

Testimony, Understanding, and Art Criticism

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Here is Roger Ebert on Stephen Spielberg's *Jaws* (1974):

In keeping the Great White offscreen, Spielberg was employing a strategy used by Alfred Hitchcock throughout his career. "A bomb is under the table, and it explodes: That is surprise," said Hitchcock. "The bomb is under the table but it does not explode: That is suspense." Spielberg leaves the shark under the table for most of the movie. And many of its manifestations in the later part of the film are at second hand: We don't see the shark but the results of his actions. The payoff is one of the most effective thrillers ever made.¹

I will argue that it is possible for someone to come to understand why *Jaws* is suspenseful – why it is "one of the most effective thrillers ever made" – on the basis of this explanation, and that, in general, testimonial understanding, and in particular testimonial aesthetic understanding, is possible.

This conclusion is important for (at least) two reasons. First, it provides a counterexample to the claim that testimonial understanding is impossible, which is (so I shall argue) a dogma in the epistemology of testimony and the philosophy of understanding.² Second, it undermines accounts of why testimonial aesthetic belief is problematic that appeal to said dogma.

Here is the plan for the paper. In §1, I'll present a puzzle – the "puzzle of aesthetic testimony" – along with a solution to it that appeals to the impossibility of testimonial understanding. In §2, I'll defend the possibility of testimonial understanding, including testimonial aesthetic understanding.

1 The puzzle of aesthetic testimony

In this section I'll present the puzzle of aesthetic testimony (§1.1), articulate a solution to the puzzle of aesthetic testimony that appeals to the impossibility of testimonial understanding (§1.3), and digress to discuss acquaintance with the object of aesthetic judgment (§1.3).

1.1 The puzzle

It is a truism in aesthetics that there is something problematic about testimonial aesthetic belief – where testimonial belief is belief that *p* on the basis of someone's telling you that *p*.³ It is suggested that it is bad, or wrong, or improper, or even impossible, to believe, for example, that Turner's watercolor *Sea View* (1826) is beautiful on the basis of someone's telling you that it is beautiful. Our question is: why is

¹ www.rogerebert.com, August 20th, 2000.

² See Zagzebski 2008, pp. 145-6, 2012, pp. 174-8, Hills 2009, 2016, forthcoming, Gordon 2017; cf. Grimm 2006, pp. 531-2, 2011, pp. 86-7, 2014, pp. 335-6, Pritchard 2010, pp. 80-3

³ In Kant's influential formulation, "[i]f someone does not find a building, a view, or a poem beautiful, then ... he does not allow approval to be internally imposed upon himself by a hundred voices who all praise it highly." (§33; trans. Guyer and Matthews) See also, e.g., Tormey 1973, p. 39, Wollheim 1980, p. 233, Pettit 1983, p. 25.

testimonial aesthetic belief problematic (if indeed it is)? This is puzzling because (but only if we assume that) neither testimonial belief nor aesthetic belief is problematic in general (cf. Hazlett 2017, pp. 50-1).

Articulating what is problematic about testimonial aesthetic belief is not easy. It is not clear how or in what way testimonial aesthetic belief is problematic. Our explanation should therefore tell us not only why testimonial aesthetic belief is problematic, but also how or in what way it is problematic.

I use “aesthetic belief” to cover a broad category of beliefs about the instantiation of aesthetic properties, both in the narrow sense of “aesthetic properties” where this includes only such properties as beauty, deformity, grace, unity, and grotesqueness, but also in the broad sense of “aesthetic properties” where this includes such properties as artistic goodness or greatness, being a masterpiece, being an artistic failure – and being suspenseful.⁴ It is unclear where the vague boundary between intuitively problematic testimonial aesthetic belief and intuitively unproblematic testimonial belief about related matters lies: although it seems problematic to believe that *Sea View* is beautiful on someone’s say-so, it does not seem problematic to believe that *Sea View* is a watercolor seascape on someone’s say-so.

1.2 The argument from the impossibility of testimonial understanding

Robert Hopkins (2011, §V) writes that “[h]aving the right to an aesthetic belief requires one to grasp the aesthetic grounds for it,” where “to grasp the aesthetic grounds for an aesthetic belief is to grasp those facts in virtue of which the belief is true.” (pp. 149-50; cf. Hopkins 2007, Hills 2009) Although Hopkins does not use the term “understanding,” I assume that to grasp the facts in virtue of which it is true that p is to understand why p, i.e. to possess *explanatory understanding*. Explanatory understanding is a species of grasp of explanatory structure; to understand why p is to appreciate or “see” what grounds the fact that p, or makes it the case that p, or explains the fact that p.⁵ Thus, Hopkins’ premise is that permissible aesthetic belief requires explanatory understanding. More precisely, his premise is that you ought not believe that an aesthetic property is instantiated unless you understand why it is instantiated, given the instantiation of the non-aesthetic properties on which it supervenes. To put this another way, his premise is that permissible aesthetic belief requires *aesthetic understanding*, i.e. understanding why relevant aesthetic properties are instantiated, given the instantiation of the non-aesthetic properties on which they supervene. Since testimony cannot provide understanding (p. 150), testimonial aesthetic belief always violates this requirement. Call this the *argument from the impossibility of testimonial understanding*.

I am going to grant for the sake of argument that the argument from the impossibility of testimonial understanding is valid, and that the premise that permissible aesthetic belief requires aesthetic understanding is true.⁶ I want to focus on the premise that testimony cannot provide understanding.

Given our interest in the argument from the impossibility of testimonial understanding, our focus will be on explanatory understanding. As well, given our interest in this argument, our focus will be on aesthetic

⁴ Is being suspenseful really an aesthetic property? Yes, given a correct analysis: to say that a fiction is suspenseful is not merely to say that it would cause suspense for most normal people, but that it would *warrant* such a response, by expressing or representing suspenseful content or by expressing or representing its content in a suspenseful way.

⁵ Cf. Zagzebski 2001, p. 242, 2012, pp. 174-5, Kvanvig 2003, p. 192, 2009, Grimm 2006, p. 532, 2011, pp. 88-90, 2014, Strevens 2013, Hills 2016, forthcoming, Hazlett 2018.

⁶ For critical discussion of these conceded claims, see Hazlett 2017, pp. 51-4.

understanding. There may be other species of understanding that are important in the context of art and art criticism – including understanding an artwork, understanding the historical context of the creation of an artwork, and understanding the processes and intentions constitutive of its creation – but I have nothing to say here about whether they can be testimonial.

1.3 Digression: acquaintance

Suppose I accept Ebert's explanation of why *Jaws* is suspenseful. Above, I suggested this case as a candidate for being a case of testimonial aesthetic understanding. You might object, however, that since I have seen *Jaws*, my understanding of why *Jaws* is suspenseful cannot be testimonial. What is needed, you might argue, is a case in which I am not acquainted with the relevant object, i.e. the bearer of the relevant aesthetic properties. Only such a case, so the argument might go, can be a candidate for *testimonial* aesthetic understanding.

I disagree, on the grounds that acquaintance with relevant objects does not entail that a given instance of understanding is not testimonial. Consider the fact that testimonial propositional knowledge is compatible with acquaintance with relevant objects. You see a curious creature in a pen at the zoo; the zookeeper tells you that it is a wombat. You now know that the animal is a wombat – and your knowledge is testimonial, despite your acquaintance with the wombat. Acquaintance with something does not, in general, preclude learning about it testimonially.

Indeed, my conclusion in this paper is consistent with Gary Iseminger's (2004) observation that "[p]ictures are to be seen; musical pieces, to be heard; poems, to be read," and that "only "acquaintance" with the work ... puts us in a position to understand, to appreciate, and to judge it." (p. 10) Perhaps acquaintance with relevant objects is necessary for aesthetic understanding; but this is consistent with the possibility of testimonial aesthetic understanding. Consider the fact that acquaintance with relevant objects is sometimes necessary for testimonial propositional knowledge. "Look at those ears," the zookeeper says, "those are the distinctive ears of the wombat." You now know that wombats have ears that look like that, but you could not come to know this unless you were acquainted with the wombat and its ears. Moreover, the same kind of requirement sometimes exists in the context of art and art criticism. "Look at the brushwork here," your art history teacher says, "this is distinctive of Cezanne's style." Acquaintance with the relevant painting is necessary for acquiring this item of testimonial propositional knowledge.⁷

We should distinguish between the idea that there is something problematic about testimonial aesthetic belief and the idea that there is something problematic about aesthetic belief without acquaintance with relevant objects. First, testimonial belief does not entail belief without acquaintance with relevant objects – consider the case of the wombat, above. Second, belief without acquaintance with relevant objects does not entail testimonial belief – consider paradigm cases of inference to the best explanation, e.g. you believe that there was a burglar in your house on the basis of the broken glass, ransacked rooms, and muddy footprints the burglar left behind. Therefore, it seems to me, given our interest in the puzzle of aesthetic testimony, we are right to focus on a case in which the recipient of testimony enjoys

⁷ N.b. that these are not cases of propositional knowledge that is *partially* testimonial. Compare testimonial propositional knowledge involving concepts acquired via acquaintance with paradigms, e.g. color concepts.

acquaintance with relevant objects – e.g. someone who has seen *Jaws*. One possibility, of course, is that this focus will lead us to conclude that there is nothing wrong with testimonial aesthetic belief, per se, but rather with aesthetic belief without acquaintance with relevant objects.⁸ But focusing on a case of testimonial aesthetic belief without acquaintance with relevant objects would only create intuitional “noise.”⁹

2 Testimonial understanding

In this section, I shall argue that testimonial understanding is possible. The key idea behind my argument is that testimony comprises not only cases in which one person tells another person that p, but also cases in which one person explains to another person why p.¹⁰ I shall concede an important claim about explanatory understanding (§2.1), defend an assumption about testimony (§2.2), argue that testimonial understanding is possible outside of aesthetics (§2.3), and argue that testimonial understanding is possible within aesthetics (§2.4).

2.1 Understanding and propositional knowledge

It is often alleged that explanatory understanding is not a species of propositional knowledge, because you can know that p because q, without understanding why p. Consider an example from Stephen Grimm (2006):

I get into my 1991 Volkswagen and none of the gauges—the speedometer, tachometer, etc.—come to life; they’re all dead. [M]y mechanic tells me that the reason why the gauges are dead is because I have a bad ignition switch. I then seem to have excellent reason to assent to the claim that my gauges are dead because of a bad ignition switch, even though I fail to grasp how a bad ignition switch might lead to this result. (p. 531)

You know that the gauges are dead because of a bad ignition switch, but do not understand why the gauges are dead. What is missing? So the argument goes, a (correct) non-propositional representation of

⁸ This is the famous “acquaintance principle,” on which see Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, §8, §§33-34, Wollheim, op. cit., Tormey op. cit., Pettit 1983, §§III–IV, Tanner 2003, p. 33, Iseminger op. cit.; see also Budd 2003, Livingston 2003. For empirical arguments that people sometimes form testimonial aesthetic beliefs, see Robson 2014. In connection with this, note well (cf. Robson 2015b) that the oddity of expressing an aesthetic belief whilst disavowing acquaintance with its object – e.g. saying “*Sea View* is beautiful, although I have not seen it” – is at least in part a matter of conversational pragmatics: expressions of aesthetic judgment generally imply acquaintance with their objects; cancelling this implication can be jarring for the listener, along the lines of “I’d like you to pass me the salt, although I am not requesting that you do so.” As well, we should distinguish between the intuition that testimonial aesthetic belief is problematic from the intuition that a life without acquaintance with artworks would be bad. The reason is that there are many things that seem like part of the good life for creatures like us, but about which testimonial belief is not problematic. A life without friendship or travel or sex seems bad in the same way that a life without acquaintance with artworks seems bad, but testimonial belief about these activities is not problematic. (In some cases we can identify a person’s wealth of testimonial knowledge about some good as an obstacle to their acquiring it – think of the self-described “foodie” whose gastronomic expertise prevents them from enjoying a simple meal. But in other cases testimonial knowledge facilitates the acquisition of some good – think of someone who is inspired to visit Malaysia after reading extensively about Malaysian history.)

⁹ Cf. Kant’s case, above, in which you are acquainted with the relevant building, view, or poem.

¹⁰ Cf. McGrath (2011) on “the apparent possibility of an agent’s deferring to another person not only about the claim that a particular course of action is right, but also about the underlying reasons that make it right.” (p. 136)

the explanatory connection between whatever explains the fact that p (the *explanans*) and the fact that p (the *explanandum*) – in this case, the explanatory connection between the bad ignition switch and the dead gauges. In the same way that propositional knowledge that p is partly constituted by a (correct) representation of the truth of the proposition that p – in the form of a true belief that p – understanding why p is partly constituted by a (correct) non-propositional representation of the explanatory connection between whatever explains the fact that p and the fact that p. Propositional knowledge is a species of true belief, and explanatory understanding is a species of such non-propositional representation; just as (propositional) knowledge and error have something in common – namely, belief – (explanatory) understanding and misunderstanding have something in common – namely, non-propositional representation of explanatory structure. It is annoying, but unimportant for our purposes here, that, unlike belief, this species of representation has no common name in English, although when we speak of a person’s picture of, construal of, or take on something, we are often speaking of their non-propositional representation of explanatory structure.

I want to grant for the sake of argument that explanatory understanding is not a species of propositional knowledge. If explanatory understanding is a species of propositional knowledge, then testimonial understanding seems possible (cf. Sliwa 2015). If understanding why p is equivalent to knowing that p because q, then testimonial understanding seems possible. But even if explanatory understanding is constituted by more propositional knowledge than this, testimonial understanding seems possible. Suppose explanatory understanding is constituted, in addition to the explanatory knowledge that p because q, by various items of counterfactual knowledge, knowledge of how things would have been different under various circumstances or knowledge of what a difference various alternatives would have made. Understanding why the gauges are dead surely requires knowing that the gauges would come back to life if the ignition switch were replaced. But that seems like the kind of knowledge that could be transmitted by testimony. The same, *mutatis mutandis*, when it comes to various items of general knowledge (e.g. that the gauges on the ’91 Volkswagen are powered by the ignition switch) that seem implicated in explanatory understanding.

2.2 Testimony and intellectual dependence

I shall assume that a *testimonial exchange* is an interaction between a hearer and a speaker, in which there is a distinctive kind of intellectual dependence of the hearer on the speaker, such that the hearer depends on the speaker for the correctness of their testimony.¹¹ In a case of testimonial belief that p, for example, the hearer, who comes to believe that p, depends on the speaker, who tells the hearer that p, for the truth of the proposition that p.

What does it mean to depend on someone for the correctness of their testimony? The intellectual dependence I have in mind can be characterized by appeal to three features of testimonial exchanges.

- i. In a testimonial exchange, the hearer’s acceptance of the speaker’s testimony is conditional on the perceived credibility of the speaker. If you have formed some beliefs about the solar system on the basis of what you were told by someone whom you took to be a distinguished professor of

¹¹ Note well that the speaker need not speak and the hearer need not hear; testimonial exchanges can go via writing, sign language, semaphore, etc. And note well that hearer and speaker need not be individual persons; they can be groups, institutions, etc.

- astronomy, when you discover that they are, in fact, an undistinguished practitioner of astrology, you will abandon the beliefs that you formed on their say-so.
- ii. In a testimonial exchange, the hearer is entitled to “pass the buck” to the speaker in the event that what they have accepted on the basis of the speaker’s testimony is challenged (Goldberg 2006, pp. 133-7, 2011, pp. 177-8). If someone asks you to defend your astronomical beliefs, you could refer them back to your source.
 - iii. In a testimonial exchange, the hearer is entitled to blame the speaker if their testimony is incorrect, e.g. if the would-be professor’s claims about the solar system turn out to be false (cf. Goldberg, *op. cit.*).¹²

The requirement of intellectual dependence rules out the following kind of case as not a case of testimonial belief that p: you believe that q on the basis of being told that q, and infer – perhaps immediately and without any conscious deliberation – that p. For example: you ask a stranger for the time and when they tell you, you immediately realize that you are late for a meeting. Your belief that you are late for the meeting is non-testimonial; testimonial belief requires that the content of the belief be the same as the content of the telling on which the belief is based.¹³ You rely on the stranger for the truth of the proposition about the time, but not for the truth of the proposition about your meeting that you infer from it. And the requirement of intellectual dependence also rules out the following kind of case as not a case of testimonial belief that p: your coming to believe that p on some non-testimonial basis is caused by your being told that p. For example: your math teacher tells you the answer to some problem, which enables you to construct a proof of it. Even though in this case the content of your belief is the same as the content of the telling that causes you to form it, your belief is not testimonial, because the intellectual dependence distinctive of testimonial exchanges is absent.

The requirement of intellectual dependence, I submit, in general distinguishes the testimonial and the non-testimonial.¹⁴ Testimonial knowledge is distinguished from non-testimonial knowledge by the presence of these features, and testimonial understanding (§§2.3 – 2.4) is distinguished from non-testimonial understanding by the presence of these three features. We thus turn to the question of whether testimonial understanding really is possible.

2.3 Explaining why p (in general)

What motivates the premise that testimonial understanding is impossible (§1.2)? Here is an argument:

¹² My formulation of this idea is different from Goldberg’s, but the difference will not matter for our purposes here.

¹³ Where the boundary lies between what is told and what is (perhaps immediately and without conscious deliberation) inferred from what is told is an important topic in the philosophy of language, related to, but not the same as, the question of where the boundary lies between what is said and what is implicated.

¹⁴ The present assumption concerns the nature of testimony, and as such it leaves open controversial questions about testimonial justification and knowledge. It is consistent with both skepticism and anti-skepticism about testimonial knowledge, with both “reductionism” and “anti-reductionism” about testimonial justification (Coady 1992, Chapter 1, Fricker 1994, 1995, Lackey 2006), and with both the “assurance view” and its negation (Hinchman 2005, Moran 2005m Lackey 2008, Chapter 8).

In any testimonial exchange, the hearer comes to believe that *p* on the basis of the speaker's telling them that *p*. In the best case, the hearer comes to know that *p*, but the result of a testimonial exchange is never anything more than propositional knowledge. But no amount of propositional knowledge is sufficient for understanding. Therefore, testimonial understanding is impossible.

I granted (§2.1) that no amount of propositional knowledge is sufficient for explanatory understanding. However, even in that case, the argument is unsound. Not all testimonial exchanges are interactions in which the speaker (merely) *tells the hearer that p*; in some testimonial exchanges, the speaker *explains to the hearer why p*.¹⁵ Testimonial exchanges can involve either of these kinds of speech act – telling that *p* and explaining why *p* – on the part of the speaker.¹⁶ In cases of testimonial propositional knowledge, the speaker expresses their knowledge that *p* by telling the hearer that *p*, who comes to know that *p* on that basis; propositional knowledge is thus transmitted from speaker to hearer. The speaker's telling is a non-mental representation of a particular proposition as true – namely, the proposition belief in which partly constitutes their propositional knowledge. In cases of testimonial explanatory understanding, the speaker expresses their understanding of why *p* by explaining to the hearer why *p*, who comes to understand why *p* on that basis; explanatory understanding is thus transmitted from speaker to hearer. The speaker's explanation is a non-mental representation of particular explanatory connections as real – namely, those explanatory connections representation of which partly constitutes their explanatory understanding.

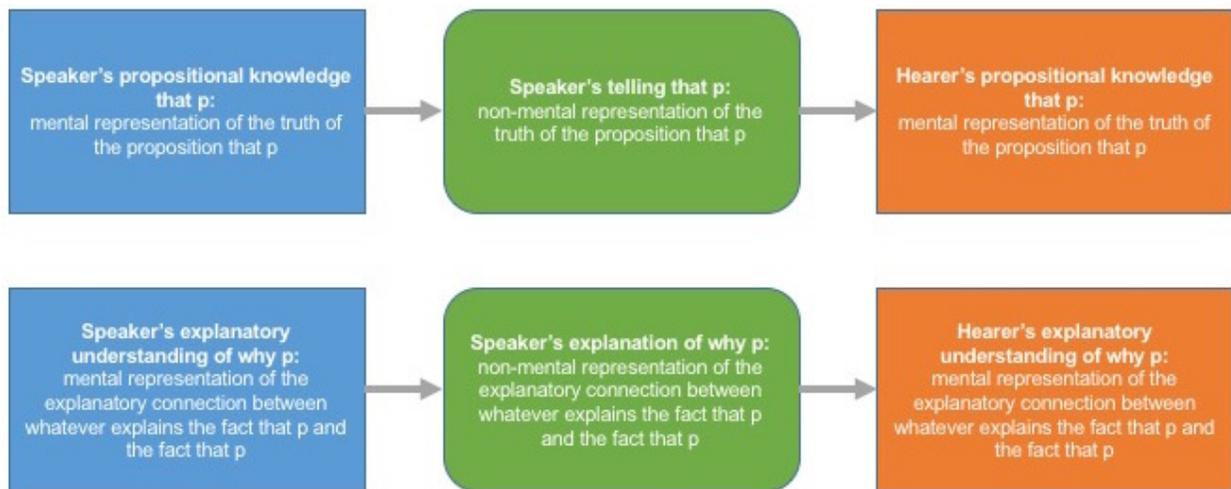


Figure: transmission of propositional knowledge and transmission of explanatory understanding

This has been schematic. For more concreteness, consider a continuation of Grimm's case (§2.1):

¹⁵ Note well that "explanation," "explains," etc., are polysemous, referring sometimes to a speech act – e.g. "my mechanic explained to me why the gauges are dead" – and sometimes a metaphysical relation – e.g. "the bad ignition switch explains the dead gauges."

¹⁶ Note that the distinction between telling and explaining is not grammatical: you can tell someone why *p* and you can explain to someone that *p*.

“I still don’t understand,” I tell my mechanic. “Look here,” they say, “this is the ignition switch. It’s responsible for activating the electrical systems of the car.” They pull the switch out of the dashboard. “It’s connected by this wire to the gauges,” as they gesture along the length of the dashboard to indicate how the wire is connected to the gauges. “And if you look here,” they now point at something inside the switch itself, “you can see that when I turn the key, the mechanism doesn’t move.”

The mechanic has explained to me why the gauges are dead, and on the basis of their explanation, if all goes well, I now understand why the gauges are dead. This, I maintain, is a case of testimonial understanding. But this conclusion is supported by the fact that the intellectual dependence distinctive of testimonial exchanges (§2.2) is present in this case. First, if my mechanic was revealed to be an imposter, someone who understands nothing about how cars work, I would no longer accept their explanation. Second, if I were to offer the same explanation to someone else, who challenged me to defend it, I could defer to the mechanic, since I accept this explanation only on their say-so. Third, if the explanation turned out to be bunk – the gauges have nothing to do with the ignition switch – I could justly accuse the mechanic of having led me astray. All this is just to say that I rely on the mechanic for the correctness of their explanation.

Contrast the present case, which I have argued is a case of testimonial understanding, with a case of non-testimonial understanding. Imagine that a second mechanic asks my mechanic why the car’s gauges are dead. “Bad ignition switch,” the first mechanic says. Drawing on their expert knowledge of auto repair, the second mechanic now understands why the gauges are dead – but this understanding is not testimonial. Their belief that the ignition switch is bad is testimonial, but they grasped the connection between this and the dead gauges for themselves, without reliance on my mechanic. The intellectual dependence distinctive of testimonial exchanges is absent in this case. (Compare the case, from §2.2, of inferring that you are late for a meeting.) And it would not necessarily change things if my mechanic had gone on to explain to the second mechanic why the gauges are dead: even if they had done that, the second mechanic might still have grasped the connection for themselves, without reliance on my mechanic. (Compare the case, from §2.2, of proving what your math teacher tells you.)

You might object that, in this and other cases of would-be testimonial understanding, the hearer must still grasp the speaker’s explanation for themselves – they must still “connect the dots” or “put it all together” on their own. As Linda Zagzebski (2008) puts it, “[t]he person’s own mind has to do the “work” of understanding.” (p. 146) However, in this respect explanatory understanding is no different from propositional knowledge, where the hearer must believe – for themselves, on their own – what the speaker tells them. In cases of propositional knowledge, the knower must do the “work” of believing that p, and in cases of explanatory understanding, the understander must do the “work” of non-propositionally representing explanatory structure. So, there is no relevant disparity between propositional knowledge and explanatory understanding here.

Moreover, believing a proposition is sometimes a kind of cognitive achievement, as when doing so requires deploying concepts that are hard to possess (e.g. believing that the Standard Model is inconsistent with the Lambda-CDM model) or when they have a complex logical structure (e.g. believing that non-residents must either pay a surtax or contribute to the pension fund, unless they either didn’t

contribute last year or paid the surtax in the previous year twice).¹⁷ So there is no relevant disparity between propositional knowledge and explanatory understanding vis-à-vis cognitive achievement, either.

I have suggested one diagnosis of the appeal of the mistaken view that testimonial understanding is impossible: the mistaken assumption that all testimonial exchanges are interactions in which the speaker (merely) tells the hearer that *p*. Another reason that testimonial understanding may seem impossible is a mistaken, but perhaps initially attractive, picture of testimonial exchanges that overestimates the intellectual contribution of the speaker and underestimates the intellectual contribution of the hearer. If we think of cases of testimonial propositional knowledge as cases in which the knower blindly and passively trusts the speaker, treating the mere fact that someone said that *p* as conclusive evidence that *p*, then we will struggle to make sense of testimonial understanding – for (so the argument might go) understanding is incompatible with blind and passive trust of this kind. (On this mistaken picture, the speaker metaphorically inserts a proposition into the inert head of the hearer – but understanding requires more activity on the part of the person who understands.) However, propositional knowledge is also incompatible with blind and passive trust of this kind, and for this reason testimonial propositional knowledge requires a significant contribution from the hearer. To acquire knowledge, the hearer must manifest a sensitivity to evidence of sincerity or insincerity on the part of the speaker, a sensitivity to the plausibility or implausibility of what the speaker asserts, and a disposition to select reliable sources of testimony.¹⁸ So the fact that understanding requires a significant contribution from the person who understands – that they must be active and not passive – is no mark against the possibility of testimonial understanding.

2.4 Explaining why *p* (within aesthetics)

Testimonial understanding is possible (§2.3). But perhaps the defender of the argument from the impossibility of testimonial understanding (§1.3) could respond by arguing that, although testimonial understanding is possible in general, testimonial *aesthetic* understanding is impossible. Is this response plausible? I think not. To see this, however, we need to say more about the specifics of *aesthetic explanation*, i.e. explanation of why some aesthetic property is instantiated, given the instantiation of the non-aesthetic properties on which it supervenes. Substantial progress has been made, in this connection, in two classic papers on art critical discourse: Arnold Isenberg’s “Critical Communication” (1949) and Frank Sibley’s “Aesthetic Concepts” (1959). Their descriptions of how people justify their aesthetic judgments provides us with the specifics we need to appreciate the possibility of testimonial aesthetic understanding.

Sibley (1959) writes that:

¹⁷ Cf. Boyd 2017, pp. 120-1, Grimm 2020, pp. 133-5. N.b. the distinction between believing that *p* and believing that the sentence “*p*” is true.

¹⁸ See Fricker 1994, pp. 135-5, pp. 148-51, 1995, pp. 404-8, p. 409, Audi 1997, pp. 406-7, Lackey 2008, pp. 160-4, pp. 178-85; cf. (in connection with moral testimony) Driver 2006, pp. 635-6, (in connection with aesthetic testimony) McKinnon 2017, pp. 186-7, and (in connection with testimonial understanding) Boyd 2017, pp. 117-8.

When we cannot ourselves quite say what non-aesthetic features make something delicate or unbalanced or powerful or moving, the good critic often puts his finger on something which strikes us as the right explanation. (p. 424)

However, as Isenberg (1949) argues, the critic does not do this by describing those non-aesthetic properties that, together with some aesthetic principle, entail the instantiation of the relevant aesthetic property. Rather (in the case of visual art):

[T]he critic ... gives us directions for perceiving, and does this *by means* of the idea he imparts to us, which narrows down the field of possible visual orientations and guides us in the discrimination of details, the organization of parts, the grouping of discrete objects into patterns. (p. 336)

Or, as Sibley puts it (again, in the case of visual art), “[t]he critic’s talk ... gets us to *see* what he has seen” and art criticism involves “bringing others to see what we see.” (p. 439) However, as Isenberg stresses, there is genuine *communication* involved here, in which “a mental content is transmitted by symbols from one person to another,” resulting in “a sameness of vision, of experienced content.” (p. 336) In the paradigm case of art critical communication, “we have been made to “understand” why we liked (or disliked) the work,” and “such understanding is the legitimate fruit of criticism.” (p. 341)

Sibley offers a description of the methods that art critics use when they provide aesthetic explanations (pp. 438-5).¹⁹ These include:

- The pointing out or mentioning of significant non-aesthetic features, e.g. “Did you notice the figure of Icarus in the Brueghel? It is very small.” (pp. 442-3; cf. Isenberg 1949, p. 332, pp. 335-7, p. 341).
- The positing of connections or links between non-aesthetic features and aesthetic features, e.g. “Have you noticed this line and that ... don’t they give it vitality, energy?” (p. 443)
- The use of similes and metaphors, e.g. “[H]is canvasses are fires; they crackle, burn, and blaze.” (Ibid.)
- The use of counterfactual comparisons, e.g. “Suppose he had made that a lighter yellow ... how flat it would have fallen.” (pp. 443-4; cf. p. 434, Isenberg 1949, p. 344)
- Non-linguistic expression, including pointing, gesturing, and adopting particular mannerisms and tones of voice (p. 444; cf. p. 439).

These are the means by which we “defend or support our [aesthetic] judgments, and convince others of their rightness.” (p. 438) Central to this activity is “mentioning or pointing out the features, including easily discernible non-aesthetic ones, upon which the aesthetic qualities depend”; in doing this “the critic is thereby justifying or supporting his judgments.” (p. 439) My contention is that, in doing this, the critic is also explaining why relevant aesthetic properties are instantiated, given the instantiation of the non-aesthetic properties on which they supervene – and on the basis of such an explanation someone else

¹⁹ Note that Isenberg (1949) reserves “explanation” for psychological explanations; what I am calling “aesthetic explanations” he would call “justifications” (p. 332)

might come to understand why those properties are instantiated, given the instantiation of the non-aesthetic properties on which they supervene, i.e. they might acquire testimonial aesthetic understanding.

Recall Ebert's explanation of why *Jaws* is suspenseful. Ebert employs all but one of Sibley's methods: he draws our attention to the fact that the shark often does not appear (even in the most suspenseful scenes); he says that the non-appearance of the shark is connected to the anxiety and tension we experience; he implies that had the shark appeared more often the movie would have been a failure; and he suggests that the shark's non-appearance is like a bomb that doesn't explode (and that it is suspenseful in the same way).

I maintain that my understanding of why *Jaws* is suspenseful, which is based on Ebert's explanation, is testimonial. The intellectual dependence distinctive of testimonial exchanges (§2.2) is present in this case. First, the reason I accept Ebert's explanation is that Ebert is an expert movie critic, much more knowledgeable about movies than I: has seen many more movies – including many more movies in the suspense genre – than I have; he has thought longer and harder about them; he has read more about the history and practice of movies and movie-making. This is why I turn to him for insight into movies – why, wanting to understand *Jaws* better, I choose to read what he writes about it. I stand to Ebert in the relation of layperson to expert, and in particular when it comes to the question of why *Jaws* is suspenseful. Had the same explanation been offered by someone else, someone who is no expert about movies, I would not accept it. Second, if the explanation turned out to be wrong, I could blame Ebert for the error. Third, if someone challenged this explanation, I could refer them to Ebert as an authority on the matter. Just as I depend on my mechanic when it comes to my representation of the explanatory connection between the bad ignition switch and the dead gauges (§2.2), I depend on Ebert when it comes to my representation of the explanatory connection between the shark's non-appearance and the suspensefulness of *Jaws*. So this is a case of testimonial aesthetic understanding.

You might object that Ebert's explanation is *prima facie* compelling, and therefore that once you come to see the fact that the shark is generally unseen as the decisive factor, you no longer rely on Ebert in your understanding of why *Jaws* is suspenseful. There is something right in this thought, but it does not suggest that my understanding is non-testimonial. It sounds right that that unexploded bombs and unseen sharks are more suspenseful than bombs that explode and sharks that appear, but I do not think I could *know* this without Ebert telling me so. Similarly, although Ebert's explanation sounds right, I do not think I could genuinely understand why *Jaws* is suspenseful without relying on him. In this connection, note well that tellings that *p* can be *prima facie* compelling and this can be part of the reason that we accept them in a testimonial exchange. In the same way, explanations why *p* can be *prima facie* compelling and this can be part of the reason that we accept them in a testimonial exchange. It seems otherwise if we assume the mistaken picture of testimony (§2.3) that underestimates the intellectual contribution of the hearer. On that picture, the hearer blindly and passively trusts the speaker, accepting what they say whether it is *prima facie* compelling or not. However, such blind and passive trust is not required for a testimonial exchange. Just as we may accept an aesthetic explanation because it strikes us as plausible – as Isenberg (1949) observes, it often happens that “with a sense of illumination we say ‘Yes, that's it exactly’” (p. 341) – we may accept what someone tells us because it strikes us as plausible. Such testimonial exchanges are to be contrasted both with cases in which someone articulates something that you already accepted (*ibid.*) and with cases in which what someone says merely causes you to non-testimonially change your mind.

You might object that the understanding afforded by aesthetic explanations is essentially perceptual – that it involves, in the case of visual art, the critic bringing you to see what they have seen – and therefore not testimonial (cf. §1.3). Certainly, some cases of being brought to see what a critic has seen are not cases of testimonial exchange. You are told not to attend to the intrinsic properties of a Pollack canvas, but rather to imagine the activity of his painting; you now see the painting in a new way, in a way more like the way your interlocutor sees it. That is not a testimonial exchange, but that is also not a case of accepting an aesthetic explanation. As Isenberg (1949) argues, aesthetic explanation is not primarily concerned with “the exhibition of *parts* or *details* of an art object,” but rather with “the exhibition of abstract *qualities*[,] which is predominant in criticism.” (p. 342) Two observations support this. First, aesthetic explanation involves not merely pointing out certain non-aesthetic properties of an artwork, but pointing those properties out *as* the explanation of its instantiation of some aesthetic property. Second, “seeing” should be understood broadly here, to include not merely the sense perception of primary and secondary qualities, but also “seeing as.” Suppose you are told, of *Sea View*, that the two dark lines in the distance are the key to the painting’s beauty. Your visual attention is drawn to those lines, of course, but you are also invited to see those lines as the explanation of the beauty of the painting. It is easy to imagine coming to see things that way – you imagine them gone and it all seems different; there is some kind of important triad comprising the light, the two dark lines, and the sailboats tossed about in the foreground; etc. Crucially, however, “seeing as” can exhibit the intellectual dependence distinctive of testimonial exchanges (§2.2). Imagine that your interlocutor reveals they were joking – those lines are nothing important; everyone who has thought for long about the painting agrees; etc. It could easily happen at that point that you realize that what you “saw” was not really there.

Although this feature is not present in the case of Ebert’s explanation, non-linguistic expression seems important in many cases of aesthetic explanation. Already in our case of mechanical explanation (§2.3) there was pointing, and pointing, in particular, seems like a paradigm way of “pointing out” the relevant features of a visual artwork. Sibley (1959) writes that “[a] critic may sometimes do more with a sweep of an arm than by talking.” (p. 444; see also p. 439, p. 440, p. 442) As well, Sibley’s catalog of methods of aesthetic explanation – which is also a catalog of methods of explanation, in general – should be expanded to include dialogical elements of explanation.²⁰ Explanation often involves a conversation, which includes both questions and answers and objections and replies. In the course of giving an explanation we often both ask questions of our interlocutors and invite them to ask questions of us. As well, inviting and meeting criticism of an explanation is a powerful way of making that explanation compelling. In any event, we should bear both non-linguistic and dialogical elements of explanation in mind to emphasize the inadequacy of the idea that all testimonial exchanges involve nothing more than propositional telling (§2.3).

I have argued that art critical explanations can be a source of testimonial aesthetic understanding. This conclusion is consistent with the fact that art critics have more to offer than explanations – that professional art critics do other things is no objection to the claim that they sometimes transmit understanding to their interlocutors. For example, art critics sometimes provide us with a critical vocabulary with which to articulate our inchoate aesthetic understanding. For another example, art critics sometimes merely instruct us as to how to engage with a work of art, putting us in a position to non-

²⁰ Cf. Green 2019, pp. 54-5.

testimonially acquire aesthetic understanding. However, one of the things art critics do is offer aesthetic explanations, and these can be a testimonial source of aesthetic understanding.

3 Conclusion

I defended the possibility of testimonial understanding, and in particular of testimonial aesthetic understanding (§2). If I am right, the argument from the impossibility of testimonial understanding (§1.3) is unsound. Where does this leave us vis-à-vis the puzzle of aesthetic testimony (§1.1)?

On the one hand, given the possibility of testimonial aesthetic understanding, aesthetic testimony seems in better shape than its reputation would suggest. We might thus re-evaluate the truism that testimonial aesthetic belief is problematic (§1.1).²¹ However, even if there is something problematic about testimonial aesthetic belief, my argument implies that there are many contexts and situations in which we can improve our understanding of artworks by accepting what other people have to say about them. On the other hand, the argument from the impossibility of testimonial aesthetic understanding is just one possible solution to the puzzle of aesthetic testimony. We might simply need to look elsewhere to explain why testimonial aesthetic belief is problematic. Consider the idea that testimonial belief is counter-conducive to certain valuable features of an intellectual community of art critics (Hazlett 2017, pp. 59-4).²² In any event, I have argued that the puzzle of aesthetic testimony cannot be solved by appeal to the impossibility of testimonial understanding.²³

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²¹ Cf. Meskin 2004, Driver 2006, Robson 2014, 2015a, 2015b, McKinnon 2017.

²² For an alternative approach, see Whiting 2015.

²³ I presented this paper in 2015 at the American Society for Aesthetics Rocky Mountain Division Meeting in Santa Fe and in 2016 at a workshop on *Varieties of Understanding* at Fordham University (which was sponsored by a grant from the John Templeton Foundation); I owe thanks to my audiences on those occasions, and to Anne Baril and Wayne Riggs.

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