

My Delicate Taste: Aesthetic Deference Revisited

Abstract: I argue that that none of the arguments for pessimism about aesthetic testimony succeeds against a plausible version of optimism. However, I suggest also that pessimist intuitions have a certain pull that optimists must account for. My second task is to explain the force of pessimist intuitions by shedding new light on their source.

Keywords: aesthetic testimony; pessimism; optimism; Acquaintance Principle; Hopkins's Requirement; aesthetic interests

1. Introduction

In Rebecca West's novel *The Fountain Overflows*, a young woman named Cordelia wants to become a violinist. Cordelia is studious but has no real musical talent. Cordelia has some success as a concert violinist playing for an indiscriminating audience thanks mainly to the fact that she is committed to pleasing her listeners by any means at her disposal. West writes:

Had the spirit of music appeared before her, it would have spanked her for there was nothing, absolutely nothing, in her performance except the desire to please. She would deform any sound or any group of sounds if she thought she could thereby please her audience's ear and so bribe it to give her its attention and see how pretty she looked as she played the violin.¹

Cordelia's equally untalented teacher, Miss Beevor, however, has become persuaded that Cordelia is truly gifted. At one point, Miss Beevor arranges for Cordelia to have an audition with a famous violin teacher, Hans Fechter. Cordelia's mother, Clare, is very musical and a professional pianist. Protective of her daughter, the mother does not want Cordelia to go to Fechter, because she fears Fechter will say something hurtful to her unmusical daughter. Miss Beevor is convinced – and convinces Cordelia – that Clare is simply not being a good mother. Teacher and student go to see Fechter. What happens next is just what the mother has expected – Fechter is angered by Cordelia's playing and says something cruel to her. He also tells Miss Beevor that people like her should be punished for encouraging students without a musical ear to try to make it as professional musicians.

A reasonable person in Miss Beevor's place would conclude that Cordelia is not, after all, a musical genius. Miss Beevor may draw this conclusion simply on the ground that Fechter, who is more qualified to judge than Miss Beevor herself is, says so.²

¹ Rebecca West, *The Fountain Overflows* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2003).

² It may be that a stronger claim is true: Miss Beevor is not simply permitted but required, at least epistemically, to defer. But I won't discuss this stronger claim here.

According to certain pessimist views about aesthetic testimony, Miss Beevor should not change her judgment on Fechter's say-so.³ The pessimist's claim is not simply that Miss Beevor is *permitted* to stick to her own view, but that she is *required* to do so. The thought is that she would be violating a norm on aesthetic belief formation if she defers. The most Miss Beevor can permissibly do under the circumstances, on such views, is to take Fechter's statements as input worth considering. The input may enable her to reassess her own reaction, but unless and until that happens, Miss Beevor should not adopt the view that Cordelia's playing is artistically mediocre.

Some pessimists make also a corollary descriptive claim to the effect that we do not, as a matter of fact, defer to others on aesthetic matters.⁴ If that's right, then we should expect that Miss Beevor won't change her judgment, whether or not she should.

Why can't Miss Beevor defer to Fechter's – admittedly, impolitely offered – aesthetic testimony, according to the pessimist? The answer is that on pessimist views, other people's aesthetic judgments cannot be a legitimate basis for our own. Opinions differ regarding the details here. Some argue that aesthetic testimony provides no justification or, more carefully, that it provides justification for probabilistic judgments only, not for beliefs or full knowledge.⁵ Others argue that while testimony may furnish an adequate epistemic ground for aesthetic beliefs, it is nonetheless inappropriate to rely (solely) on testimony in forming beliefs concerning aesthetic matters.⁶ Robert Hopkins calls the first flavor of pessimism “unavailability” pessimism, and the second “unusability” pessimism. The idea behind the second kind of pessimism is that there is some non-epistemic norm that constrains aesthetic belief formation. Deference to other people's judgments is said to violate that norm. Finally, it is claimed that there is an asymmetry of sorts between aesthetic and non-aesthetic testimony so that, while deference to non-aesthetic testimony is perfectly kosher, deference to aesthetic testimony is not.

The pessimist case concerns what we may call *pure* aesthetic testimony that's problematic: that is, testimony concerning the aesthetic evaluation of an object, not its descriptive properties. Pure testimony can be contrasted with what we may call *impure* testimony.⁷ The latter may contain aesthetic evaluation, but it will also contain descriptive information relevant to the evaluation. In the limiting case, there is so much descriptive information conveyed that I may, after hearing your impure testimony, make a judgment solely on the basis of the descriptive information you have transmitted to me. This is a case of reliance on *impure* testimony.

In defending their position, pessimists appeal to cases meant to elicit pessimist intuitions. Consider this case courtesy of Thi Nguyen:

³ The pessimist vs. optimist terminology is due to Robert Hopkins. See his “What Is Wrong with Moral Testimony?”, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 74 (2007): 1–24 and “How to Be a Pessimist About Aesthetic Testimony,” *Journal of Philosophy* 108 (2001): 138–57, though the main issue, in some version, was introduced by Kant in the third *Critique*. See Richard Wollheim, *Art and Its Objects* (Cambridge University Press, 1980), and Mary Mothersill, *Beauty Restored* (Oxford University Press, 1984).

⁴ Jon Robson, “A Social Epistemology of Aesthetics: Belief Polarization, Echo Chambers and Aesthetic Judgement,” *Synthese* 191 (2014): 2513–28, p. 2514, calls this “descriptive pessimism” and traces it back to Kant.

⁵ I note that a view on which testimony provides an adequate ground for probabilistic judgments hardly counts as pessimism. But I set this issue aside.

⁶ See Hopkins, “How to Be a Pessimist.”

⁷ I borrow these terms from Sarah McGrath who, in “Skepticism About Moral Expertise as a Puzzle for Moral Realism,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 108 (2011): 111–37, uses them in discussing moral testimony.

Suppose that I have never seen Van Gogh's *Iris*es for myself, but my art teacher tells me that it's an extraordinarily beautiful painting. Intuitively, something seems to have gone wrong if I were simply to acquire, on the basis of testimony and testimony alone, the belief, "Van Gogh's *Iris*es is a very beautiful painting."⁸

Perhaps, the reader shares the view that something would have gone wrong if a person relies on her teacher's testimony in such a case. Anyone who has this intuition is likely to have some sympathy with the pessimist view. Moreover, pessimists do not simply rely on intuitions about cases. They have offered arguments.

I think pessimists – of both unavailability and unsuability persuasion – are mistaken. That is, testimony – as the case of Miss Beevor suggests – provides a perfectly good ground, epistemically, for aesthetic belief. It also provides an *appropriate* ground for aesthetic belief. But I think also that pessimist intuitions ought to be taken seriously. We need an account of their force. In what follows, I have two aims: to defend a version of optimism, and to shed new light on the pull of pessimist intuitions.

On the type of optimism I wish to defend, the aesthetic testimony case is like the case of expert testimony and unlike that of testimony involving ordinary matters such as the weather: We have a good reason to defer to the testimony of people more qualified to judge than we are but no good reason to rely on a randomly chosen person. This optimism is both more and less ambitious than optimism with regard to regular testimony. I take it that in the ordinary case, we think we have a good reason to rely on the testimony of a randomly chosen person but no good reason to *defer* to that person's judgment when we have access to the evidence ourselves (e.g., I believe you when you tell me it's raining, but if I look out the window and see it's not raining, I will believe my eyes). On the optimism about aesthetic testimony I wish to defend, by contrast, there is no good reason to rely on a randomly chosen person when we don't have direct access to the evidence, so this optimism is less ambitious in its scope. However, once we've identified someone more qualified to judge than we are, we can *defer* to that person even if we ourselves are inclined to make a different judgment, so the optimism is more ambitious in degree. Thus, a version of the asymmetry thesis turns out to be true. Aesthetic testimony is parallel to expert testimony, but there is an asymmetry between it and regular testimony.⁹

For present purposes, this brief characterization of the view I champion suffices. The question is whether this variety of optimism can be refuted. I will argue that it cannot be, not with the arguments given by pessimists so far.

⁸ Thi Nguyen, "The Uses of Aesthetic Testimony," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 57 (2017): 19–36. Note that in this paper, Nguyen does not defend pessimism. He defends a view on which relying on testimony in public but not in private contexts is acceptable. Note also that this is not Nguyen's last word on the matter. See his more recent, "Autonomy and Aesthetic Engagement," *Mind* 129 (2019): 1127–1156. For my own (quick) reaction to Nguyen's recent view, see footnote 34 below.

⁹ Aaron Meskin, "Aesthetic Testimony: What Can We Learn from Others about Beauty and Art," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 69 (2004): 65–91 argues relatedly that most but not all aesthetic testimony is unreliable.

Two qualifications are in order before I proceed any further. First, I will assume that at least *sometimes*, we have a good reason to think that another person's aesthetic judgment is more likely to be correct than our own.¹⁰ Miss Beevor from my example has just such a reason.¹¹

Second, I will focus on what one is warranted in believing, not on what one is warranted in *asserting*. The norms governing assertion have to do with various pragmatic implications.¹² For instance, an assertion such as "Painting X is beautiful" generally implies that you have seen the painting. And if you exclaim, "Painting X is beau-u-u-u-tiful!" that may imply that looking at the painting gives you aesthetic pleasure (if you have seen the painting and think it beautiful, but the beauty is of a sort that leaves you utterly cold, your exclamation would be misleading). There is a separate question of whether the pragmatic norms of assertion can be used to ground pessimism about aesthetic testimony, as some have argued.¹³ I don't think so. The issue deserves a longer discussion, but briefly, consider the following: instead of saying, "Cordelia's playing is technically proficient but artistically mediocre," which may sound misleading, Miss Beevor says, "Hans Fechter says that Cordelia's playing is technically proficient but artistically mediocre, and I believe him." There is nothing intuitively problematic about this latter assertion despite the fact that it contains an endorsement of another person's testimony.

In addressing my two tasks, I proceed as follows. I begin with what I take to be the strongest arguments for pessimism (Section 2) and argue that none of them succeeds against the variety of optimism just outlined. I then take up the issue of pessimist intuitions and their intuitive force (Section 3). In the concluding section (Section 4), I summarize the results and bring up some residual issues.

2. Arguments for Pessimism and their Shortcomings

2.1. *The Acquaintance Principle*

One popular motivation against reliance on aesthetic testimony has to do with sympathy with what Richard Wollheim called the *Acquaintance Principle*,

¹⁰ I am going to stop short of asserting that there are aesthetic experts since the assumption is both unnecessary and likely to prove controversial.

¹¹ One may think that the aesthetic case is an instance of what Thi Nguyen calls "cognitive island" – a case in which no independent test of expertise (or ever superiority of judgment) is available. For a general argument to the effect that we can derive at least some benefit from the knowledge and competence of others even on cognitive islands, I refer the reader to Nguyen's "Cognitive Islands and Runaway Echo Chambers: Problems for Epistemic Dependence on Experts," *Synthese* 197-7 (2020): 2803–2821.

¹² Dilip Ninan, "Taste Predicates and the Acquaintance Inference," *Proceedings of Semantics and Linguistic Theory* 24 (2014) 24: 290–309 calls this "acquaintance inference." Nils Franzen suggests that aesthetic assertions in general are expressions of affective states, which one can be in only if one has experienced the relevant object and its properties. However, Franzen does not think that this applies to beliefs and avowals of belief. See his "Aesthetic Evaluation and First-Hand Experience," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 96 (2018): 669–682.

¹³ For a good discussion of attempt to derive norms governing aesthetic belief-formation from the norms governing aesthetic assertion, see Jon Robson, "Norms of Belief and Norms of Assertion in Aesthetics," *Philosopher's Imprint*, 15 (2015): 1–19.

which insists that judgment of aesthetic value, unlike judgments of moral knowledge, must be based on first-hand experience of their object, and are not, except within very narrow limits, transmissible from one person to another.¹⁴

As Hopkins notes, the principle can be interpreted in purely epistemic terms.¹⁵ On this interpretation, it lends support to unavailability pessimism: it says that we *cannot* acquire knowledge on the basis of testimony, because aesthetic knowledge requires first-hand experience of the properties known;¹⁶ or it can be interpreted in non-epistemic terms, as a norm that places constraints on the type of evidence it is *appropriate* to use in forming aesthetic beliefs. On this second interpretation, knowledge without acquaintance is possible, but it should not be sought or acquired. This reading of the principle underwrites unusability pessimism.

The *Acquaintance Principle* has some intuitive pull. Is it true? The first point I wish to note is that there is a plausible construal of “aesthetic judgment” on which only conclusions based on one’s own assessment of the aesthetic properties of an object count as aesthetic *judgments*.¹⁷ Something like this construal – call it the “narrow” construal – can be given of judgments in general. Consider perceptual judgments. On the narrow reading, nothing counts as a *perceptual judgment* unless it is based on one’s own perceptual evidence. Thus, a conclusion to the effect that it is raining is not a perceptual judgment on this understanding if it is based on another person’s testimony.

I suspect that part of the intuitive force behind the *Acquaintance Principle* comes from the possibility of construing “judgment” in this narrow sense.¹⁸ The narrow construal, however, while it might lend plausibility to Wollheim’s proposal, is not, in the end, what he has in mind. For note that in the passage, he uses “judgment” and “knowledge” synonymously, claiming that neither is generally transmissible from person to person. Thus, his pessimism is ultimately pessimism either about the transmissibility of judgments in a broader sense, that is, transmissibility of aesthetic knowledge or beliefs.¹⁹ Does Wollheim’s principle stand up to scrutiny?

¹⁴ Richard Wollheim, *Art and Its Objects*, 156. This passage is generally the one cited in discussions of *the Acquaintance Principle*, though we must note that Wollheim qualifies the statement by saying “except within very narrow limits.” Note also that *pace* Wollheim, there is at least as much skepticism about moral testimony in ethics as there is about aesthetic testimony in aesthetics. In fact, Julia Driver in “Autonomy and the Asymmetry Problem for Moral Expertise,” *Philosophical Studies* 128 (2006): 619–644 argues that while aesthetic testimony is perfectly kosher, moral testimony is not.

¹⁵ Hopkins, “How to Be a Pessimist.”

¹⁶ Setting aside the qualification “except within very narrow limits.”

¹⁷ Malcolm Budd in “The Acquaintance Principle,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 43 (2003): 386–392 suggests that Kant did not so much argue aesthetic judgments cannot be based on testimony as *defined* aesthetic judgments in just this way, ruling out the possibility of testimony-based aesthetic judgments.

¹⁸ Importantly, not all of it. I shall have more to say about pessimist intuitions later.

¹⁹ Madeleine Ransom in “Frauds, Posers And Sheep: A Virtue Theoretic Solution To The Acquaintance Debate,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 98 (2019): 417–34 offers a reconciliationist view on which aesthetic judgments must be based on one’s own aesthetic responses but aesthetic beliefs and knowledge need not be. I have sympathy with the claim that aesthetic judgments – in *some sense* – cannot be purely testimonial, but I think that this observation does not provide a basis for reconciling pessimism and optimism any more than pointing out that in one sense of “perceptual judgment,” perceptual judgments have to be based on one’s own perceptual evidence would pave the way to reconciling a pessimist and an optimist view of perceptual testimony. (If there were pessimists about perceptual testimony, we would be ceding no ground to them in agreeing that there is a narrow sense in which all perceptual judgments have to be based on one’s perceptual evidence.) Pessimism about aesthetic deference is pessimism either about the availability of knowledge or about the appropriateness of acquiring aesthetic beliefs and/or knowledge on the basis of testimony.

The first thing I wish to note is that certain kinds of aesthetic judgments are quite obviously possible without acquaintance. For instance, I can hold a justified belief, on the basis of my general knowledge of the world, that there are great poems written in Chinese although I have not read any of them. Perhaps, the proponent of the principle can stipulate that the principle applies only to judgments about particular objects. If that's what pessimists who endorse the *Acquaintance Principle* wish to say, they owe us an explanation of the difference between judgments about classes of aesthetic objects, such as "poems written in Chinese," and judgments about particular objects.

Other philosophers have given a different reason for resisting the *Acquaintance Principle*. It has to do with the (undisputed) appropriateness of reliance on evidence such as photographs or recordings. Laetz notes, for instance, that it would be perfectly acceptable to conclude that Audrey Hepburn was beautiful on the basis of a photograph.²⁰ This response applies to both the epistemic and the non-epistemic interpretation of the principle. A photograph makes knowledge of Hepburn's beauty available to us, and there is nothing inappropriate in making use of this knowledge.

Laetz's challenge succeeds so far as it goes, but a photograph functions in a way analogous to that in which purely descriptive – rather than evaluative – testimony functions: it only directly transmits descriptive information.²¹ However, pessimists about aesthetic testimony need not be pessimists about testimony concerning descriptive information. In order to accommodate this observation, the proponent of the *Acquaintance Principle* can adopt a modified version of the thesis which allows reliance on descriptive information acquired by testimony and means other than acquaintance. On this modified version, an aesthetic judgment must be based on one's own grasp of the aesthetic grounds for a given evaluation. The judgment, "Audrey Hepburn is beautiful," that I make on the basis of a photograph counts. I think it is precisely such a suitably modified version that Hopkins means to capture in what he calls *The Requirement*:

The Requirement (for aesthetic matters): having the right to an aesthetic belief requires one to grasp the aesthetic grounds for it.²²

Arguably, *The Requirement* is preferable to the *Acquaintance Principle*. This is because it helps make sense of intuitions about cases such as relying on photographs or recordings. Hopkins's *Requirement*, unfortunately, fares no better than the *Acquaintance Principle* when it comes to making sense of general statements such as, "There are good poems written in Chinese, but I haven't read any of them."²³ Even so, the proponent of *The Requirement* need not fold since the move we made above in responding on behalf of the proponent of *The Acquaintance Principle* is open here too: we can say that *The Requirement* applies only to judgments about particular aesthetic objects. Thus, even if *The Requirement* fares no

²⁰ Brian Laetz, "A Modest Defense of Aesthetic Testimony," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 66 (2008): 355–363.

²¹ Laetz considers a different response on behalf of the defender of the principle: one that amounts to embracing the transparency thesis defended by Kendall Walton, "Transparent Pictures: The Nature of Photographic Realism," *Critical Inquiry* 11 (1984): 246–277, referenced at Laetz, "A Modest Defense," footnote 17. He calls the transparency thesis an "arcane" philosophical thesis, saying that, "normal people comfortably make aesthetic judgments based on photographs without thinking that they are literally seeing through them," 357. I note that the transparency thesis could be true even if ordinary people don't believe it, but for my purposes, it does not matter whether it is or not.

²² Hopkins, "How to Be a Pessimist."

²³ Perhaps, one can try to flesh out "grasp the aesthetic grounds" so as to allow general knowledge about the world involving knowledge of the distribution of aesthetic properties to count as such a grasp. I think that reliance on general knowledge of this sort is inconsistent with the spirit of *The Requirement*, if not the letter.

better than *The Acquaintance Principle* when it comes to accounting for the possibility of general claims not based on first-hand experience, it also fares no worse, and it clearly fares better with respect to the photograph case and others like it, so overall, we can grant that *The Requirement* is preferable to *The Acquaintance Principle*. The question, though, is whether *The Requirement* is preferable to optimism of the sort I champion. Why think it is?

2.2. Hopkins's Requirement vs. optimism

It has been argued that a principle along the lines of *The Requirement*, that is, one mandating that we base aesthetic judgments on our own evaluation of aesthetic properties, has the following implausible implication: we cannot rely on memory in many instances in which clearly we can so rely.²⁴ Consider this: I read Stendhal's *The Red and the Black* 30 years ago. I remember almost nothing about it, but I do remember concluding that it was a good novel. According to the memory argument, I can maintain my belief that the novel is good.

The memory argument for optimism raises interesting problems, but it is not the argument on which I wish to rely in making my own case. This is for two reasons.

First, a pessimist can, when confronted with this argument, simply say that when we no longer remember enough of the relevant descriptive information, we are not entitled to the evaluative judgment based on that information either. Second, even if we say that one *can* rely on stored beliefs about aesthetic properties, it is unclear that such reliance is incompatible with versions of *The Requirement* in the way reliance on others' testimony is. The unavailability pessimist can argue that all my memory does in such cases is *transmit* justification that I acquired previously through my own first-person experience. The unusability pessimist, on the other hand, can claim that norms of use license relying on one's own memories but not on other people's testimony.

If not the memory argument, then what? In addressing this question, I wish to approach the issue from the other side and ask why reliance on aesthetic testimony is, according to the pessimist, distinctly problematic. If no good reason can be articulated, then all we have is reliance on intuitions. But as noted at the start, while we can elicit pessimist intuitions about cases, we can also elicit optimist ones, so the best case scenario for the pessimist relying solely on intuitions would be a stalemate. The optimist can score a victory if she can offer an account that accommodates pessimist intuitions, which is what I intend to do.

Can the pessimist give an adequate explanation of the relevant difference between kinds of testimony?

Consider a possible explanation: aesthetic judgments and beliefs, it can be claimed, can only be properly based on sentiment.²⁵ The unavailability pessimist can argue that you lack justification and

²⁴ Budd, "The Acquaintance Principle." I note here that there is a parallel debate in epistemology concerning reliance on memory. Externalists about justification argue that internalists cannot account for the appropriateness of relying on beliefs stored in memory, particularly those whose origins are obscure to us.

²⁵ Presumably, the sentiments must be caused in the right way, for instance, it shouldn't be the case that you are pleased by the painting because your child painted it.

the unusability pessimist that you lack some sort of non-epistemic entitlement to the belief that some object is beautiful if said object has never given you aesthetic sentiments of the relevant sort.²⁶

A detailed discussion of the role of sentiment in aesthetic beliefs is beyond the scope of this paper, but for present purposes, it suffices to say that we know from first-person experience that our aesthetic judgments may diverge from our aesthetic sentiments in the absence of reliance on testimony. For instance, a person may, on the basis of a cognitive appraisal, judge that Virginia Woolf's novels have more literary merit than Conrad's but nonetheless experience no positive aesthetic sentiments in reading Woolf and experience such sentiments in reading Conrad.²⁷ Her own taste may, in this case, be lacking *in her own estimation*, that is, she may judge that someone who has a more positive aesthetic reaction to Woolf's writing compared to Conrad's has a more refined taste.²⁸ I conclude that an appeal to sentiment does not suffice to show that pessimism is the winning position.

In the course of responding to an optimist's objection, Hopkins offers another reason to prefer pessimism. It has to do with an alleged tendency we have to discard other people's testimony about an object once we have first-hand experience of said object. I think that Hopkins's suggestion on this score fails, but the failure is instructive, and it will take us to the heart of what, in my view, pessimists get wrong.

The objection Hopkins is responding to is the following: it seems perfectly acceptable, optimists argue, to form probabilistic beliefs on the basis of testimony, and to rely on testimony in making choices, for instance, in deciding what movie to see. How is the pessimist to explain that?

In Hopkins's view, the unusability pessimist has no trouble accommodating this type of case, actually. There is a good practical reason to rely on testimony provisionally, and aesthetic norms license such provisional reliance. Hopkins writes:

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

²⁶ One may wish to know more here about the conditions under which the agent must experience the relevant sentiments. For instance, a person who is too sad to take pleasure in listening to a Chopin piano piece but who loved Chopin before getting depressed presumably does not lose her right to the belief that Chopin's music is beautiful. What about a person who has listened to a piece of music to the point of satiation and will never again, under any circumstances, take pleasure in it? If such a person can, on the sentimental view, justifiably continue to judge that the piece is beautiful, the case comes to resemble the memory case in which an agent ultimately trusts her own past self. If so, then we might ask why we can trust our own past selves but not other people.

²⁷ Since reading Woolf is more cognitively demanding, it will probably be true even of Woolf fans that they have to be in a particular state of mind in order to enjoy a Woolf novel. I am, however, imagining a person who is never disposed to enjoy a Woolf novel.

²⁸ This phenomenon has been dubbed "aesthetic akrasia." See Anita Silvers, "Aesthetic 'Akrasia': On Disliking Good Art," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 31 (1972): 227–234.

them all. In sum, since I can neither remain agnostic nor settle the matter for myself, the norm of Use lapses.²⁹

So the proponent of *The Requirement* can explain why we rely on recommendations in making choices. However, the optimist, on Hopkins's view, cannot explain what happens later, namely, that once we have seen the movie, our friend's judgment no longer matters. Hopkins writes:

[A]ny 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...³⁰

But the case Hopkins is focusing on here cannot support pessimism over what I suggested is a plausible version of optimism, namely, the view that we have a reason to defer to people *more qualified to judge than we are*. A friend, unless stipulated otherwise (and Hopkins makes no such stipulation) is generally not such a person. If I have no good reason to think that my friend is more qualified to judge than I am, then on the version of optimism I wish to defend, there is no good reason to defer either. When we solicit recommendations from friends, we generally do that simply because we think we are likely to enjoy what our friends enjoy. If we were interested not in what we are going to enjoy but in the proper aesthetic evaluation of a movie's qualities, we would seek the testimony of people more qualified to judge than we are, such as movie critics. The question for Hopkins then is this: Suppose a person is genuinely interested in the aesthetic properties of an object and consults those in a better position to judge. She then experiences the work for herself. Is it *then* true that the testimony of the person better suited to judge should come to "count for nothing"? I don't think so, and Hopkins's argument does not show otherwise.

Thus, while *The Requirement* has advantages over *The Acquaintance Principle*, Hopkins does not demonstrate that it has advantages over optimism of the kind I favor. I conclude that none of the general arguments for pessimism on offer succeeds.³¹

The strongest motivation for pessimism, however, comes from intuitions about cases. If optimism about aesthetic testimony is to come out victorious, it must be supplemented with a satisfactory account of pessimist intuitions. This is the task I turn to presently.

3. Not in our Interest

Sometimes, pessimists appeal to cases in which we refuse to defer to people no more qualified to judge than we are. Earlier, we saw Hopkins doing that in arguing that we should discount a friend's judgment of a movie once we have seen the movie for ourselves. The variety of optimism I wish to defend, remember, is optimism about the testimony of those *more* qualified to judge than we are. Aesthetic

²⁹ Hopkins, "How to be a Pessimist," 154.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ There is one more argument, an argument for unavailability pessimism, put forth Daniel Whiting recently. See his "The Glass is Half Empty: A New Argument for Pessimism about Aesthetic Testimony," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 55-1 (2015): 91–107. Briefly, Whiting argues that it would be irrational to acquire aesthetic sentiments on the basis of testimony and that if this is irrational, then so is the acquisition of belief. I respond to this argument in more detail elsewhere (see Author), but briefly, if it succeeds, the argument proves too much. It follows from it that it is not rational to acquire the (arguably unproblematic) testimonial belief that someone is admirable unless it is rational to acquire admiration sentiments testimonially. For a different criticism of Whiting's view, see Errol Lord's, "On the Rational Power of Aesthetic Testimony," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 56 (2016): 1–13.

testimony, I suggested, is akin to expert testimony – you cannot defer to a randomly chosen person’s judgement. The test case for the pessimist is this: I have a strong (perhaps compelling) reason to think that someone else is more qualified to judge than I am, and yet, it is inappropriate for me to defer to that person.

On the face of it, such is the case with Nguyen’s *Irides* example mentioned at the start. I may not have a good reason to think my teacher is *much* more qualified to judge than I am (it depends on who my teacher is), but I likely have a good reason to believe my teacher is *more* qualified. Perhaps, then, this case can be said to pose a challenge to my brand of optimism. Isn’t it true that one should, in the case described, refuse to defer to one’s painting teacher?³²

The first thing to note is that there are aesthetic properties with regard to which one should quite obviously defer to those suitably positioned to pass a judgment. Consider the property of originality. Recognizing originality requires acquaintance with the tradition: no one is in a good position to judge how original a work of art is if he or she does not know enough about the preceding tradition. Such reliance, *pace* unavailability pessimism, does not violate any epistemic norms; but in addition, *pace* unusability pessimism, it does not violate any non-epistemic norms concerning aesthetic practice either.³³

What about other properties, such as beauty, though? It is here that pessimists may feel on safer intuitive ground.

Pessimist intuitions, I wish to argue, can be traced back to an overlooked fact of aesthetic life: it is often not in our interest to defer to others.³⁴ This is the claim I will argue for now.

In aesthetic life, we often have goals other than that of forming correct aesthetic beliefs. Indeed, our primary goal, usually, is to find things we enjoy and avoid things we dislike, and we have an interest in achieving that goal. We also have an interest in maintaining a positive view of our own aesthetic abilities. Deferring to others may interfere *with all of these goals*: finding out what we enjoy, enjoying it,

³² Readers who think that we do not have a sufficiently strong reason to believe that our painting teacher is more qualified to judge than we are can substitute their own example. For instance, most of us probably believe that Samuel Beckett would be in a better position to judge the merits of a play than we are and that Beethoven would be in a better position to judge the aesthetic qualities of a symphony.

³³ An anonymous referee suggests that perhaps, originality is not an easier candidate for the optimist since insofar as it is an aesthetic feature of the work, it shows up in experience, and to that extent, knowledge of the preceding tradition does not suffice for judgments of originality. I agree that originality shows up in experience (and in fact, I think an artist’s primary aim in creating an original work is probably the aim of producing an aesthetic effect). My point is that the judgments of a person who knows the tradition are more likely to be true. If something strikes me as original but a more knowledgeable person says it’s been done *ad nauseam*, I should discount my own aesthetic response.

³⁴ My view has resonances with an original account proposed by Thi Nguyen in “Autonomy and Aesthetic Engagement,” but we differ in important ways. Nguyen argues that while in aesthetic practice we aim at truth, finding the truth is not the purpose of the “game” of aesthetic practice – autonomous aesthetic engagement is. He makes an analogy: when you are solving a crossword puzzle, your goal is to get it right, but if you simply flipped to the page with the answer key and copied the responses, you’d be defeating the purposes of the whole enterprise. Nguyen’s view, however, cannot help explain why we resist deferring not only before we have experienced an object for ourselves but afterward. Note that aesthetic practice is in this way rather unlike the practice of solving a crossword puzzle. In the latter case, while it makes little sense to immediately flip to the page with the answer key, it makes little sense also to persist in the belief that we are right after we’ve seen the answer key. But that’s often just what we do in the aesthetic case. The conclusion I draw from here is that we often do not aim at truth in aesthetic matters at all.

and maintaining a positive view of our own taste and critical abilities.³⁵ By “taste” here, I mean the disposition to have positive aesthetic sentiments in response to the aesthetically meritorious, and by “critical abilities” – the capacity to discern aesthetic merit. Why would deference interfere with these goals?

I will begin with the last goal. If you defer to another, you are thereby acknowledging that your own critical abilities are inferior to those of the other. This may be a price well worth paying if you want to cultivate your taste further, but if you do not, there may be no sufficient corresponding benefit.³⁶ One can argue that there is a tacit acknowledgement of this sort in many cases of deference – particularly those in which I and the other have the same descriptive information – yet we do not refuse to defer on other matters, such as cosmology or statistics. There are two things to say in response. First, in most cases, we do not actually have all the descriptive information that the people we defer to do, so we can tell ourselves that if we studied the relevant subjects and acquired said information, we wouldn’t have to defer. Second, and more importantly, even if we do not think that, most of us do not aspire to the status of qualified arbiters of cosmological debates or debates over the proper use of statistics.³⁷ Most people, however, don’t want to think of themselves as unable to discern aesthetic properties and critically evaluate them. I cannot here take up the question of why that is so, but I think the evidence we have that it *is* so is compelling.

Things stand similarly with our view of our own taste. We don’t like to think our taste is deficient. Hume already noted this. In “Of the Standard of Taste,” he writes:

One obvious cause, why many feel not the proper sentiment of beauty, is the want of that delicacy of imagination, which is requisite to convey a sensibility of those finer emotions. This delicacy every one pretends to...³⁸

But if we defer, we risk having to conclude that we don’t have the delicacy of imagination we pretend to and that our taste is deficient since it is quite possible that we don’t at all enjoy what our best testimony suggests is meritorious.³⁹ We may, in order to avoid that conclusion, put pressure on ourselves to like what we believe meritorious. This, however, interferes with another goal of aesthetic practice, finding out what we enjoy. In addition, it interferes with the goal of enjoying what we are

³⁵ This list is not meant to be exhaustive.

³⁶ There may be an epistemic benefit, but it is very small compared to the practical cost.

³⁷ Of course, some people don’t like to defer on any matter, even matters that clearly require expertise they lack.

³⁸ David Hume, “Of the Standard of Taste,” *Essays: Moral, Political and Literary*, edited by Eugene Miller (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1985), 158.

³⁹ An anonymous referee suggests that we cannot disconnect the desire to have a positive view of our aesthetic abilities from interest in the aesthetic truth, as I do here, since it is not clear why we would care about having good aesthetic abilities if we didn’t care about actually getting to the aesthetic truth. This is a good objection, but it can be handled. We may see the possession of an attribute as desirable not only because of what it will help us accomplish but because of the way in which possessing it or not possessing it would reflect on us. Thus, a person may desire to think of herself as tactful without being committed to the cultivation of tact. Such a person may, when confronted with evidence suggesting she’d been untactful, go to great lengths to deny said evidence – arguing, perhaps, that the party who got upset by her remark is overly sensitive, and so on – instead of taking the case as an opportunity to cultivate tact. The desire to see ourselves as possessing good aesthetic abilities is similar.

disposed to enjoy since if we acquire the belief that what we enjoy is aesthetically worthless, and that our taking pleasure in it shows an unrefined taste, our pleasure may be spoiled.⁴⁰

Some people try to get themselves out of the bind by adopting the belief that their own aesthetic responses do reflect aesthetic merit without putting pressure on themselves to consume what they believe meritorious. For instance, a person might think of herself as someone who loves Bergman and Tarkovsky while in fact, she has not seen almost any movies by those directors, despite having multiple opportunities, and instead watches popular TV shows.⁴¹ This way forward generates cognitive dissonance. We are bound to notice that though we think of ourselves as people who enjoy some kind of art, such art does not figure prominently in our aesthetic lives. Sometimes, people resort to various self-persuasion techniques in those cases, telling themselves, for instance, that they'd engage with different types of art if only they had more time or were in a more robust state of mind, and so on. But this strategy is cumbersome and clearly not ideal. We are generally better off simply refusing to defer altogether. The important point here, however, is that deference is not inappropriate, either epistemically or in some other normative sense. It is simply prudentially inadvisable, at least often.

Things change if something of import to other people hinges on getting things right, for instance, if a person must, like Miss Beavor, decide whether to encourage a student to pursue a career as a violinist. It then becomes quite appropriate to defer.

For the most part, then, we are not concerned with aesthetic truth but with our own aesthetic interests. When we do try to determine the truth about the aesthetic properties of an object, this is generally for two reasons. First, we may expect that knowing the truth will help us refine our own taste. We may want to know what objects are likely to give us exquisite pleasures if we put in the time and effort. Second, something may hinge on passing a correct judgment, as in Miss Beavor's case or that of a person who serves on a literary prize committee.

It is not surprising that our goal is generally something other than truth about beauty and other aesthetic properties. There may be cases in which knowing the truth about something, while not of immediate practical concern, enriches our understanding of the world or benefits us in some other way. For instance, it may be worth learning something about the nature of space and time even without any tangible practical benefit. However, seriously trying to determine whether some particular novel is good or some painting beautiful when I judge that I am unlikely to enjoy said novel or painting may not be in my interest. Nor is it in my interest to acquire beliefs that cast doubt on my own critical abilities unless I am trying to cultivate my own taste.

I wish to note that the account just presented has resonances with an account developed by Jon Robson.⁴² According to Robson, we refuse to defer to those more qualified to judge not because we *should* refuse but because we have a tendency to have an inflated view of our own capacities, as we do

⁴⁰ One can also embrace one's lack of refinement, and even revel in the badness of one's own taste, but this reaction, in addition to being unusual, is not conducive of a flourishing aesthetic life. I note also that aesthetically akratic agents who do not like what they themselves judge to be meritorious have at least the consolation that their own critical abilities are discerning even if their taste is not.

⁴¹ A well-known author reported in an interview that he felt offended by the fact that Netflix was always suggesting to him popular shows instead of, say, Pasolini, but upon reflection, he had to accept that the suggestions are consistent with his past choices though not with his self-image.

⁴² See his "Aesthetic Autonomy and Self-Aggrandisement," *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 75 (2014): 3–28.

of other abilities and positive attributes. Robson means this as a debunking explanation of the pessimist thesis that we must refuse to defer to the judgments of other people.

I agree that we have a tendency to self-aggrandise, but as I argue here also, deference to others can interfere with legitimate aesthetic interests such as finding out what we really enjoy and enjoying it. It is not generally important to get things right in the aesthetic domain, particularly when our aesthetic beliefs concern only us, and the ability to pursue our aesthetic interests is important. (It is important to get things right in a case such as Miss Beevor's, but that is not the typical case.) So while I think pessimists are wrong to suppose we ought not defer, I think also that simply debunking our autonomy impulse as Robson does won't do either. There is at least an excuse and perhaps often a good non-epistemic, prudential justification for refusals to defer, though generally, there is no normative reason.

4. Conclusion

I argued that deference is neither epistemically inappropriate nor inappropriate in some other way. A version of optimism about deference to aesthetic testimony succeeds. However, pessimist intuitions point to a real feature of aesthetic life, it is just that pessimists misdiagnose its source: it is often not a good idea to defer, because deference may spoil our pleasure, undermine our attempts to find out what we enjoy, force us to adopt an unflattering view of our aesthetic capacities, and create cognitive dissonance.

There is something else to be said for a refusal to defer: such refusal may help counter a peculiar aesthetic vice: the vice of snobbery.⁴³ I take snobbery to be a tendency to tie one's aesthetic judgments to considerations of social status. This often involves deference for the wrong reasons: not because because you think someone else's aesthetic judgment is more likely to be correct but for reasons such as social status. The snob wants to be perceived as "high class" by mimicking the taste of others. A person who is reluctant to defer in general is unlikely to defer for reasons of status and to that extent, is unlikely to become a snob.

This should give no sense of triumph to pessimists, however, and that, for two reasons. First, refusals to defer may, in turn, be a result of snobbery.⁴⁴ This may be particularly troubling for the pessimist when, for instance, one refuses to defer to someone more qualified to judge because one believes deference would detract from one's social status. Second, and relatedly, one can defer for the right reasons and without becoming a snob, so the danger of snobbery does not ground a normative reason to refuse to defer.

There is a final point I wish to make before closing this discussion. There may be cases in which deference is not only prudentially but epistemically inadvisable. Those are cases in which the verdict of a person I deem a more qualified judge seems utterly baffling to me. Consider the reaction of some viewers to an exhibit of a pile of bricks in the Tate gallery.⁴⁵ In such cases, it may be epistemically virtuous – and not only prudentially advisable – to refuse to defer. (Some people may be too easily

⁴³ Matthew Kieran, "The Vice of Snobbery," *Philosophical Quarterly* 60 (2010): 243–63.

⁴⁴ I thank an anonymous referee for this point.

⁴⁵ "Brick layer named Tony Heffer did a quick herringbone pattern with about 30 bricks and said he could probably peddle it to the Tate for the equivalent of what he earned in a year," Robert Semple Jr., "Tate Gallery Buys Pile of Bricks—Or Is It Art?," Special to the *New York Times*, February 20, 1976.

baffled, of course. A senior academic was once heard saying that no one could possibly enjoy opera, and that everyone claiming to do so is pretending.)

But if this is so, couldn't one argue that a modest version of pessimism succeeds after all?

I don't think so. One way to resist this conclusion is to argue that deference in such cases is simply psychologically impossible, and that therefore, refusal to defer is not epistemically virtuous.⁴⁶ This is not the line I wish to take because first, deference may be, for some, psychologically possible, and second, a state may be epistemically virtuous even if its opposite is psychologically impossible. Consider: we may be psychologically unable to believe Moore-paradoxical statements, but disbelieving such statements is generally rational and to that extent, epistemically virtuous.

My own response is this: optimism is fully compatible with limits on deference of this sort. Compare: an optimist about perceptual testimony says we can believe a person who tells us that it is raining. But an optimist need not say we should believe a person who says it's raining cucumbers, however reliable the informant. Some things, one shouldn't believe if they were asserted by Cato. An optimist can endorse this view without losing her optimist credentials.

⁴⁶ It can be claimed that there are classes of aesthetic properties regarding which deference is psychologically impossible. For instance, funniness. I don't think that's right. A depressed person may fail to be amused by anything without acquiring the belief that nothing whatsoever in the world is funny. But even if there were such properties, it wouldn't follow from this that deference is inappropriate.