

# Aesthetic Testimony and Aesthetic Authenticity

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## Abstract

Relying on aesthetic testimony seems problematic. For instance, it seems problematic for me to simply believe or assert that *The Velvet Underground and Nico* is an amazing album solely because you have told me so, even though I know you to be an honest and competent music critic. But why? After all, there don't seem to be similar reservations regarding testimony from many other domains. In this paper, I will argue that relying on aesthetic testimony seems problematic because we are attached to an ideal of aesthetic authenticity and feel that living up to this ideal is anathema to simply relying on aesthetic testimony.

**Keywords:** Aesthetics & Epistemology; Authenticity; Aesthetic Judgement

## 1. Introduction

Presumably, most contemporary philosophers would agree that, for a wide variety of domains, it is *prima facie* unproblematic to rely on the testimony of an interlocutor one knows to be honest and competent.<sup>1</sup> However, as variously noted, this doesn't seem true for aesthetic testimony. For instance, some philosophers have noted that it seems problematic to make aesthetic assertions on the basis of aesthetic testimony (cf. e.g., Mothersill, 1984; Lackey, 2011;

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<sup>1</sup> This formulation is meant to be broad enough to not depend on a specific view concerning the epistemology of testimony. For overviews of the testimony debate, see, for example, Lackey & Sosa (2006) and Gelfert (2014).

Robson, 2015). Moreover, it has been pointed out that forming aesthetic beliefs on that basis also seems problematic (cf. e.g., Wollheim, 1980; Hopkins, 2001, 2011; Whiting, 2015; Nguyen, 2017, 2020; Hills, 2022), or, at least, inferior to forming aesthetic beliefs first-hand (cf. Ransom, 2019). I take it that, in a sense to be presently specified, both forming aesthetic beliefs and making aesthetic assertions on the basis of aesthetic testimony seems problematic.

Suppose I have never seen *Wings of Desire* and imagine that my friend Peter, whom I know to be an honest and competent film scholar, simply tells me that it is beautiful and an overall great film.<sup>2</sup> Here, it seems problematic for me to flat-out believe this solely on the basis of Peter's say-so. Rather, it seems that I should settle for more qualified beliefs; e.g., "*Wings of Desire* is probably beautiful" or "*Wings of Desire* is probably a great film".<sup>3</sup> Likewise, it seems that I shouldn't flat-out assert that *Wings of Desire* is beautiful or a great film, but instead qualify my assertion with something like "According to Peter".<sup>4</sup> Flat-out believing and asserting this seems to require that I watch *Wings of Desire* myself and personally judge it to be beautiful and an overall great film.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, if I do watch *Wings of Desire*, maybe repeatedly, and don't find it beautiful or great, then it would seem rather strange if I would defer to Peter's judgement and value it above my own, although I know that his cineaste credentials far exceed mine.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Let me stress that I am assuming that Peter's judgement is all I have to go by and that I am therefore in no position to assess the film for myself on the basis of his words. More specifically, I am assuming that (i) Peter doesn't supplement his judgement with arguments or a description of the film and that (ii) I don't have background information regarding some aesthetic criteria he might use to evaluate films. For related discussion, see Robson (2013: 242); Ransom (2019: 418); Foley (2001: 86); Lord (2016: 2-3).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Meskin (2004: 72), Whiting (2015: 99).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. e.g., Robson (2015: 6), Ransom (2019: 428).

<sup>5</sup> It is sometimes argued that aesthetic judgements require *first-hand acquaintance* with the work in question, or with an appropriate surrogate thereof (cf. e.g., Wollheim, 1980: 233; Budd, 2003: 386). Alternatively, it is sometimes argued that what matters is not so much personal acquaintance, but that one "arrive[s] at one's aesthetic judgments through the application of one's own faculties and abilities" (cf. Nguyen, 2020: 1130; for related discussion, see Hopkins, 2011: 149-150). However, note that even if one subscribes to the latter *Autonomy Principle*, being personally acquainted with the work will be the canonical route to forming an autonomous aesthetic judgement (cf. Hills, 2022: §6).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Hopkins (2011: 154-155) and note that we are not dealing with a case of peer disagreement here, where some philosophers hold that one is permitted to stick to one's own judgements (cf. e.g., van Inwagen, 1996; Foley, 2001; Kelly, 2005). – After all, I know that Peter is a film expert while I am not.

In so far as we agree with this assessment, we are faced with the task of explaining what grounds the apparent asymmetry between relying on aesthetic testimony and relying on testimony in a wide variety of other domains.<sup>7</sup> Or, more precisely, we are faced with the task of explaining why it seems problematic to flat-out believe or assert an interlocutor's aesthetic judgement about certain aesthetic qualities of a work or about its overall aesthetic worth (e.g., *Wings of Desire* is beautiful; *Wings of Desire* is a great film, respectively).<sup>8</sup> One might think that an explanation is ready to hand. Aesthetic judgements aren't truth-apt. Rather, they are *only* expressions of a person's own experience with a work and are therefore not transmissible via testimony. However, this view is controversial and even philosophers who think that relying on aesthetic testimony is problematic often hold that such judgements are truth-apt and can be known.<sup>9</sup> I will accept this for the purpose of this paper. Alternatively, one might think that relying on aesthetic testimony seems problematic because, although aesthetic knowledge is possible, aesthetic testimony can't make such knowledge available to us. But, as Robert Hopkins points out, this position is difficult to maintain. Assuming that there is aesthetic knowledge, and given that testimony is a source of knowledge, why shouldn't aesthetic testimony make aesthetic knowledge available to us (cf. 2011: 141-142)? A more promising approach then would be that relying on aesthetic testimony seems problematic, not because it fails to provide knowledge, but because there is something else that we value in the aesthetic

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<sup>7</sup> I am not claiming that aesthetic testimony is unique in this regard. For instance, various philosophers have pointed out that it seems problematic to rely on moral testimony – cf. e.g., Nickel (2001), Driver (2006), Hopkins (2007), Hills (2009, 2010), McGrath (2011), Howell (2014), Mogensen (2017). In this paper, however, I will restrict myself to the discussion of aesthetic testimony.

<sup>8</sup> In distinguishing between these two kinds of aesthetic judgements, I follow Sibley (cf. 1965: 135-136). Moreover, I follow him in assuming that we have a sufficient intuitive grasp of what is and isn't an aesthetic judgement. For, as Sibley remarks, to deny this would mean “to be precluded from discussing most questions of aesthetics at all, just as one could hardly begin ethics without the prior recognition that some judgments and notions do, while others do not, concern morality” (1965: 135).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. e.g., Hopkins (2011), Whiting (2015), Nguyen (2017, 2020), Hills (2022). Also note that, on this assumption, it seems unproblematic to treat both kinds of aesthetic judgement together. After all, the truth of judgements about a work's overall aesthetic worth plausibly depends, in some complicated way, on the truth of judgements about its more specific aesthetic qualities. For instance, if there aren't at least some true positive judgements about certain aesthetic qualities of a work, then it also seems to be false that it has great overall aesthetic worth (for related discussion, see Hills, 2022).

realm and that seems to be missing when one relies on aesthetic testimony. This is the kind of explanation I will develop in this paper.

To do so, I will proceed as follows. I will first criticise two influential explanations along the indicated lines that were recently proposed by Alison Hills (2022) and Madeline Ransom (2019). Roughly, Hills tries to explain our intuitions regarding aesthetic testimony by appealing to our attachment to the virtue of aesthetic understanding, arguing that aesthetic testimony fails to provide such understanding. And Ransom, again roughly, tries to explain our intuitions by appealing to our attachment to the virtue of good taste, arguing that aesthetic testimony doesn't allow us to cultivate or exercise it. Criticising these proposals will allow us to identify two desiderata that a successful explanation should satisfy (§2). From this background, I will then turn to my positive proposal: it seems problematic to rely on aesthetic testimony because we are attached to an ideal of aesthetic authenticity – *we can and should discover and live up to our true aesthetic self* – and we feel that we miss this ideal when we simply rely on aesthetic testimony.<sup>10</sup> To make the case for this proposal, I will motivate the claim that we are attached to the aforementioned ideal. And I will argue that appealing to this attachment allows us to explain our intuitions in a way that satisfies the previously identified desiderata (§3). Then, once the authenticity account is on the table, I will defend it against several objections (§4).

One caveat before we start: my aim in this paper is to explain our intuitions regarding aesthetic testimony. My aim is not to vindicate these intuitions, nor to cast them aside. If what I will argue for is on the right track, then our intuitions are driven by our attachment to the ideal of aesthetic authenticity. However, whether this ideal and thus our intuitions stand up to scrutiny is of course a different matter. Bearing this in mind, I will end by raising some prima facie concerns one might have with the ideal of aesthetic authenticity. And I will point to some

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<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Mogensen (2017) appeals to our attachment to an ideal of authenticity to explain our reluctance when it comes to relying on moral testimony. Moreover, he briefly suggests extending his account to aesthetic testimony, without, however, developing or defending this suggestion in any detail (cf. 2017: 280).

background issues that need to be settled to determine how seriously we need to take these concerns (§5).<sup>11</sup>

## 2. Hills and Ransom on Aesthetic Testimony

Alison Hills starts her reflections on aesthetic testimony by observing that “[t]hough we learn a great deal about the world from testimony, some kinds, including testimony about aesthetic value and aesthetic reasons [...] seem problematic” (2022: 21).<sup>12</sup> According to her, this intuition is best explained by our attachment to the virtue of *aesthetic understanding*. Following Hills (cf. 2022: 26-27), one possesses aesthetic understanding of a given work if and only if:

- (i) One is struck by aesthetic reasons when engaging with it (e.g., the book is badly written).
- (ii) One makes an aesthetic evaluation (e.g., the book is terrible) based on the aesthetic reasons one is struck by, where this basing-relation is spelled out in terms of counterfactual dependency.
- (iii) One is able to explain one’s aesthetic evaluation in terms of the aesthetic reasons one is struck by (e.g., the book is terrible because it is badly written).

Now, says Hills, aesthetic testimony “will obviously not get you aesthetic understanding because you will have no idea of the aesthetic reasons why the evaluation is correct” (2022:

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<sup>11</sup> A quick remark on how my proposal thus relates to the dominant views in the debate on aesthetic testimony. On the one hand, there is *pessimism*, which says that aesthetic testimony isn’t a proper source of aesthetic knowledge. Hopkins (2011) helpfully distinguishes between two different kinds of pessimism – “unavailability pessimism” and “unusability pessimism” –, opting for the latter (see above). Unavailability pessimism holds that aesthetic testimony can’t make aesthetic knowledge available to us. In contrast, unusability pessimism holds that, although aesthetic testimony can make aesthetic knowledge available to us, it is improper for us to make use of that knowledge (cf. 2011: 140). On the other hand, there is *optimism*, which denies both kinds of pessimism. Optimists hold that aesthetic testimony can make aesthetic knowledge available to us and that it can be proper for us to make use of that knowledge. Now, if the ideal of aesthetic authenticity turns out to be tenable, then my proposal amounts to a version of unusability pessimism: because of the ideal of aesthetic authenticity, it is improper, in the sense specified above, for us to make use of the aesthetic knowledge made available to us via aesthetic testimony. However, if the ideal of aesthetic authenticity turns out to be untenable, then my proposal furnishes optimists with a kind of error theory: given that our negative intuitions regarding aesthetic testimony are driven by the ideal of aesthetic authenticity, and given that this ideal is untenable, those intuitions turn out to be misguided.

<sup>12</sup> A remark on terminology: according to Hills, an example for a judgement giving aesthetic reasons is “*Citizen Kane*[’] cinematography is beautiful, it has a strong narrative and a powerful lead performance” (2022: 28), while an example for a judgement about aesthetic value would be “*Citizen Kane* is a great film“ (2022: 22). Thus, her distinction between judgements about aesthetic reasons and judgements about aesthetic value maps onto the distinction between judgements about certain aesthetic qualities of a work and judgements about a work’s overall aesthetic worth (cf. §1). Moreover, Hills holds that the truth of judgements about aesthetic value depends on the truth of judgements about aesthetic reasons (cf. 2022: 28).

30).<sup>13</sup> And because aesthetic testimony won't get us aesthetic understanding, we should not flat-out believe the former. Rather, we should only rely on it provisionally, using it as a guide to develop aesthetic understanding ourselves (cf. 2022: 30). Moreover, it seems problematic to make aesthetic assertions on the basis of aesthetic testimony – without adding a qualifier like “according to her” – because, by doing so, we misrepresent ourselves as possessing aesthetic understanding (cf. 2022: 22).

To see the problem with this account, consider the following case:

*Great Music:* Normally, Sally doesn't much like classical music. She knows next to nothing about it and the few pieces she had to listen to in high school have struck her as boring. One day, however, she absentmindedly switches through various radio stations and happens upon a station dedicated to classical music. The piece that is playing touches her deeply. She has no idea why. It just hits her “This is great”. When the piece is over, she learns that it is Beethoven's *Eroica*. Sally forms the belief that Beethoven's *Eroica* is great, and, later that day, tells a friend that *Eroica* is great.

Sally is spontaneously hit by the music she happens upon. It strikes her as great. However, she isn't struck by aesthetic reasons for why it seems great to her – its bold use of dissonant chords, its subtle variations in tempo, its exquisite use of string instruments, and so on. Presently, discerning such reasons is beyond her ken (cf. (i)). She is just dumbfounded by the music itself. Thus, her aesthetic evaluation (*Eroica* is great) isn't based on aesthetic reasons (cf. (ii)). Consequently, she isn't able to explain her evaluation in terms of aesthetic reasons (e.g., *Eroica* is great, in part, because of its bold use of dissonant chords) (cf. (iii)). In short, on Hills' account, Sally doesn't possess aesthetic understanding.

Nevertheless, there seems to be nothing problematic about Sally flat-out believing or asserting that *Eroica* is great. Of course, one might hold that Sally's belief/assertion would be somehow more valuable if it exhibited the virtue of aesthetic understanding. But this, in and of itself, doesn't seem to be a reason to take issue with her belief/assertion. In fact, one might be

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<sup>13</sup> Note that, here, Hills is focusing on cases of relying on aesthetic testimony where the aesthetic judgement is not accompanied by arguments or descriptions of the work in question (cf. fn. 2). She doesn't rule out that we might get aesthetic understanding from aesthetic testimony when it encompasses such elucidation (cf. 2022: 30).

quite impressed with Sally for judging *Eroica* to be great even though she doesn't possess aesthetic understanding when it comes to this piece or classical music more generally.

The problem with Hills' account, then, is this: her explanation of why aesthetic testimony seems problematic is convincing only if a flat-out aesthetic belief or a flat-out aesthetic assertion seems problematic whenever the person in question lacks aesthetic understanding. If the latter doesn't hold, then why should the flat-out aesthetic belief or the flat-out aesthetic assertion of someone who relies on aesthetic testimony seem problematic *because* this person lacks aesthetic understanding? Now, *Great Music* shows that a flat-out aesthetic belief or a flat-out aesthetic assertion can seem unproblematic, even when the person in question lacks aesthetic understanding. Thus, *Great Music* calls into question whether our intuitions regarding aesthetic testimony can be explained by appealing to the virtue of aesthetic understanding.<sup>14</sup> More generally, this case indicates that, by appealing to this virtue the way she does, Hills puts too heavy a cognitive load on those forming aesthetic beliefs or making aesthetic assertions.

But couldn't one simply deny that Sally lacks aesthetic understanding on Hills' account and thus conclude that it can accommodate the intuitions provoked by *Great Music*? To do so, one might note that Sally has an emotional/non-cognitive response to *Eroica* – it touches her deeply – and one might say that this response counts as an aesthetic reason (cf. (i)). One might say further that Sally bases her aesthetic evaluation – *Eroica* is great – on that reason (cf. (ii)). Finally, one might say that, plausibly, Sally is able to explain her aesthetic evaluation in terms of her aesthetic reason. That is, when talking to her friend, Sally might well be able to say something like “*Eroica* is great. It touches me deeply”, indicating that her evaluation is based

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<sup>14</sup> For similar criticism of Hills' (2009, 2010) understanding-based account of why it seems problematic to rely on moral testimony, see Mogensen (2017: 271-272).

on her response (cf. (iii)). On this picture, Sally would satisfy Hills' requirements on aesthetic understanding.<sup>15</sup>

This response stands and falls with the plausibility of construing Sally's non-cognitive response as an aesthetic reason on Hills' view. Here, we need to stress that Hills takes aesthetic understanding to be "factive": one possesses aesthetic understanding only if both the aesthetic evaluation and the aesthetic reasons on which it is based are true (cf. 2022: 26). But, arguably, non-cognitive responses aren't even truth-apt and thus can't play the reason-role in Hills' account. Moreover, Hills herself is quite explicit about not casting non-cognitive responses in this role. When discussing the relation between such responses and aesthetic reasons as well as aesthetic evaluations, she writes: "[N]on-cognitive attitudes [...] feed in to our aesthetic understanding, drawing attention to features of the artwork and providing grounds for or making salient its aesthetic merits and defects, and so allowing us to why it is (or is not) valuable" (2022: 32). A straightforward way to read these remarks is that non-cognitive responses aren't aesthetic reasons themselves. Rather, they are what might prompt the discovery of aesthetic reasons on which we might then base our aesthetic evaluations.<sup>16</sup> For the purpose of illustration, consider the following example. While sitting through a play, I might feel intensely bored by it. This feeling of boredom (my non-cognitive response) might then set me on a path to explore what prompted it. I might discover that my response is owed to the play's two-dimensional characters and its overly repetitive structure, which in turn might lead me to the conclusion that the play is bad because of these aesthetic defects. Crucially, my feeling of boredom itself isn't my aesthetic reason for judging the play to be bad. It is only what prompted me to discover the aesthetic reasons on which my aesthetic evaluation is based. This has the following

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<sup>15</sup> Moreover, one might say that Sally already possesses *tacit*, though not *explicit*, aesthetic understanding simply in virtue of satisfying (i) and (ii). That is, for Sally to possess tacit aesthetic understanding, it is not necessary that she is able to explain her aesthetic evaluation in terms of her aesthetic reason. (For a distinction between tacit and explicit understanding along these lines, see Hills, 2015: 667; also cf. Hills, 2022: 28).

<sup>16</sup> This reading is further supported by the fact that Hills doesn't refer to non-cognitive attitudes when giving examples for aesthetic reasons – e.g., "Citizen Kane['] cinematography is beautiful, it has a strong narrative and a powerful lead performance", or "*Princess Daisy* [...] is inept, lifeless and badly written" (2022: 28).



consequence: if non-cognitive responses aren't aesthetic reasons themselves, then Sally doesn't possess an aesthetic reason in virtue of her non-cognitive response to *Eroica*. And if Sally doesn't possess an aesthetic reason, then, on Hills' view, we can't properly attribute aesthetic understanding to her. Thus, Hills can't account for the intuition that there is nothing problematic about Sally's belief/assertion by saying that Sally possesses aesthetic understanding.

Madeleine Ransom presents a somewhat different virtue-theoretic explanation of our intuitions regarding aesthetic testimony. She appeals to the virtue of *aesthetic competence* or *good taste*<sup>17</sup>, which, drawing on Ernest Sosa's virtue epistemology, she understands as "a disposition [...] to make apt aesthetic judgements" (2019: 423). Importantly, according to Ransom, aesthetic competence is distinct from the epistemic competence required to assess and thus to properly rely on testimony, including aesthetic testimony.<sup>18</sup> Based on this distinction, she then goes on to argue that we can't cultivate or exercise aesthetic competence by relying on aesthetic testimony, but only by forming our own aesthetic judgements of a given work (cf. 2019: 423-425). And she concludes that, since aesthetic competence or good taste is a virtue, this is why forming our own aesthetic judgements of a given work is preferable over relying on aesthetic testimony (cf. 2019: 426; also see §1). In addition, Ransom argues that making unqualified assertions on the basis of aesthetic testimony seems problematic, because, by doing so, we misrepresent ourselves as possessing aesthetic competence or good taste (cf. 2019: 428).<sup>19</sup>

Arguably, Ransom's account can avoid the objection levelled at Hills' account. The reason is that, plausibly, possessing good taste, on Ransom's account, doesn't require

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<sup>17</sup> Following Ransom, I will use "aesthetic competence" and "good taste" interchangeably.

<sup>18</sup> It is worth stressing that Ransom doesn't take her view to depend on the claim that aesthetic competence doesn't involve epistemic competences. She only takes her view to require that "aesthetic competence is distinct from the epistemic sub-competence required to assess testimony" (2019: 424).

<sup>19</sup> Robson (2015) gives a similar explanation of why it seems problematic to make unqualified aesthetic assertions on the basis of aesthetic testimony. According to him, this seems problematic because, by doing so, we falsely signal that we possess various desirable traits that are needed to make an aesthetic judgement, such as intelligence, perceptiveness, creativity, or sensitivity.

possessing aesthetic understanding. For example, one might hold that Sally shows her good taste in virtue of judging *Eroica* to be great, even though she doesn't understand why *Eroica* is great. If one subscribes to this picture, then *Great Music* doesn't pose a problem for Ransom. Still, her account runs into trouble when it comes to what we might call "bad taste-cases", which, to my knowledge, haven't been discussed in the literature on aesthetic testimony:

*Bad Taste:* Pauline and Greg are having a private conversation about literature. Pauline is fully aware that the *Twilight Saga* is generally considered trash. Moreover, she has excellent reason to believe that Greg shares this sentiment. She knows that he is a book snob. Still, she asserts "*Twilight* is a masterpiece of romantic fiction, really up there with *Pride and Prejudice*". Only when Greg asks her how she comes to this assessment, she admits "Oh, I have never read *Twilight*", adding "But my dentist has told that it is a masterpiece of romantic fiction, on par with *Pride and Prejudice*".<sup>20</sup>

Now, Ransom's account can capture the intuition that Pauline's *belief-forming* behaviour is problematic or, at least, subpar (see above): it is problematic or subpar in so far as she doesn't cultivate or exercise good taste when she simply relies on her dentist's aesthetic testimony. However, Ransom's account can't capture our intuitions regarding Pauline's subsequent *assertion* to the effect that *Twilight* is a masterpiece of romantic fiction. To see this, we need to note three things. First, Pauline calling *Twilight* a masterpiece without having read it seems just as problematic as me calling *Wings of Desire* beautiful without having watched it. Second, plausibly, calling *Twilight* a masterpiece will not be taken as a sign of good taste, at least for the most part. Third, and crucially, Pauline herself is well aware that she isn't representing herself as possessing good taste *to Greg* via her assertion. She knows that, if anything, Greg will think less of her aesthetic tastes for calling *Twilight* a masterpiece. Hence, we can't appeal to Pauline misrepresenting herself as possessing good taste to explain why her assertion seems problematic.<sup>21</sup> In sum, while Ransom's account delivers the intuitively correct

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<sup>20</sup> For the sake of simplicity, I am assuming that the conversation is strictly between Pauline and Greg – no potential listeners, who might have a different take on *Twilight*, are present.

<sup>21</sup> Note that the same problem seems to affect Robson's explanation of why unqualified aesthetic assertions on the basis of aesthetic testimony seem problematic (cf. fn. 19). After all, presumably, Pauline isn't, and knows that she isn't, signalling the possession of desirable traits to Greg via her assertion. Thus, we can't appeal to Pauline falsely signalling the possession of desirable traits to explain the intuition that her assertion is problematic. Moreover, this

result when it comes to Pauline's *Twilight*-belief, it can't capture our intuitions regarding her subsequent *Twilight*-assertion. Thus, given that we want an account of aesthetic testimony to capture our intuitions regarding *both* aesthetic beliefs and aesthetic assertions, *Bad Taste* poses a problem for Ransom's account.

There are two responses available to Ransom. For one, she might try to argue that, despite appearances to the contrary, Pauline is misrepresenting herself as possessing good taste to Greg via her assertion. This would account for the intuition that said assertion is problematic. Alternatively, Ransom might try to account for this intuition by looking at Pauline's assertion from an epistemic perspective. Let's consider these strategies in turn.

Regarding the first strategy, Ransom might appeal to Matt Strohl's distinction between art that is good or bad in the *conventional sense* and art that is good or bad in the *final sense*. According to Strohl, "[a]n artwork is *good in the conventional sense* if it accords with mainstream norms and standards, and *bad in the conventional sense* if it violates them in a way that is perceived as artistically unserious". And "[a]n artwork is good in the final sense if it enables valuable activities of engagement, and bad in the final sense if it does not enable valuable activities of engagement" (2022: 181). Plugging this distinction into her account of good taste, Ransom might say that there is also good taste in the conventional sense and good taste in the final sense. And she might say that Pauline's assertion is problematic because she is misrepresenting herself as possessing good taste in the final sense to Greg via her assertion (though not in the conventional sense).

By way of response, let me stress that Strohl readily acknowledges that not everybody will agree with his distinction. He writes: "For someone whose aesthetic sensibility is thoroughly mainstream, conventional badness and final badness end up being one and the same"

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problem seems to affect Hills' account, too. As Greg, we may assume, considers *Twilight* trash, he will not attribute aesthetic understanding to Pauline when she calls *Twilight* a masterpiece and Pauline, we can again assume, is aware of this. Thus, we can't appeal to Pauline misrepresenting herself as possessing aesthetic understanding to explain why her assertion seems problematic.

(2022: 12). Mutatis mutandis, the same applies to conventional goodness and final goodness. Correspondingly, there will be people for whom good taste is just good taste in the conventional sense. Importantly, for such people, one will represent oneself as possessing good taste only if one represents oneself as possessing good taste in the conventional sense. In connection to this, we can stipulate that Pauline knows that Greg is such a person (remember, she knows that he is a book snob). This in turn means that, again, Pauline knows that she isn't representing herself as possessing good taste to Greg via her assertion, and that he will think less of her aesthetic taste for calling *Twilight* a masterpiece. Thus, again, we can't appeal to Pauline misrepresenting herself as possessing good taste to explain why her assertion seems problematic.

Alternatively, Ransom might tackle Pauline's assertion from an epistemic perspective. She might help herself to the *knowledge norm of assertion*<sup>22</sup> and say that, since it isn't true that *Twilight* is a masterpiece, Pauline doesn't know what she asserts. Or she might help herself to the *justification norm of assertion*<sup>23</sup> and say that, assuming her dentist isn't qualified to evaluate literary worth, Pauline isn't justified to believe what she asserts. Either way, she can explain why Pauline's assertion seems problematic. I want to make two points in response. First, although Ransom might account for our intuitions in these ways, she can't account for them within her views on aesthetic testimony. Thus, she has to give a different explanation of our intuitions regarding "good taste-cases" and "bad taste-cases". At least without further argument, this seems somewhat ad hoc. A unified explanation of our intuitions regarding both kinds of cases seems prima facie preferable. Second, it seems that there is something problematic about Pauline's assertion even if we abstract from questions of knowledge and justification. It seems that, for someone reflecting on Pauline's behaviour, it would be quite natural to feel a bit disappointed in her – not, or not just, because her assertion is epistemically subpar, but also because she is passing herself off as a *Twilight* fan, although she isn't one.

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. e.g., Williamson (1996, 2000), DeRose (2002), Hawthorne (2004), Turri (2014, 2016).

<sup>23</sup> Cf. e.g., Douven (2006), Lackey (2007, 2008), Hill & Schechter (2007), Kvanvig (2011).

We are now in a position to formulate two desiderata that an explanation of our intuitions regarding aesthetic testimony should satisfy: (D1) it shouldn't put too heavy a cognitive load on those forming aesthetic beliefs or making aesthetic assertions and (D2) it should be able to accommodate cases of what is considered good taste as well as cases of what is considered bad taste. In what follows, I will present an explanation that satisfies these two desiderata.

### 3. The Ideal of Aesthetic Authenticity and Aesthetic Testimony

To set the stage for my proposal, I will first motivate two claims: (1) we take "being authentic" – roughly, discovering and living up to our true self – to be an ideal. (2) Our aesthetic taste is a material component of what we take to be our true self. Based on (1) and (2), I will then formulate what we might call "the ideal of aesthetic authenticity". And I will argue that appealing to our attachment to the latter allows for a satisfactory explanation of our intuitions regarding aesthetic testimony.

#### 3.1 Authenticity

Various philosophers have claimed that we are attached to an ideal of authenticity.<sup>24</sup> An influential articulation of this ideal is due to Charles Taylor:

There is a certain way of being human that is my way. I am called upon to live *my* life in this way, and not in imitation of anyone else's. But this gives a new importance to being true to myself. If I am not, I miss the point of my life, I miss what being human is for *me*. (1991: 28-29).

Let us take a moment to examine this quote and to pencil in some details. The key idea seems to be that we all have a true self that makes us who we are, rather than somebody else.<sup>25</sup> This

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<sup>24</sup> Cf. e.g., Taylor (1991: 18); Elliot (1999: 33); Fine (2004: 153); Varga, (2011: 113); Mogensen (2017: 275).

<sup>25</sup> Rousseau, whom Taylor (cf. 1991: 27) credits as a founding father of this notion of authenticity, remarks: "I am not made like anyone I've met; I dare say I am not made like anyone who exists. I may not be better, but at least I am different" (2000: I, 5).

true self might be conceived of as our unique “set of beliefs, desires, tastes, and sentiments”, or as an appropriate subset thereof (cf. Mogensen, 2017: 276; also cf. Guignon, 2008: 278). In addition, it is implicitly suggested that we can discover our true self, at least to some extent. If this wasn’t the case, then it would be hard to make sense of us being “called upon” to live life in a certain way that is our way.<sup>26</sup> However, although we supposedly can, at least partly, discover our true self, we can still fail to live up to it. This is suggested by the warning not to live “in imitation of anyone else’s [life]”. This in turn raises the question what it means to (not) live up to one’s true self. Plausibly, we live up to it when our behaviour reflects who we really are deep down. And we fail to live up to it when our behaviour doesn’t reflect this – e.g., when our behaviour is driven by other people’s expectations, or social conventions more broadly. This is where notions of *authenticity* and *inauthenticity* come in. If we achieve harmony between our true self and our outer behaviour, then we are being authentic. In contrast, we are being inauthentic when our true self and our outward behaviour are in disharmony (cf. Guignon, 2008: 288; Bialystok, 2014: 281; Mogensen, 2017: 276). Finally, being authentic, so understood, constitutes an ideal in so far as it is taken to be a crucial measure for the success of our lives. After all, it is suggested that if we fail to live authentically, “[we] miss the point of [our lives], [we] miss what being human is for [us]”. In sum, there is an ideal of authenticity according to which we have a true self that makes us unique and that we can and should discover and live up to. Call this the *self-discovery model of authenticity*.

That our being attached to such an ideal of authenticity isn’t just an ivory tower figment is confirmed by a quick google search. The last time I checked, “How to become more authentic” yielded 972.000.000 results. Moreover, looking at some of these results confirms that authenticity is commonly understood along the above lines. Here is a sample: “Authenticity

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<sup>26</sup> Alternatively, one might interpret the quote as implicitly suggesting that we are somehow fully aware of our true self. Such a view, however, strikes me as implausible. That is, even assuming that each of us has a true self, it seems implausible that this true self is, or even can be, fully transparent to us. Hence, I take the weaker interpretation given above to be more charitable.

is about staying true to what you believe, not about your image – to be brave to express your genuine feelings and opinions”.<sup>27</sup> “Being authentic means that you act in ways that show your true self and how you feel”.<sup>28</sup> “[B]eing ‘authentic’ [...] I define as being able to be your true self, with honesty, openness and transparency”.<sup>29</sup> In addition, think of the oft-given advice “Just be yourself”, or the reply said to be frequently made by exasperated teenagers “It’s not a phase, it’s my personality, mom”. Both betray an attachment to the notion that we can and should live up to our true self.<sup>30</sup>

Still, one might point out that there is also a radically different model of authenticity, perhaps most prominently associated with Jean-Paul Sartre (1948, 2007). According to this model, there is no true self to discover in the first place. Instead, we create ourselves through the choices we make, the actions we perform, the projects we undertake. Moreover, nothing is fixed. We can always choose differently, always remake ourselves. To be authentic, then, would roughly mean to acknowledge this and to not let preconceived notions of who we are or outside forces dictate our choices. Call this the *self-creation model of authenticity*.<sup>31</sup> Or one might hold that the whole notion of authenticity is mistaken, no matter which authenticity-model is appealed to.<sup>32</sup> By way of response, let me stress that (1) does not claim that the self-discovery model of authenticity is tenable upon critical reflexion, or the only game in town. Rather, it only claims that we take “being authentic”, so understood, to be an ideal. And for the reasons just elaborated on, this claim seems very plausible.

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<sup>27</sup> <https://www.fearlessculture.design/blog-posts/how-to-be-authentic-in-a-fake-world> .

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/click-here-happiness/201904/develop-authenticity-20-ways-be-more-authentic-person> .

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kathycaprino/2017/12/09/3-essential-steps-to-becoming-more-authentic-in-life-and-work/?sh=6b8d286d7ac2> .

<sup>30</sup> Guignon (2008) and Bialystok (2014) call the above conception of authenticity the “the ordinary conception of authenticity”.

<sup>31</sup> The terminology with regard to the competing models of authenticity is adapted from Levy (2006: 311).

<sup>32</sup> For related discussion, see §5.

### 3.2 The Aesthetic Self

With this in mind, let us now turn to the question which role aesthetic matters play with regard to our conception of our true self. To explore this issue, let's start with some remarks made by Nick Cave about the influence Leonard Cohen had on him early on:

I discovered Leonard Cohen with 'Songs of Love and Hate'. I listened to this record for hours in a friend's house. I was very young and I believe this was the first record that really had an effect on me. In the past, I only listened to my brother's records. I liked what he liked, followed him like a sheep. Leonard Cohen was the first one I discovered by myself. He is the symbol of my musical independence.<sup>33</sup>

A plausible way to read these remarks is that, through discovering Leonard Cohen, young Nick Cave discovered something important about himself. He discovered what he truly liked, what truly resonated with him. And by doing so he was able, maybe for the first time, to get an idea of himself as a free-standing person and to affirm himself as such. He was no longer just his brother's disciple. Put differently, he was able to "define" himself as a person through his taste in music (cf. Taylor, 1991: 29). His taste in music was material to his sense of self, his identity. To bring this out more sharply, imagine that someone would have told Nick Cave then that this was just a passing phase, that he would soon get over Leonard Cohen only to discover his love of yodelling. I think that young Nick Cave would have thought that this wasn't him. He wouldn't have recognized himself in that prediction and would have been unable to imagine what could bring about such a radical change.

Try it yourself. Think of your favourite works of art. The songs you love. The paintings you can look at for hours on end. The movies you watch time and again. The novels and poems that never cease to reveal hidden depth... Now imagine that you wake up one fateful morning to find all of this changed. The songs sound like elevator music, the paintings look bland, the movies seem trite, the novels and poems ring hollow. What is more, you are now drawn to completely different works – works that never spoke to you before. If you are anything like me,

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<sup>33</sup> <https://www.nme.com/news/music/nick-cave-pays-tribute-leonard-cohen-greatest-1846385>.



imagining such a radical change in aesthetic taste is quite hard and feels profoundly alienating. It feels like imagining to be a different person, or close to it.

Extrapolating from these observations, it seems that our aesthetic tastes are central to our conception of who we truly are and, correspondingly, that imagining a radical change here goes hand in hand with a feeling of loss of self. In short, it seems to us that, in part, we are what we like and that radically changing what we like would change who we are.<sup>34</sup>

There is an immediate worry, though. Nick Cave is an artist. Presumably, you are a philosopher interested in art. And it shouldn't be surprising that, for an artist or such a philosopher, one's sense of self is partly constituted by one's aesthetic tastes. This doesn't show that aesthetic taste is an integral part of one's sense of self for most people. Artists and philosophers might be the exception here, rather than the norm. However, recent empirical work on the folk conception of personal identity strongly suggests that this worry is misplaced. In a series of studies, Joerg Fingerhut et al. (2021) have tested for what they call *The Aesthetic Self Effect*. In each study, participants from the general public were first asked how important a given art genre – e.g., music, painting – or art in general was to them. Then they were confronted with different vignettes asking them to consider a related change in aesthetic taste. For example, participants were asked to imagine going from enjoying classical music to only liking pop music, going from liking traditional visual art to liking abstract visual art, or going from being indifferent about art to caring about art. And they were asked to evaluate in how far these changes would impact their sense of self. What Fingerhut et al. found across the board was that such changes are perceived as identity transforming. Moreover, they found that this was independent from the personal importance that participants had assigned to the respective art genre or to art beforehand. From this Fingerhut et al. then concluded – plausibly, I think –

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<sup>34</sup> Similarly, Levinson remarks that “[o]ne’s taste, in the sense of personal preferences in matters aesthetic, arguably not only partly *reveals* who one is or what sort of person one is, but also partly *constitutes* who one is or what sort of person one is” (2010: 228).

that our sense of self is deeply entangled with our aesthetic tastes. We are, as they put it, “aesthetic selves”.<sup>35</sup> Given these results and their interpretation, together with the intuitions provoked in this section, (2) seems plausible as well.

### 3.3 Aesthetic Testimony

Since (1) and (2) both seem plausible, it also seems natural to put them together and to thus say that we are (at least implicitly) attached to the “ideal of aesthetic authenticity”: *we have a true aesthetic self that we can and should discover and live up to*. I think that whether this ideal stands up to critical scrutiny is an open question (cf. §5). However, I believe that appealing to our attachment to this ideal allows for a satisfactory explanation of our intuitions regarding aesthetic testimony. Here, we need to note that, plausibly, this attachment manifests itself in various norms that govern our aesthetic practises, including the forming of aesthetic beliefs and the making of aesthetic assertions. For our purposes, we can explicate the latter norms as follows:

*Aesthetic Belief*: One ought to form an aesthetic belief about a work only if: said belief reflects one’s true aesthetic self as discovered so far or it at least isn’t likely to hinder one from further discovering one’s true aesthetic self.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> It should be noted that a previous series of studies, by Strohminger & Nichols (2014), failed to establish an aesthetic self-effect. That is, they didn’t find a strong connection between aesthetic taste and perceived identity. Does this result undermine the results gathered by Fingerhut et al.? Not necessarily, as we need to consider some important differences in design between the two studies. Strohminger & Nichols asked participants to evaluate how *various changes in another person’s* different mental traits would affect that person’s identity. In contrast, Fingerhut et al. asked participants to evaluate how the *change of one* mental trait would affect identity, using different traits between different participants. Moreover, they asked participants to imagine that the respective change would *happen to themselves*, rather than to another person. These differences might help explain why Fingerhut et al., unlike Strohminger & Nichols, were able to find an aesthetic self-effect. Strohminger & Nichols point out that “the first-person experience of the self and assessment of another person’s identity [...] may operate by different rules”. And they add that this might be relevant when we evaluate how “desires and preferences” affect identity, saying: “it’s possible these distinguishing features define us more to ourselves than to others” (2014: 169). Thus, since aesthetic taste falls under preference, one reason why Fingerhut et al. were able to find an aesthetic self-effect might be that they asked participants self-directed questions. In addition, it might have helped that they asked participants to focus on a single change in their life, thereby allowing them “to imagine more vividly such a change” (2021:14). Due to these differences in design and their potential impact, it is questionable whether Strohminger & Nichols not finding an aesthetic self-effect undermines the results by Fingerhut et al. (For further discussion, see Fingerhut et al., 2021: 14-15).

<sup>36</sup> Here and in what follows, I am assuming that one’s aesthetic self-discovery isn’t complete. I think this assumption is benign. After all, we are finite beings. And for such beings, self-discovery, including aesthetic self-discovery, is typically taken to be a continuous process, never quite finished (also cf. fn. 26).

*Aesthetic Assertion*: One ought to make an aesthetic assertion about a work only if: said assertion expresses one's true aesthetic self as discovered so far or one at least makes it clear that one is not engaging in an act of aesthetic self-expression.

If one satisfies these norms, then one will, at least partly, conform to the ideal of aesthetic authenticity. Conversely, if one violates these norms, then one might well be criticised for one's aesthetic inauthenticity.

To see how these norms relate to aesthetic testimony, let's return to the *Wings of Desire*-example. If I form the flat-out belief that *Wings of Desire* is beautiful solely on Peter's say-so, then I violate *Aesthetic Belief*: For one, this belief clearly doesn't reflect what we might take to be my true aesthetic self as discovered so far. After all, I am simply borrowing Peter's aesthetic judgement, rather than engaging with the film, contemplating its beauty, and thereby exploring how it resonates with me aesthetically. Moreover, flat-out believing what Peter has told me might well stand in the way of further aesthetic self-discovery. If I already flat-out believe that the film is beautiful when watching it for the first time, then it seems plausible that I will just look for features that confirm my preconceived notions instead of really exploring whether it seems beautiful to me.<sup>37</sup> Now imagine that I manage to overcome my preconceived notions while first watching the film and judge that it is not beautiful but still defer to Peter's judgement and value it above my own. This would seem like housing a belief that is alien to my aesthetic self and that, due to its alienness, might impede further aesthetic self-discovery. In contrast, if I merely form the belief that *Wings of Desire* is probably beautiful on the basis of Peter's say-so, then I satisfy *Aesthetic Belief*: Here, the film being beautiful isn't a foregone conclusion for me. Rather, I am implicitly acknowledging that, ultimately, I have to make up my own mind in this regard. Hence, the belief in question isn't likely to stand in the way of aesthetic self-discovery. In fact, it might actually help in this regard; it might help to motivate me to watch

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<sup>37</sup> Such behaviour seems indeed likely in light of the phenomenon commonly referred to as "confirmation bias" – "the seeking or interpreting of evidence in ways that are partial to existing beliefs, expectations, or a hypothesis in hand" (Nickerson, 1998: 175).

the film, which in turn affords me an opportunity to learn about my aesthetic self.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, if I continue believing that *Wings of Desire* is probably beautiful after first watching it and failing to find it beautiful, then this wouldn't seem like housing an alien belief. It just seems I'm allowing that there is something about the film I have missed, still waiting to be discovered. So, appealing to our attachment to the ideal of aesthetic authenticity and the associated belief-norm can explain why flat-out, but not qualified, belief on the basis of aesthetic testimony seems problematic.<sup>39</sup>

What about the intuition that it is problematic to make unqualified assertions solely on the basis of aesthetic testimony? If I assert "*Wings of Desire* is beautiful" simply because Peter has told me so, then I violate *Aesthetic Assertion*: Supposing I have never watched the film, this assertion clearly isn't an expression of what we might take to be my true aesthetic self as discovered so far. Rather, it looks like I am putting on Peter's aesthetic self, so to say. In a way, my behaviour here seems similar to that of someone who is wearing a band shirt only to appear cool to others, although she doesn't listen to that band. And just like such people tend to be labelled "posers" and to be criticised for, among other things, their perceived aesthetic inauthenticity (cf. Sklar & Donahue, 2021), it also seems natural to take issue with my assertoric behaviour on this score.<sup>40</sup> In contrast, if I qualify my assertion with something like "According to Peter", then I satisfy *Aesthetic Assertion*: For I make it clear that I am not performing an act

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<sup>38</sup> Of course, flat-out believing that *Wings of Desire* is beautiful on the basis of Peter's say-so might also help to motivate me to watch the film. However, I take it that, here, this benefit is outweighed by the danger of my watching experience being tainted with my preconceived notions.

<sup>39</sup> Similarly, Nguyen (2020) argues that we feel that we shouldn't flat-out believe something on the basis of aesthetic testimony because we value the activity of personally engaging with works of art. However, as Hills (cf. 2022: 35) points out, Nguyen doesn't offer an explanation of why we value this engagement. My account can fill this lacuna by saying that we value the engagement with works of art because we value discovering what resonates with us aesthetically. And we value discovering this because we are attached to the ideal of aesthetic authenticity. Thus, my account might be taken as a possible supplement to Nguyen's account.

<sup>40</sup> Two notes on "posers". First, posers are not only criticised in terms of what is called "aesthetic authenticity" in this paper. They are also sometimes criticised for engaging in cultural appropriation (cf. e.g., Nguyen & Strohl, 2019; Sklar & Donahue, 2021). Second, a poser might appear aesthetically authentic in one regard and aesthetically inauthentic in another regard. For example, a person wearing a *Ramones*-shirt might appear aesthetically authentic in so far as she wears it because she truly likes the way it looks. At the same time, she might appear aesthetically inauthentic in so far as she doesn't listen to the *Ramones* and the shirt thus doesn't reflect her taste in music.

of aesthetic self-expression in virtue of this assertion. Hence, questions of aesthetic authenticity don't arise. This is why making qualified assertions on the basis of aesthetic testimony seems unproblematic. Thus, appealing to our attachment to the ideal of aesthetic authenticity and the associated assertion-norm can explain why unqualified, but not qualified, assertions on the basis of aesthetic testimony seem problematic.

Importantly, this explanation of our intuitions regarding aesthetic testimony satisfies the two desiderata identified in §2. Unlike the virtue of aesthetic understanding, the ideal of aesthetic authenticity doesn't put too heavy a cognitive load on those forming aesthetic beliefs or making aesthetic assertions (cf. (D1)). The reason is that satisfying the relevant norms doesn't require that you understand why something resonates with you aesthetically. To see this, think of Sally. Plausibly, Sally already satisfies *Aesthetic Belief* and *Aesthetic Assertion* when she spontaneously forms a belief and then makes an assertion to the effect that *Eroica* is great. After all, her belief and her assertion are genuine responses to her own listening experience and thus reflect and express what we might take to be her true aesthetic self.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, appealing to our attachment to the ideal of aesthetic authenticity, unlike appealing to the virtue of good taste, allows for a unified explanation of our intuitions regarding “good taste-cases” and “bad taste-cases” (cf. (D2)). When Pauline calls *Twilight* a masterpiece, despite not having read it, she violates *Aesthetic Assertion* – just like I do when I call *Wings of Desire* beautiful, despite not having watched it. And, just like me, Pauline seems aesthetically inauthentic in virtue of doing so. Hence, in both cases, we can use this perceived inauthenticity to explain why the respective assertion seems problematic. On the flipside, this also suggests that a lover of what is considered “trash fiction” might be taken to be just as aesthetically authentic as an aficionado of arthouse cinema.

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<sup>41</sup> Relatedly, Bialystok remarks: “I believe most people have had the experience of what I call intuitive authenticity, where, upon doing something or being somewhere or having a revelation about oneself, one has the insuperable sense of homecoming that prompts one to say, ‘*This is me.*’” (2014: 272).

In addition, this explanation of our intuitions regarding aesthetic testimony allows us to straightforwardly account for the fact that relying on testimony doesn't seem similarly problematic for a wide variety of other domains. On the present proposal, the reason is, simply, that many other domains don't seem as central to our self-conception as the aesthetic domain.<sup>42</sup> Hence, in these domains, authenticity-related demands aren't perceived to be much of an issue and thus don't stand in the way of relying on testimony.<sup>43</sup>

#### 4. Objections and Replies

I have argued that forming flat-out aesthetic beliefs and making flat-out aesthetic assertions on the basis of aesthetic testimony seems problematic because we thereby violate *Aesthetic Belief* and *Aesthetic Assertion*, respectively, and thus fail to live up to the ideal of aesthetic authenticity. In connection to this, one might point out that not living up to an ideal – e.g., by violating its associated norms – won't necessarily make our behaviour seem problematic. It might just make our behaviour seem subpar. Consider dining etiquette. Arguably, there is an ideal of having good table manners, which manifests itself in various norms that govern eating in social settings; for example, start eating only if everybody has been served. Now, if I start eating before my companions have been served, then my behaviour might well seem subpar – “You could have waited”. But it is far from clear whether my behaviour actually seems problematic. Given these considerations, it appears questionable whether appealing to our attachment to the ideal of aesthetic authenticity and its associated norms can explain why relying on aesthetic testimony in the indicated sense seems problematic – and not just subpar.

To respond to that objection, let me stress that the ideal of having good table manners and the ideal of aesthetic authenticity seem to play rather different roles in the grander scheme

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<sup>42</sup> Cf. the study testing for *The Aesthetic Self Effect* that was referred to in §3.2. For a similar study regarding the so-called *Essential Moral Self Hypothesis*, see Strohminger & Nichols (2014).

<sup>43</sup> For related discussion concerning moral testimony, that refers to the study by Strohminger & Nichols (cf. previous fn.), see Mogensen (2017: 277-278).

of things. Having good table manners is certainly deemed valuable, at least by many people. However, living up to the respective ideal seems to be of relatively little importance for the evaluation of someone's life: "How sad, he never knew what the proper spoon for eating soup was" is hardly something one might hear at funerals or read in obituaries. This helps explain why shortcomings vis-à-vis this ideal will likely be viewed as subpar, rather than problematic. In contrast, the general ideal of authenticity seems to play a major role when it comes to the evaluation of someone's life.<sup>44</sup> Remember, in explicating this ideal, Taylor talks of us being called upon to live life in a certain way that is our way. And he contends that we miss the point of our life should we fail to answer that call (cf. §3.1). Assuming that Taylor echoes popular sentiment here, it seems very plausible that shortcomings vis-à-vis this ideal will indeed be viewed as problematic – and not just as subpar. Importantly, given the findings of §3.2, that will include the ideal of aesthetic authenticity. That is, failing to live up to the ideal of aesthetic authenticity is bound to be viewed as problematic, too. Following this line of thought, the authenticity account seems in a good position to explain why relying on aesthetic testimony in the indicated sense seems problematic.

However, one might point out at this juncture, people regularly engage in behaviours that might seem aesthetically inauthentic. People frequently buy pieces of "decorative art" at chain-stores. "High art" is often bought only as a financial investment or only to impress others. Some people hire interior designers to furnish their homes. And hipsters are said to commonly wear items of clothing ironically – e.g., "wifebeaters", trucker hats, track suits, gold chains. The worry here is this: in so far as such behaviour seems both aesthetically inauthentic and unproblematic, appealing to our attachment to an ideal of aesthetic authenticity (and its associated norms) seems ill-suited to explain why relying on aesthetic testimony seems problematic.

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<sup>44</sup> For a literary exploration of that theme, see Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (2008).

Let's first take a closer look at buying "decorative art" and hiring interior designers. Here, much depends on how the cases are described. Do people buy a piece of "decorative art" because they really like it, or only because the sales person told them it was popular? Do people use interior designers as advisors but ultimately decide themselves what they like and put in their homes, or do they take a totally hands-off approach? In the former case, there seems to be nothing problematic about the respective behaviours. This, however, isn't a problem for my account as one might well say that the people in question seem, at least to a certain degree, aesthetically authentic. And in the latter case, it doesn't seem out of bounds to criticise the people in question for being "posers" in a way that is similar to the poser-criticism levelled at the above band shirt-wearer. And, as above, this criticism might be justified by appealing to these people's perceived aesthetic inauthenticity. Likewise, we might use labels such as "poser", "philistine" or "snob" to criticise people who buy "high art" only as a financial investment or only to impress others.<sup>45</sup> And, once again, it seems plausible to justify the use of such disparaging labels, in part, in terms of these people's perceived aesthetic inauthenticity. What about hipsters? For starters, note that the term "hipster" is mostly used to negatively refer to others, rather than as a means of self-identification (cf. e.g., Schiermer, 2014: 170). And, crucially, the animosity towards hipsters seems to, partly, stem from their ironic aesthetics. Joe Mande makes this explicit in his popular book *Look at This F\*cking Hipster* when he writes: "Everything they do is ironic: from the clothes they wear to the TV-shows they watch, to the stupid facial hair they grow – it's all an endless joke. There is no substance behind any of it" (2010: 12). As Mande anchors his criticism of hipsters' ironic aesthetics in the lack of substance he sees in it, he can be read as saying that one problem with "hipsterdom" is precisely its missing

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<sup>45</sup> McAdoo remarks that "[s]craping the bottom of the barrel, even for [the] category of philistine, would come those people who 'value' works of art solely as a financial investment" (1979: 334). And Kieran points out that "snobbery involves making use of [a work] for the sake of social demarcation" (2010: 245).



aesthetic authenticity. In sum, upon closer inspection, the examples discussed here don't seem to undermine, but to actually strengthen, the proposal developed in §3.

Yet, a further worry remains. While philosophers tend to agree that relying on aesthetic testimony seems more or less problematic, some have remarked that aesthetic testimony about lost artworks (broadly understood) constitutes an exception. More specifically, they have suggested that, here, it seems unproblematic to form flat-out aesthetic beliefs on the basis of aesthetic testimony. For instance, Brian Laetz suggests as much when he writes: "I believe [...] that [Nijinsky] was a brilliant performer [...] on nothing more than the word of others. And, [...], it is clear that I could have no other basis for doing so" (2008: 355; also cf. Hopkins, 2011: 154; Robson, 2012: 5). This raises the question whether my account can make sense of this exception. Can it also capture our intuitions concerning aesthetic testimony about lost artworks?

I believe it can. Remember, *Aesthetic Belief* says, roughly, that one ought to form an aesthetic belief only if it reflects one's true aesthetic self or it at least isn't likely to hinder aesthetic self-discovery (cf. §3.3). Now, flat-out believing that, say, Nijinsky was a brilliant performer on the basis of a ballet anthology won't reflect what one might take to be my true aesthetic self. After all, I haven't explored how Nijinsky's dancing resonates with me aesthetically. Still, that belief isn't likely to hinder aesthetic self-discovery: Unlike with the *Wings of Desire*-example, flat-out believing that Nijinsky was a brilliant performer doesn't carry the danger of me then just looking for features of his dancing that confirm my preconceived notions about him. The reason is, simply, that there are no recorded performances of Nijinsky I could watch. So, on my account, an important consideration against forming flat-out aesthetic beliefs on the basis of aesthetic testimony is inactive here. Moreover, believing that Nijinsky was a brilliant performer might spark a more general interest in ballet and thus help to motivate me to attend ballet performances – which in turn affords me opportunities to learn about my aesthetic self (cf. fn. 38). Thus, I would satisfy *Aesthetic Belief* by forming the

belief in question. Extrapolating from these observations, the authenticity account also seems well-equipped to capture our intuitions concerning aesthetic testimony about lost artworks.

## 5. Concluding Remarks

In this paper, I have given an explanation of why it seems problematic to rely on aesthetic testimony. On the proposal developed here, this seems problematic because we are attached to the ideal of aesthetic authenticity, i.e., we should discover and live up to our true aesthetic self, and because we feel that we miss this ideal when we simply adopt other people's aesthetic judgements.

While I take this to be a satisfactory explanation of our intuitions regarding aesthetic testimony, it is of course a different matter whether the ideal of aesthetic authenticity itself stands up to critical scrutiny. Let me end by briefly pointing to two *prima facie* concerns one might have here, both targeting the notion of a true aesthetic self.<sup>46</sup> First, one might think that there is a quite realistic possibility that our aesthetic tastes might radically change over time.<sup>47</sup> Imagine that I start out only liking punk rock and end up only liking Gregorian chants. Was my earlier "punk rock-self" my true aesthetic self or my later "Gregorian chant-self", or both, or neither? Second, one might think that our aesthetic tastes are, at least to a high degree, a function of the social, economic, regional, historical... environment we find ourselves embedded in. For instance, one might think that my present love for punk rock is but the result of such contingent factors and that my taste in music would have been entirely different had I found myself embedded in a different environment. So, can I really be said to live out my true aesthetic self when I buy yet another *Sex Pistols* LP?

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<sup>46</sup> For related discussion, see Bialystok (2014: 272-273) and Noë (2021: 307), respectively. For somewhat different worries regarding "moral authenticity", see Mogensen (2017: 276).

<sup>47</sup> While this seems realistic enough, it will likely be difficult for us to imagine such a change from our present perspective (cf. §3.2).

Now, given the account developed in this paper, the following is worth stressing. In so far as the above considerations put pressure on the notion of a true aesthetic self and thus on the ideal of aesthetic authenticity, they also directly impact how much weight we might want to attach to our intuitions regarding aesthetic testimony. But how much pressure is actually exerted by these considerations? I think this ultimately turns on how demanding we take the notion of a true aesthetic self to be: is it required that our true aesthetic self is immutable and free from outside influences? Or may our true aesthetic self change over time, and may it, at least in part, be shaped by outside influences? If we side with the former camp, then, in light of these considerations, we might well think that aesthetic authenticity is an untenable ideal and that our attachment to it is misguided. *Ipso facto*, we might hold that our intuitions about aesthetic testimony are misguided, too. However, if we side with the latter camp, then we might well think that aesthetic authenticity is a tenable ideal that is worth striving for. And we might further hold that, for this reason, there really is something problematic about relying on aesthetic testimony.

While my sympathies lie with the latter camp, arguing for such a notion of the true aesthetic self would be beyond the scope of this paper.<sup>48</sup> After all, my aim in this paper was to explain of our intuitions regarding aesthetic testimony; not to vindicate these intuitions, nor to cast them aside. And I believe the authenticity account allows us to do just that – no matter whether we ultimately come to bury or to praise aesthetic authenticity.

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<sup>48</sup> For a general account of authenticity that one might draw on here, see Bratu (2020).

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