals constitutive of belief. Rather, the claim is that responsiveness to non-epistemic norms can lead one to *resist* forming belief. By governing belief only in this direction these norms leave it as a necessary condition on one's beliefs that one takes the propositions in question to be true and takes oneself to stand to them in epistemically satisfactory relations. All they block is the idea that meeting these conditions is sufficient for a proposition to merit one's belief.

Those sceptical about the coherence of norms of Use may consider this reply too limited. For sure, it helps that the suggestion is not that belief should be formed with a view to something other than how things are. That deals with the most serious potential objection to the view. But doesn't a significant obstacle remain? Isn't belief's role *nothing more* than to reflect the facts? If so, it can be governed *only* by epistemic norms. So one may remain tempted to think there is no room for norms of the kind Unusability views postulate.

It is as well, then, that a second response to the challenge is available. At least some of our practices of belief formation involve norms of precisely the kind Unusability postulates. For examples to be persuasive, we need to get away from the particular subject matters—aesthetics, ethics, mathematics and perhaps others—that give rise to

the debates between pessimists and optimists, and between pessimists of different stripes. But such cases can be found. For we find norms of the kind we seek in many areas. All that is required is that there be room for one particular notion of expertise.

Although the notion of an expert is multi-faceted, one element that sometimes comes to prominence is the idea that an expert is someone who *ought to settle for herself questions in her domain of expertise*. As philosophers, we should be familiar with this idea, for it governs our own professional lives. It is part of our job to think philosophical issues through, and to reach our own judgements on them. It is consistent with pursuing this goal that we consider others to be as good philosophers as we are, or better. If we do think this, we might think that their testimony on a philosophical matter offers us knowledge. But we might still resist forming belief on that basis, and continue working through their reasoning for ourselves. Only if we come to accept their arguments, and to see the truth of their claims, will we adopt the views in question. Perhaps the idea of philosophical knowledge makes you uneasy. If so, just change the example. Think of chemists, or logicians, or historians, or whatever you like. Of course, for any such specialist there will be some topics, relevant to her field of expertise, on which she does think it acceptable to take testimony. The point is that for many topics, those forming the core of that field, she will not think it so. And this, even though she may consider the judgement of her peers to be worth as much as hers, or more. In such circumstances, she resists testimony, even though it offers her knowledge, and she takes it to do so.

I think the case of experts provides a clear example of belief-formation governed by a non-epistemic norm. Since these folk resist taking testimony even when they judge

that it offers them knowledge, they cannot be responsive only to norms that determine whether their prospective belief counts as knowledge. Since there is nothing incoherent in this practice, which is familiar to us all, there can be nothing incoherent in the idea of a non-epistemic norm that governs belief, a norm of Use.

Two things might be said in reply. The first is that the norm here itself has an epistemic justification. The reason experts are required to settle for themselves matters in their field is that that way we minimise the risk of error across the interested community as a whole. By holding out until we fully appreciate the force of the arguments supposedly establishing a position, each of us forces the advocates of those arguments to re-examine and refine them, raising the chance that any hidden errors are brought to light. All this is true. It is also true that, in the aesthetic case, if there is a non-epistemic norm governing aesthetic belief, it may not find a similar epistemic justification. But that is irrelevant to the point made by the case of experts. Whatever the justification for the norm governing expertise, it remains non-epistemic in the sense at stake. It is not a norm that determines whether the belief the recipient is offered would count as knowledge. It might increase the chances, across the community as a whole and the beliefs they collectively hold, that more of those count as knowledge. It thus bears indirectly on the status of any belief testified to. But the case goes through even when the status of the belief currently being offered is not up for grabs. The recipient need have no real doubt that her esteemed colleague's view amounts to knowledge, and yet feel she ought not to take her word on the matter.

The second reply offers an alternative way to describe the case. Being an expert does not oblige one to resist knowledge that testimony offers. Rather, it raises the bar for

what, in the case of one's own beliefs, counts as knowledge. The laity might gain knowledge from the colleague's testimony, but our expert cannot. Thus the norm to which the expert responds is epistemic after all. It's just that what counts as knowledge for some (the lay recipients of the testimony) does not count as knowledge for others (the original expert herself).

This proposal amounts to a form of contextualism about knowledge. What's distinctive here is that the context in question is wholly constituted by the professional role a person occupies. We need not worry whether in general contextualist views are plausible. Even if so, the redescription here either misrepresents the facts, or concedes the key point that Usability seeks. Contextualism is usually taken to be the idea that the degree of justification or warrant required for knowledge varies with context. If we stick to that interpretation of the position, it misdescribes the case in hand. For, in resisting testimony, our expert need not believe that thinking the matter through for herself will result in her having greater justification or warrant for the view she settles upon. Her modesty might run to the thought that, not only does her colleague's testimony offer her knowledge, but it offers her as great a warrant or justification for the belief testified to as she can reasonably hope to attain by working things out for herself. Even if she thinks thus, she can coherently resist the testimony, on the grounds that she ought to settle the matter independently. Suppose the contextualist accepts this, and admits that context does not merely raise or lower the bar for knowledge, in terms of the degree of support a belief requires to count as such; it also dictates directly what methods of belief formation are appropriate. Then the contextualist description of the facts is a mere terminological variant on that offered by the Unusability pessimist. The norm the contextualist proposes, like that mooted

for aesthetic testimony, dictates that one can only legitimately form belief by settling the matter for oneself. It has the same consequences for our practices of forming belief as that postulated by the Unusability view. But then there is after all nothing incoherent in the idea that belief formation might be governed in this way. It matters not one jot whether we follow this contextualist in labelling the norm with these consequences epistemic. If his description of the case of experts is coherent, so is the Unusability account of aesthetic testimony.<sup>x</sup>

6. *Prima facie* then, Unusability views are coherent, and have at least some attractions over the rival form of pessimism. However, they face several questions. The first is what the non-epistemic norm governing aesthetic testimony might be. Its upshot is clear: that, even when such testimony offers one knowledge, one ought not to exploit that resource. But what is the norm that has this as consequence?

I consider two candidates. To reach the first, consider the analogous position in ethics. Anyone pessimistic about the legitimacy of taking our moral beliefs from others will find that the distinction between Unavailability and Unusability can be drawn there too, and that there too Unusability has certain advantages over Unavailability.<sup>xi</sup> Confronted with the parallel question to that now before us, such a pessimist might offer the following as the non-epistemic norm governing moral testimony:

*The Requirement (for morals):* having the right to a moral belief requires one to grasp the moral grounds for it.



This has a natural analogue in mathematics. Note that the norm is epistemic in content. As I warned earlier (§2), that may be a feature of some norms of Use. The point is that it is not epistemic in the sense at issue: it is not a norm determining whether any belief adopted on the basis of the testimony before one would count as knowledge. This is not explicit in the norm itself; but that is the intent behind it.<sup>xii</sup>

Thus we might hope to draw out the links between the situation concerning aesthetic testimony and that holding in these other areas by offering the following as the norm governing the former:

*The Requirement (for aesthetic matters):* having the right to an aesthetic belief requires one to grasp the aesthetic grounds for it.

For brevity, I will call this the ‘Requirement’. How does it exclude forming aesthetic belief on testimony? We saw that there are two main models for how testimony operates. Whichever operates in a given case, testimony cannot meet the Requirement. On the Humean model, although the subject has grounds for her belief—provided by the Humean argument—those grounds are not aesthetic. Far from concerning features salient to the aesthetic aspects of the object judged, they concern the type of informant, and the correlation between such informants and the independently established truth of their claims on aesthetic matters. And on the transmission model, the subject has no grounds at all for the belief she adopts. Rather than her right to the belief depending on the availability to her of some argument, or some other set of reasons, she is default entitled to adopt the view she is offered,

provided certain framing conditions are met. On either model, then, the Requirement promises to proscribe aesthetic testimony.

However, for this to go through, we need to know what counts as an aesthetic ground for an aesthetic claim. I will simply assume that we have a sufficient grasp on the notion of the aesthetic to know (by and large) which beliefs are aesthetic and which not. But what is an aesthetic ground for such a belief? And what counts as grasping such a ground? These questions are not easy to answer. A plausible first stab would be this: to grasp the aesthetic grounds for an aesthetic belief is to grasp those facts in virtue of which the belief is true. If a pot, for instance, is beautiful, then (according to the Requirement) having the right to believe it so is to know what makes that pot beautiful: its shape, its colouration, the texture of its surface, and so forth. Presumably the demand is not just that the subject knows the pot to have those features, but that further she has some appreciation of how those facts bear on the pot's being beautiful. Perhaps these suggestions raise as many questions as they answer. Even so, I will assume that we have sufficient understanding of the Requirement to proceed.

7. The other candidate for a norm of Use is familiar from the literature on aesthetics.

It is the norm Richard Wollheim dubbed the 'Principle of Acquaintance':

*Acquaintance Principle:* having the right to an aesthetic belief requires one to have experienced for oneself the object it concerns.<sup>xiii</sup>

In the case of the belief that the pot is beautiful, the Acquaintance Principle demands that one have experienced—presumably seen, touched or both—the pot. Only then does one have the right to that belief. Since the testimony of another cannot offer one the chance to experience the pot, the Principle excludes taking testimony as a legitimate source of aesthetic belief.

Wollheim is not the only person to have discussed this Principle.<sup>xiv</sup> Every discussion, sympathetic or otherwise, has assumed the Principle to be an epistemic norm, one determining when an aesthetic belief counts as knowledge. We now see another possibility. The Principle might be taken as a norm of Use. Even when some method of forming aesthetic belief offers one knowledge, the Principle denies one the right to the resultant belief unless one has experienced the object for oneself. It is this interpretation of the Principle that interests me.<sup>xv</sup>

How do the Acquaintance Principle and the Requirement relate? There are powerful pressures working to draw the two together in terms of which instances of aesthetic belief they license. However, the two are distinct. They differ in content: the Requirement demanding that we grasp those facts in virtue of which our aesthetic beliefs are true, the Principle that we experience for ourselves the objects of those beliefs. And, even if they will often be met together, the overlap in which beliefs they license will never be complete. For, while both exclude forming aesthetic belief on testimony, only the Principle has implications for another important potential source of aesthetic belief.

The idea of a principle of taste was first clearly formulated by Kant.<sup>xvi</sup> Such a principle is a universal generalisation, to the effect that anything with some feature F has some aesthetic feature G. (In more sophisticated variations on the idea, the principle might merely claim that whatever is F is *pro tanto*, or tends to be, G. This and other subtleties need not detain us.) The interest of such principles lies in the possibility of using them to formulate arguments. From such a principle, and the premise that some object O is F, one can infer the aesthetic claim, that O is G. Principles thus promise to make room in aesthetics for something that counts as argument, in the clearest possible sense of that term.

Consider some sound argument taking a principle of taste as premise. Is grasping such an argument a legitimate source of aesthetic belief? The Requirement rules that it is, or at least might be. For to understand the argument might be to grasp the conditions in virtue of which the aesthetic claim forming its conclusion, that O is G, is true. I suppose it is possible that some factors universally correlating with the presence of Gness might nonetheless fail to provide such conditions. If so, the existence of a sound argument from a principle of taste does not guarantee that the Requirement will be met by anyone persuaded by that argument. But, even if grasping such arguments is not always enough to meet the Requirement, surely it will often be. For often the principle will capture, not merely a necessary correlation, but one with the right sort of depth: one where O is G in virtue of the fact that it is F. Whenever this is so, the Requirement rules that grasping sound arguments from principles gives one the right to the resulting belief.

Contrast the Acquaintance Principle. Grasping an argument, of whatever form, is never sufficient to perceive the object its conclusion concerns. Thus understanding such an argument is never sufficient to meet the Acquaintance Principle. The two norms thus differ in their consequences. One excludes, the other allows, appeal to principles of taste in forming aesthetic belief.

The argument over principles of taste has concentrated on whether there are any.<sup>xvii</sup> It has been taken for granted that, if there are, the arguments they allow us to formulate can be used to derive aesthetic belief. Perhaps not coincidentally, discussion of the Acquaintance Principle has tended to concentrate on its implications for testimony, and ignored its implications for principles of taste.<sup>xviii</sup> Insofar as a connection has been made between the Acquaintance Principle and principles of taste, the assumption has been that the former is inconsistent with the existence of the latter. But all this assumes that the Acquaintance Principle is an epistemic norm. We now see another possibility: it might be a norm of Use. If so, the dialectic shifts considerably. So understood, the Acquaintance Principle excludes direct reliance on principles of taste to form aesthetic belief. But it does so whether or not there are any such principles. An advocate of the Principle thus need not shoulder the burden of arguing that there are no principles of taste, and an advocate of aesthetic argument needs to do more than show that such principles exist. Even if there are, it might still be illegitimate to exploit them.

8. I have not endorsed either of the candidate norms of Use, the Requirement or the Acquaintance Principle. Perhaps one or the other governs our aesthetic thinking,

perhaps some further norm of Use does so, or perhaps aesthetic thinking is not governed by norms of Use at all. However, without settling this issue we are now in a position to uncover another benefit of framing pessimism in terms of Unusability. It allows us to deal with a serious threat to any pessimist position.

The threat comes from the homely thought that we often take the recommendations of others on aesthetic matters, and that we are right to do so. Consider filmgoing again. If a friend recommends a film she has seen, surely there need be nothing wrong with my going to it on that basis. But how can this be, if, as pessimism claims, it is illegitimate to take my aesthetic views from the testimony of others? We can formulate this challenge as a little argument that brings out how it threatens both forms of pessimism:

(1) It can be perfectly licit to go to a film, rather than the others available, on a friend's recommendation.

(2) A necessary condition of this action being licit is that it be rational.

(3) Such action can only be rationalised by appeal to a warranted belief that the film is worth seeing (more so than at least most of the rivals).

So

(4) Provided the belief is true, the testimony is a source of aesthetic knowledge. (So Unavailability Pessimism is false.)

And

(5) Since it is perfectly licit to act in this way, there is no further non-epistemic difficulty in acquiring aesthetic beliefs by these means. (So Unusability Pessimism is false.)

What is the pessimist to say in reply? For the Unusability view, I suggest, the response is clear. Norms of Use, like many other norms, do not hold come what may. There are circumstances in which they lapse. What will those circumstances be for the norm putatively governing aesthetic thinking, be it the Requirement, the Acquaintance Principle, or some other? The effect of that norm is to require one either to think aesthetic matters through for oneself (at the least, to experience for oneself the object in question), or to remain agnostic. What it excludes is taking one's view on the matter from others. But what if neither of the options the norm permits is available? What if one can neither stay agnostic, nor settle the matter for oneself? In those conditions, I suggest, the norm will lapse. In effect, then, the application of this norm is governed by the higher level norm that ought implies can.

This idea promises to allow Unusability pessimism to handle various putative problem cases, including those concerning aesthetic education, and those involving works now lost. I will work it through only for the case in hand. How does the idea that the norm of Use might lapse bear on our sometimes taking recommendations from others? These are taken, I suggest, when the conditions are precisely those under which the norm lapses. There are many films showing at any one time, some no doubt worth seeing, others not. Assuming I want to see a film at all, how am I to choose which to go to? If I remain agnostic about the merits of each of them, then I must either not go to the cinema at all or choose one at random. The former is perverse,

given my desire to see a movie; and the latter is risky, given that the quality of what's on offer usually varies considerably. Agnosticism, then, is not a genuine option. But nor is investigating the matter for myself. That would require me to see all the films, to find out which is most worth seeing. And, while I have the time and the desire to see one film, I have neither the time nor the desire to see them all. In sum, since I can neither remain agnostic nor settle the matter for myself, the norm of Use lapses. And since Unusability views do not deny that testimony can make aesthetic knowledge available, there is nothing puzzling in how it can then be rational for me to take my friend's word that this film is decent, or that it is not.

Optimists might concede that this description of the case is coherent, but ask why it should be preferred to their own: that recommendations can be taken because, quite generally, there is nothing—epistemic or otherwise—wrong with aesthetic testimony. The Unusability view has an answer. It is that any force my friend's recommendation has for me is purely *pro tempore*. Once I have seen the film for myself, her view should count for nothing in my assessment of it. The force of this reply is not apparent if we concentrate on cases in which I form a strong opinion. Whether I hate the film or love it, the optimist will be able to finesse the fact that the recommendation now counts for very little by treating it as simply outweighed. It still counts for something, but I am bound, having seen the film, to put far greater weight on my own experience. But consider a case in which seeing the film leaves me uncertain what to think. My own experience fails to settle the matter. Can I then continue to appeal to my friend's recommendation, in forming my view? The pessimist will say not, and I am strongly inclined to agree with her. For all that the recommendation rightly had weight with me before, I must now discount it altogether. Optimism is at a loss to explain why my



friend's testimony should have lost all significance in this way. If the recommendation counted epistemically before, why should it not do so now? After all, on the optimist view, the only norms operative here are epistemic. If my experience leaves the question of the film's merit in the balance, why shouldn't my friend's testimony tip it one way or the other? The Unusability view, in contrast, can easily accommodate the recommendation's shifting status. Now that I have investigated the film for myself, the norm of Use once again applies. That forbids me to appeal to anything but my own deliberations and experience in forming my view of the merits of the piece. If my experience fails to settle the matter, agnosticism is the only course permitted. The recommendation remains epistemically significant, but it is now illicit to use that resource.

Of course, the dyed-in-the-wool optimist may be unimpressed by all this. She may insist that, even once I have seen the film, I can give some weight to my friend's opinion. That seems wrong to me, but I cannot argue the determined optimist out of that view. This is one of the points at which the standoff in intuitions returns to stifle debate. The point, however, is that the Unusability view has nonetheless made a good deal of progress. For the recommendation argument began with a premise (1 above) that no one should reject. If pessimism is inconsistent with that, it really is in trouble. The effect of the above is to show that the Unusability view can readily accommodate that homely thought. If the debate then resolves onto inherently controversial matters, Unusability pessimism has deflected a serious threat, and replaced it with an open question.

What of Unavailability pessimism? Can it likewise deflect the threat posed by the argument from recommendations? That is a complex question, one that I do not have the space to go into here. My suspicion is that meeting the challenge will require the view to adopt some form of contextualism about knowledge, and thereby to complicate its theoretical framework, and to burden itself with further commitments. Perhaps Unavailability can meet the challenge; Unusability's ability to do so is proven.

9. I close by noting a major issue about which as yet nothing has been said. Suppose the pessimist settles on the Requirement, or the Acquaintance Principle, or some third norm as yet unarticulated, as the norm governing aesthetic belief, and hence as the source of the illegitimacy of forming such belief by taking (pure) testimony. Why is our aesthetic practice governed by that norm? What about that practice is responsible for its having the normative structure thus described? What is the source of that norm's authority over us? (I intend these to be three formulations of the same question.)

What might an answer look like? In the moral case, we have at least some idea. If moral belief is governed by the Requirement (for morals), there are at least the materials, in existing moral theories, to explain why it might be. We might appeal to the Kantian idea, refined by Korsgaard, that first order moral norms can only have authority over us if we understand the sources of those norms in our own legislation.<sup>xix</sup> If subjection to a norm requires us to will it as law, and if the willed law is always an abstract principle, as Kant thought, then only she who grasps the

principle underlying what morality dictates can be subject to its demands.

Alternatively, we might appeal to Scanlon's thought, also ultimately deriving from Kant, that morality is essentially about being able to show to others that one's demands are rooted in considerations that transcend the personal.<sup>xx</sup> Developing these accounts so that they meet the current need would be a major task. Nonetheless, in the moral case, we at least have some idea where to begin.

The situation in aesthetics is perhaps less promising. None of the starting points available in the moral case transfers at all naturally, and there is rather less theory already developed that might provide the source of alternative accounts. One might again hope for help from Kant, at least in the third Critique. Indeed, Kant was as pessimistic about aesthetic testimony as he was about testimony in morals. However, much of his discussion implicitly assumes that the problem is one of Availability. Since in my view nothing in his account of aesthetic judgement explains why testimony on such matters should fail to yield knowledge, it is perhaps even less likely that it will explain how that testimony is subject to a norm of Use.<sup>xxi</sup> More recently, the odd defender of the Acquaintance Principle has sought to ground it in the idea that art's value lies in the experiences it sustains.<sup>xxii</sup> Again, however, the assumption has been that the Principle is one governing Availability; and the attempt to ground it is more obviously riven with lacunae than was Kant's. None of this, of course, shows that attempts to ground the Principle, or other aesthetic norms of Use, are bound to fail. The very novelty of the idea of such norms suggests that there may be much remaining to be done in exploring the options here. I merely note how primitive our position is, in seeking to explain where the authority of such norms might stem from.

Of course, it might be that that question admits of no answer. Perhaps the fact that our aesthetic practice is governed by this norm is simply brute. Perhaps the only explanation in the offing is historical, of how it came about that our practice has this feature. Perhaps nothing can be done to ground that feature rationally in the deeper aims or point of aesthetic engagement.

Perhaps indeed. However, if so, the Unusability pessimist might find herself under increased pressure in another area. There is the question why the norm holds, and the question why we should believe it does. Her answer to the second can appeal to her intuitions about particular cases of the formation of aesthetic belief, and to any more theoretical reflections she has on why testimony is not a legitimate source for it—at least if those reflections are at a level below appeal to the norm of Use itself. But, as noted at the start, appeal to intuition can rapidly lead to stalemate. If our pessimist is not simply to articulate a view of the area to her own satisfaction, but also to furnish herself with grounds by which to persuade her opponents, she would do well to have an account of why the norm holds. Without that, optimists will find it easier to stick to their guns and deny that it does. And others, though persuaded that we act as if that norm governs aesthetic matters, might wonder whether it is reasonable for us to do so.<sup>xxiii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> See Roger Scruton *Art and Imagination* Methuen: London, 1976 ch.4; Richard Wollheim *Art and Its Objects*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 1980; Philip Pettit ‘The Possibility of Aesthetic Realism’ pp.17-38 in Eva Schaper ed. *Pleasure, Preference and Value* Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 1983; Michael Tanner ‘Ethics and aesthetics are — ?’ pp.19-36 in *Art and Morality* ed.s Jose Bermudez and Sebastian Gardner London: Routledge (2003); Robert Hopkins ‘Beauty and Testimony’ pp.209-236 in *Philosophy, the Good, the True & the Beautiful* ed. Anthony O’ Hear, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2000; and Robert Hopkins ‘Kant, Quasi-Realism & the Autonomy of Aesthetic Judgement’ *European Journal of Philosophy* vol.9 no.2 (2001), pp.166-189.

<sup>ii</sup> See Malcolm Budd ‘The Acquaintance Principle’ *British Journal of Aesthetics* 43:4 (2003) pp.386-392 and Aaron Meskin “Aesthetic Testimony: What Can We Learn From Others About Beauty and Art?” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 69:1 (2004) pp. 65-91.

<sup>iii</sup> Hence only some pessimists about aesthetic testimony are sceptics, if that means denying that it yields knowledge.

<sup>iv</sup> For error theory, see J.L.Mackie *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1976. For expressivism, see Scruton *op.cit.* and Simon Blackburn Oxford: Oxford University Press 1981.

<sup>v</sup> Meskin *op.cit.*

<sup>vi</sup> Thus the two Unavailability accounts suffer analogous defects. The difference is that, while the first threatens to deny that there is anything valuable for one’s deliberations to yield, the second threatens to deny that those deliberations have any chance of yielding that good.

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<sup>vii</sup> See, for instance, Tyler Burge ‘Content Preservation’ *Philosophical Review* 102:4 (1993) pp.457-88; John McDowell ‘Knowledge by Hearsay’ pp.414-443 in his *Meaning, Knowledge and Reality*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 1998.

<sup>viii</sup> In ‘Beauty and Testimony’ I offered the missing argument for the response. However, at the time I was not alert to the distinction between Unavailability and Unusability. The argument I offered fails to support the response over the quite different account of the phenomena in terms of Unusability.

<sup>ix</sup> See ‘Beauty and Testimony’.

<sup>x</sup> So the dialectic has played out as follows. Confronted with a threat to the coherence of the idea of a norm of Use, we appealed to a case, that of experts, which seems both to involve such a norm and to be coherent. The contextualist tries to redescribe that norm as one of Availability. But that description, if it is to be accurate, involves that parallel context being governed by a norm, however labelled, of the precise nature Unusability postulated. The challenge to coherence has thus been met. There is a further question. If we can describe the norm either as one of Availability or one of Use, then have we characterised the distinction between those two approaches adequately? There may be more work to do here. However, my main goal is to explore the view of the facts offered by Unusability. If that view can, given certain assumptions, be expressed as Unavailability, that does not prevent me from meeting that goal.

<sup>xi</sup> I explore this issue in Robert Hopkins ‘What is Wrong with Moral Testimony?’ in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* LXXIV:3 (2007 ) pp.1-24.

<sup>xii</sup> It would perhaps be undesirable for norms of Availability and Use to find identical expression. The best way to avoid this is not to change the Requirement, but to make

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the difference explicit in the corresponding norm of Availability. It might read ‘If a moral belief is to count as knowledge, one must grasp the moral grounds for it.’

<sup>xiii</sup> See Wollheim *op.cit.* p.234. My formulation of the Principle differs from Wollheim’s. For present purposes, the differences are unimportant.

<sup>xiv</sup> For other examples, see Budd *op.cit.*; Paisley Livingston ‘On an Apparent Truism in Aesthetics’ *British Journal of Aesthetics* vol.43 no.3 (2003) pp.260-278; and Alan Goldman ‘The Experiential Account of Aesthetic Value’ *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 64: 3 (2006) pp.333–342.

<sup>xv</sup> As with the Requirement, it would be best to distinguish the Acquaintance Principle as an epistemic norm from its correlate governing Use by reformulating the former: ‘If an aesthetic belief is to count as knowledge, one must have experienced for oneself the object it concerns.’ That would improve upon the formulations in the literature, all of which are ambiguous between these two interpretations.

<sup>xvi</sup> Immanuel Kant *Critique of Judgement* trans. J.C.Meredith Oxford: Clarendon Press 1952 §34.

<sup>xvii</sup> See, e.g., George Dickie ‘Iron, Leather and Critical Principles’ pp. 313-326 in Matthew Kieran ed. *Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art* Oxford: Blackwell 2005 and Alan Goldman ‘There Are No Aesthetic Principles’ pp.327-354 in the same volume.

<sup>xviii</sup> In part, this may be because the Principle is often formulated as the demand that we have ‘first hand’ experience of the objects of aesthetic belief. Reliance on testimony is clearly ‘second hand’ as appeal to argument is not.

<sup>xix</sup> Christine Korsgaard *The Sources of Normativity* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1994.

<sup>xx</sup> T.M.Scanlon *What we owe to each other* Harvard: Harvard University Press 1998.

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<sup>xxi</sup> I explain my scepticism about the prospects for Kant's view in 'Beauty and Testimony'. For a very interesting discussion that instead treats Kant as an Unusability pessimist see Keren Goredeisky 'A New Look at Kant on Testimony' *British Journal of Aesthetics* 50:1 (2010) pp.53-70.

<sup>xxii</sup> See Goldman 'The Experiential Account of Aesthetic Value.

<sup>xxiii</sup> I thank audiences at the annual meetings of the American and European Societies for Aesthetics, at the Weggis conference on Normativity, at the Auburn conference on Beauty, at University College London and at the University of Leeds. I am particularly grateful to Fabian Dorsch, John Gibbons, Keren Goredeisky, Mike Martin, Aaron Meskin and David Owens.