

The Glass is Half Empty:

A New Argument for Pessimism about Aesthetic Testimony

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Abstract

Call the view that it is possible to acquire aesthetic knowledge via testimony, optimism, and its denial, pessimism. In this paper, I offer a novel argument for pessimism. It works by turning attention away from the basis of the relevant belief, namely, testimony, and toward what that belief in turn provides a basis for, namely, other attitudes. In short, I argue that an aesthetic belief acquired via testimony cannot provide a rational basis for further attitudes, such as admiration, and that the best explanation for this is that the relevant belief is not itself rational. If a belief is not rational, it is not knowledge. So, optimism is false. After addressing a number of objections to the argument, I consider briefly its bearing on the debate concerning thick evaluative concepts. While the aim to argue that pessimism holds, not to explain why it holds, I provide an indication in closing of what that explanation might be.

1 Introduction

As I leave work, I meet someone entering the building. She tells me that it is raining. In response, I form the belief that it is raining. In this way, on the basis of *testimony*, I come to *know* that it is raining. The next day, as I leave work, I meet the same person. She tells me that Hockney's recent portraits are lifeless. In response, I form the belief that Hockney's recent portraits are lifeless. In this way, on the basis of testimony, might I come to know that the portraits are lifeless? It is clear that testimony can provide knowledge in cases like the

first, but can it do so in cases like the second? More generally, is testimony a source of *aesthetic* knowledge?

Call the view that one can acquire aesthetic knowledge via testimony, *optimism*, and its denial, *pessimism*.¹ As Robson says, ‘pessimism is more often assumed than argued for’.²

¹ This terminology is due to Robert Hopkins, ‘How to Be a Pessimist about Aesthetic Testimony’, *Journal of Philosophy* 108 (2011), 138-157. Hopkins draws a further distinction between *unavailability* pessimism – according to which aesthetic testimony does not make available (is not a source of) aesthetic knowledge – and *unusability* pessimism – according to which aesthetic testimony does make available aesthetic knowledge although it is improper to form a belief on its basis. Importantly, the norm according to which the relevant belief is improper is *aesthetic* rather than *epistemic*, and so its violation is not knowledge-undermining.

For optimism, see Malcolm Budd, ‘The Acquaintance Principle’, *BJA* 43 (2003), 386-392; Aaron Meskin, ‘Aesthetic Testimony’, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 69 (2004), 65-91; Nick Zangwill, ‘Two Dogmas of Kantian Aesthetics’, in Richard Woodfield (ed), *Proceedings of the 11th International Congress in Aesthetics* (Nottingham: Nottingham Polytechnic Press, 1990), 1-12.

For unavailability pessimism, see Robert Hopkins, ‘Beauty and Testimony’, in Anthony O’Hear (ed), *Philosophy, the Good, the True and the Beautiful* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 209-236; Alvin Goldman, ‘The Experiential Account of Aesthetic Value’, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 64 (2006), 333-342; Philip Pettit, ‘The Possibility of Aesthetic Realism’, in Eva Shaper (ed), *Pleasure, Preference and Value* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 17-38.

For unusability pessimism, see Keren Gorodeisky, ‘A New Look at Kant’s View of Aesthetic Testimony’, *BJA* 50 (2010), 53-70; Robert Hopkins, ‘How to Be a Pessimist about Aesthetic Testimony’. For critical discussion of unusability pessimism, see Jon Robson, ‘Aesthetic Testimony and the Norms of Belief Formation’, *European Journal of Philosophy* (forthcoming).

Pessimism is usually traced back to Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. J. C. Meredith (Oxford: OUP, 1952), §33. For discussion of Kant’s position, see Hopkins, ‘Beauty and Testimony’; Gorodeisky, ‘A New Look at Kant’s View of Aesthetic Testimony’.

In this paper, I argue for unavailability pessimism (hereafter, *pessimism*). I thereby argue against unusability pessimism, though for ease of presentation I will focus on the dispute with the optimist.

² Jon Robson, ‘Aesthetic Testimony’, *Philosophy Compass* 7 (2012), 3.

In this paper, I try to remedy this situation by developing a novel argument for pessimism, one which shifts attention away from the basis for the relevant belief, namely, testimony, and towards what that belief in turn provides the basis for, namely, other attitudes. Doing so, I suggest, allows us to resolve what can seem like an intractable dispute.³

2 Setting the Stage

Before introducing the argument, some stage-setting is in order. First, to keep things manageable, when discussing cases of aesthetic testimony I focus on those involving *evaluative*, as opposed to *deontic*, beliefs and claims. So, I do not discuss testimony about what aesthetic *reasons* there are for doing certain things – say, hanging the picture there – or about what one aesthetically *ought* to do – say, remove the stone-cladding. Moreover, I focus in the first instance on testimony involving only *thin* evaluative concepts – such as *beauty*, *ugliness*, *goodness* and *badness* – as opposed to *thick* concepts – such as *gracefulness*, *delightfulness* and *garishness*. Where the thin ends and the thick begins is a thorny issue, one I return to (§10).⁴

Second, I focus (until §9) on cases of *bare* aesthetic testimony, cases in which the testifier does no more than assert, say, *that the Shard is ugly*, without saying anything about

³ The argument might support pessimism about testimony as a source of evaluative knowledge more generally; that is, it might count against the idea that one can know that something possesses, say, moral value on the basis of testimony. I do not explore the wider consequences of the argument here – there is enough to be getting on with.

⁴ The view that beauty and ugliness are thin evaluative concepts is often implicit in work in aesthetics. For an explicit statement, see Nick Zangwill, ‘Moral Metaphor and Thick Concepts’, in Simon Kirchin (ed), *Thick Concepts* (Oxford: OUP, 2013), 197-209.

why it is ugly, in what *respects* it is ugly, what *features* it has which make it ugly, and so on.⁵

The claim that aesthetic knowledge is not possible due to bare testimony remains contentious and puzzling; after all, one can clearly gain knowledge concerning non-aesthetic matters via bare testimony. For example, one can acquire testimonial knowledge that it is raining, even if the testifier says nothing about why it is raining, in what way it is raining, and so on.

Third, I assume that aesthetic knowledge *is* possible. The claim I defend is only that it is not possible to acquire such knowledge thanks to testimony alone.

Fourth, I do not assume any particular theory of aesthetic discourse and its subject matter. The tendency will be to talk in a *realist* fashion – that is, to talk as if there are aesthetic properties which testimony concerns – but this is consistent with a host of meta-normative views. I am not tipping the balance in favour of pessimism by proceeding in this way; indeed, if some version of realism is true, if there really are aesthetic properties, one might expect testimony about when and where those properties are on display to be a straightforward matter.

Fifth, I do not discuss competing accounts of the nature of testimony or of how in general it provides knowledge. On some views, a subject acquires testimonial knowledge only if she lacks the belief that the testifier is untrustworthy, or the environment is friendly, or the testifier is reliable and authoritative, or.... When considering cases of testimony, I assume that whatever conditions need to be met for typical cases of non-aesthetic testimony to

⁵ In addition, I assume that the *recipient* of the testimony has no independent reason to believe or disbelieve the proposition in question, that the testimony is the only available grounds for belief. The recipient might have some idea of the kinds of features which, for example, make a building of the relevant sort ugly or beautiful but she is not in a position to know whether the building in question actually has or lacks those features.

succeed are met.⁶ Since the focus of my argument is downstream, it will not turn on any particular theory of testimony. I take this to be an advantage of the argument.

Sixth, I do not deny that when a person provides testimony concerning some aesthetic matter there is knowledge *of a sort* that her audience might acquire *in a fashion*. If Sophie's colleague tells her that the Shard is ugly, she might come to know *that her colleague believes that the Shard is ugly*. But here the knowledge is psychological, not aesthetic; it is also non-testimonial, since Sophie might have this knowledge while disbelieving the testimony. Alternatively, if Sophie's colleague tells her that the Shard is ugly, she might acquire knowledge *that the Shard is probably ugly*. It is not clear to me that such probabilistic knowledge is best thought of as aesthetic; be that as it may, I am not denying that it is possible. The claim is only that Sophie cannot come to know via bare testimony *that the Shard is ugly* (full stop). This remains contentious and puzzling; after all, it is clearly possible to come to know via bare testimony *that it is raining* (full stop), not just *that it is probably raining*.

3 Belief as a Basis

My argument against optimism takes off from the familiar thought that belief provides a basis for actions and other attitudes. (For simplicity's sake, I focus on attitudes in what follows.) If Elliot believes that it is snowing in Michigan and that he lives in Michigan, he might on those grounds believe that it is snowing where he lives. Similarly, if Holly believes that it is snowing where she lives, she might on that basis decide to put on warm clothes. Again, if Stanley believes that a rabid dog is behind the door, he might for that reason fear opening it.

⁶ For critical discussion of the suggestion that the conditions which have to be met for testimony to provide knowledge concerning non-aesthetic matters are not met in the aesthetic case, see Hopkins, 'Beauty and Testimony'; Pettit, 'The Possibility of Aesthetic Realism'.

Finally, if Hayley believes that Kelly ran a marathon in under three hours, she might on that basis admire Kelly.

Of course, the examples are underdescribed, but it should be uncontroversial that one's beliefs constitute a basis for further cognitive, conative, and affective attitudes.⁷

Belief plays this role in two ways – one causal, the other normative. First, belief *motivates* certain attitudes. The thought that a rabid dog is behind the door is what leads Stanley to fear opening it.

Second, what a subject believes *rationalizes* certain attitudes. Given his belief that a rabid dog is behind the door, Stanley's fear is rational.

What does it take for a belief to rationalize an attitude? That is a large and thorny issue which I cannot resolve here. Nonetheless, I will say a few things so as to put some flesh on the proposal, all of which are supposed to be relatively uncontroversial and commonplace in the literature. Later I address concerns one might have about it (§8).⁸

A subject's attitude is rational to the extent that, in light of what she believes, her attitude is right, or appropriate, or fitting, or correct, etc.⁹ Relative to his belief that there is a rabid dog behind the door, Stanley's fear of opening it is fitting; hence, it is rational. Were he to believe instead that there is a gentle puppy behind the door, Stanley's fear would not be fitting; hence, it would not be rational.

Whether a belief rationalizes an attitude depends on what else the subject believes. Stanley's belief that there is a rabid dog behind the door does not make it rational for him to

⁷ The claim is not that belief is the *only* basis for attitudes but that it is *a* basis for attitudes and, in some cases, *the* basis. This is consistent with the claim that in other cases something else – for example, perception – might figure in or provide that basis.

⁸ In closing (§11), I introduce a more substantive – hence, more controversial – proposal for how beliefs rationalize further attitudes but, as I make clear there, the arguments to follow do not depend on it.

⁹ Relative, if you like, to her goals or desires.

fear opening it if he also believes that the dog is caged or sedated. When claiming that a subject's belief makes it rational for her to have a certain attitude, I assume that beliefs which would outweigh or undercut the rationality of having that attitude are absent.

Moreover, a belief does not make it rational to have a certain attitude unless that belief is itself rational. If Stanley's belief that there is a rabid dog behind the door is a result of crazed conviction or held in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary, it does not make it rational for him to fear opening it. In a slogan: irrationality cannot beget rationality.

To summarize, a subject's belief makes it rational to hold some attitude only if the attitude is fitting (right, proper, etc.) relative to that belief, she has no further beliefs which defeat the rationality of holding that attitude, and the relevant belief is itself rational. One might think that these conditions are sufficient as well as necessary for the belief to rationalize the attitude it motivates but the argument to follow does not rest on this (cf. §6). No doubt these conditions could be spelled out more fully but, again, my aim is not to offer a detailed analysis of rationality but to introduce the materials needed for the case against optimism.

4 Against Optimism

As stressed, the above remarks on belief's role in motivating and rationalizing attitudes are intended as uncontroversial and familiar. I now bring them to bear on the issue at hand.

In general, beliefs acquired from bare testimony can motivate and rationalize further attitudes. Suppose that Holly turns on the radio to hear that it is snowing. She thereby comes to believe that it is snowing, which moves her to decide to put on warm clothes. This decision seems rational, which suggests that the belief on which it is based, a result of testimony, is also rational. Suppose that a neighbour tells Stanley that there is a rabid dog behind the door. He thereby comes to believe that there is a rabid dog behind the door, which in turn moves

him to fear opening it. This fear seems rational, which suggests that the belief on which it is based, a result of testimony, is also rational. Finally, suppose that Dave phones Hayley to tell her that Kelly ran a marathon in under three hours. She thereby comes to believe that Kelly ran a marathon, which in turn moves her to admire Kelly. Hayley's admiration seems rational, which suggests that the belief on which it is based, due to testimony, is also rational.¹⁰

The situation is different when one turns to beliefs about aesthetic matters. Suppose that a friend tells Harry that Rembrandt's *Abraham's Sacrifice* (1635) is good. As a result, Harry comes to believe that the painting is good, which moves him to admire it. In this case, it does not seem rational for Harry to admire the Rembrandt, which suggests that the belief on which it is based, a result of testimony, is not rational. If a belief is not rational, it is not knowledge. Hence, the belief Harry acquires via aesthetic testimony falls short of knowledge.¹¹

Admittedly, I appeal to (so-called) intuition when suggesting that Harry's admiration for the painting is not rational, in contrast to Hayley's admiration for Kelly. But experience suggests that this intuition is shared much more widely than the intuition that subjects cannot acquire aesthetic knowledge via testimony. So, at the very least it provides a neutral starting-point or some common ground from which the argument can proceed.

To bolster the intuition, suppose that you learn that Harry admires the Rembrandt. You ask him why. He tells you that he admires it because the painting is good. You ask Harry

¹⁰ Since the testimony in each case is bare, Stanley is not told why the dog is rabid, in virtue of what it is rabid, etc., while Hayley is not told in what way Kelly ran the marathon, what made it the case that she did so, etc.

¹¹ One might agree that Harry's admiration in the above case is in some way inappropriate, unfitting, or improper, but not want to say that it is thereby *irrational*. Fortunately, all the argument requires is the thought that Harry's admiration is improper (etc.). It seems to me that 'irrationality' is the right term of criticism to apply in this case but nothing substantive turns on this. I return to this in §8.

why he thinks this. He tells you that he thinks this because his friend told him that it is good. You persevere and ask in what respects the painting is good. Harry admits he has no idea. Surely, you would doubt that Harry's admiration has an adequate basis, that it is rational.

The claim here is not that, for his admiration to be rational, Harry must be able to articulate the features in virtue of which the painting is good. Often, we are not in a position to do this (without the help of, say, a critic). But where the subject is unable to make such things explicit there are typically things she can say, such as 'You just have to see it!' or 'That is good!' (directing our attention to a feature of the painting). Evidently, these are not things one can say in cases where admiration is grounded in bare testimony.

Note how the case just described differs from cases of admiration based on non-aesthetic testimony. Suppose that you learn that Hayley admires Kelly. You ask her why. She tells you that Kelly ran a marathon. You ask Hayley why she thinks this. She tells you that she believes it because Dave told her as much. You might be satisfied with this reply. You need not doubt that Hayley's admiration is rational.

Compare also a case in which Harry acquires the belief that *Abraham's Sacrifice* is good in some other way than from bare testimony. Suppose that Harry sees the painting and notices the playing-card-like structure in which the grey, worn face of Abraham and his heavy hands are mirrored by the angel's smooth, flushed face and weightless hands, that Harry follows the sweeping line from the angel's billowing sleeve along the curved blade of the knife – seemingly frozen in mid-air – to the radiant skin of Isaac's neck, and so on. As a result of what he sees, Harry believes that the painting is good.¹² This moves him to admire

¹² The claim here is that perceptual acquaintance with the object can provide rational support for an aesthetic belief, not that aesthetic beliefs are *only* rational when acquired on the basis of such acquaintance.

the work.¹³ In this case, the admiration seems rational, which suggests that the belief on which it is based, acquired in a non-testimonial fashion, is also rational. If it is rational, it is a candidate for knowledge.

The claim that an affective attitude based on an aesthetic belief due to bare testimony is not rational does not turn on the particular example. Suppose that a colleague tells Sophie that the Shard is ugly. As a result, she comes to believe that it is ugly, which in turn moves her to disapprove of the building. It does not seem rational for Sophie to feel disapproval toward the Shard, which suggests that the belief on which it is based, a result of testimony, is not rational. If a belief is not rational, it is not knowledge. Hence, the aesthetic belief Sophie acquires via testimony falls short of knowledge.

Suppose that Mike's cousin tells him that a certain performance of Bach's *Air on the G String* is beautiful. As a result, Mike comes to believe that the performance is beautiful, which moves him to feel esteem toward the performance. It does not seem rational for Mike to esteem the performance, which suggests that the belief on which it is based, a result of testimony, is not rational. If a belief is not rational, it is not knowledge. Hence, the aesthetic belief Mike acquires via testimony falls short of knowledge.¹⁴

Insofar as there is nothing special about the examples, one can generalize from them. An affect based on an aesthetic belief based on bare testimony is not rational. Hence, an aesthetic belief based on bare testimony is not rational. Hence, an aesthetic belief based on bare testimony does not qualify as knowledge.

¹³ I am not suggesting that Harry's admiration *must* be based on his non-testimonial belief that the painting is good – it might be based directly on what he perceives, or on his beliefs about the features of the painting in virtue of which it is good.

¹⁴ As these examples reveal, I do not assume that beliefs acquired due to aesthetic testimony give rise to a distinctive *aesthetic* attitude characterized, perhaps, by a peculiar form of disinterest. I consider only cases involving common-or-garden affects.

This is a stronger conclusion than one might have expected. The claim is not merely that testimony is not a source of aesthetic knowledge but that it is not even a source of rational aesthetic belief. Optimism must be false.

5 Alternative Explanations

I claimed that a belief rationalizes an attitude only if it is rational. Next, I claimed that aesthetic beliefs due to bare testimony do not rationalize certain attitudes. I concluded that those beliefs are not rational. Am I committing the fallacy of denying the antecedent?

No. The argument is intended as one to the best explanation. In that case, however, one might wonder whether a better explanation is available for why the relevant beliefs fail to rationalize the associated attitudes.

A rational belief might not rationalize an attitude if certain other beliefs are present which defeat the rationality of having that attitude. But I have stipulated that, in the above cases, such further beliefs are absent.

If a belief is rational, it does not follow that it rationalizes all and any attitudes. A rational belief that there is a gentle puppy behind a door does not rationalize fear of opening it. What is believed must stand in a suitable (rationalizing) relationship to the relevant attitudes. Perhaps the aesthetic beliefs acquired via bare testimony are rational but do not stand in the relevant relationship to the attitudes in question.

As it happens, I think that there is something to this thought. But, as stated, it is extremely puzzling. What could stand in a better rationalizing relation to admiration than the belief that something is good? If, as Harry believes, the Rembrandt is good, admiration is surely fitting (right, appropriate, etc.). So, if there is a reason why this belief fails to rationalize admiration, it is hard to see how it could be that its content does not bear in the relevant way on the attitude it motivates.

I will return to the above thought in closing (§11) and suggest that, rather than undermining the argument, it actually supports it by contributing to an explanation for why the pessimistic conclusion holds.

One might be tempted to seek an explanation for why affective attitudes based only on aesthetic beliefs due to testimony are not rational in constraints governing the affects. Perhaps an affective attitude is rational only if the subject has first-hand experience (broadly construed) of the object of that attitude. Since, in the original case, Harry has not seen *Abraham's Sacrifice* for himself, his admiration is not rational. The problem does not lie with Harry's belief that the painting is good – which might be rational, and thus knowledge – but is peculiar to the admiration it gives rise to.

The principle that an affect is rational only if a subject has experience of its object does not seem to hold generally. If Stanley is told that a rabid dog is behind the door, he might come to believe this and, on that basis alone, fear what lies behind the door. This fear might be rational, even though Stanley has not experienced the dog for himself. Likewise, if Hayley is told that Kelly ran a marathon, she might come to believe this and, on that basis alone, admire Kelly in this regard. This admiration might be rational, even though Hayley did not see, hear, or otherwise perceive Kelly's performance.

That said, for the purposes of this paper, I can accept the proposed principle of acquaintance. If it holds, one would expect it to apply to aesthetic beliefs too, not just the affects they cause. After all, if it is rational for Harry to believe that the Rembrandt is good despite not having experienced it, it is hard to see why it would not be equally rational for him to admire it. Conversely, if it is irrational to admire the painting, having not seen it, it would be surprising if it were not also irrational to think well of it.

The point here is that it is highly implausible to suggest that a requirement of first-hand experience governs the affects but not the corresponding beliefs.¹⁵ And, if a version of that requirement applies to aesthetic beliefs, pessimism follows.¹⁶

One might suggest that, even if a subject holds an attitude on the basis of a rational belief, she has no defeating beliefs, and the content of her belief stands in a suitable (rationalizing) relation to the relevant attitude, her belief might still fail to rationalize her attitude, since it fails to satisfy further conditions. What might those conditions be?

Some claim that what one believes provides a rational basis for an act or attitude only if one *knows* what one believes.¹⁷ Clearly, this provides no support to optimism. Some deny that knowledge, hence rational belief, is always a rational basis for a corresponding act or attitude – in some cases only *certain knowledge* will do. This is plausible in ‘high-stakes’ cases like the following. Katy’s children have been kidnapped and she needs to secure the ransom money within an hour. She knows that a certain bank is open. But it would be irrational for her to decide to go to the bank on the basis of that belief until she has *made sure* that it is (by phoning, checking online, and so on).¹⁸

So, if it is irrational for Harry to disapprove of the Rembrandt on the basis of his testimonial belief, it might not follow that his belief falls short of knowledge – perhaps it falls short of *certainty*. Since the optimist claims only that testimony can deliver aesthetic knowledge, not certainty, such a case is not a counterexample to the view.

¹⁵ This is especially counterintuitive if, as many hold, the claim that something is good *is* or *entails* the claim that there are reasons to adopt a favourable attitude (such as admiration) toward it. I return to this idea in closing (§11).

¹⁶ Cf. Budd, ‘The Acquaintance Principle’.

¹⁷ John Hawthorne and Jason Stanley ‘Knowledge and Action’, *Journal of Philosophy* 105 (2008), 571-590.

¹⁸ Cf. Jessica Brown, ‘Subject-Sensitive Invariantism and the Knowledge Norm for Practical Reasoning’, *Noûs* 42 (2008), 167-189.

While one might accept that it is sometimes irrational to hold an attitude on the basis of less than certain knowledge, it is surely sometimes, indeed often, rational to do so. If Holly knows that it is snowing and the stakes are low, it is rational for her to decide to put on warm clothes whether or not she is certain of the weather. In contrast, it is *never* rational for Harry to admire the Rembrandt on the basis of a belief that it is good acquired through bare testimony, even when the stakes are low. Indeed, I can simply stipulate that in the cases I discuss little to nothing is at stake.

I cannot promise to have considered all possible alternative explanations to the one I have offered for why beliefs acquired due to bare aesthetic testimony fail to rationalize affective attitudes. But I do think I have addressed the foremost contenders, as well as the prominent positions in the literature, and it is not obvious what options, if any, remain. In the absence of an alternative, the best explanation remains that the belief in question is not rational.

I turn now from the search for competing explanations to challenges of a different sort to my argument for pessimism.

6 Conative Attitudes

One might object to the case against optimism on the grounds that it rests on a one-sided diet of examples. An aesthetic belief acquired via bare testimony might not rationalize admiration and the like – *affective* attitudes – but it might rationalize desire and the like – *conative* attitudes. If a friend tells Harry that the Rembrandt is good, this might lead him to want to see it. This attitude seems rational. Hence, the belief acquired via testimony motivating the attitude must be rational.

I deny this. If a subject really holds a conative attitude on the basis of a belief acquired due to bare testimony (alone), her attitude is not rational. This might seem crazy –

surely we frequently want to see things on the basis of reports we receive and are rational for doing so. Indeed, one might ask, isn't one of the main points of reading reviews of artworks to inform our desires about what to watch (or listen to, etc.)?

It is important to stress that to deny that it is rational for a subject like Harry in the above case to desire to see the painting is *not* to deny that there are cases in which it *is* rational to form a conative attitude in response to, say, reading a review. Consider a revised case in which what motivates and rationalizes Harry's desire is not a belief *that the painting is good* but a belief *that his friend thinks that the painting is good*. Such a non-aesthetic, psychological belief might be rational but, as noted (§2), that is not to concede that the testimony-based, aesthetic belief is rational. Or consider a case in which what motivates and rationalizes Harry's desire is a belief *that the painting is probably good*. Such a (probabilistic) belief might be rational but, as noted (§2), that is not to concede that its non-probabilistic counterpart is rational.

In a similar fashion, when a person (in real life) decides to watch *Harold and Maude* having read a favourable review in *Sight and Sound*, I venture that the operative belief has psychological or probabilistic content, not non-probabilistic aesthetic content.¹⁹ After all, when a person is asked why she wants to see a film she has read about, a typical response is, 'Because it's supposed to be good' or 'Because *Sight and Sound* says that it's good', not simply, 'Because it's good'. It might seem I am indulging in armchair psychological speculation. But the present point does not depend on it. What matters is that, in cases of bare testimony, there are other attitudes available to motivate a subject to hold a conative attitude

¹⁹ It is worth noting that typically reviews do not just state that a work is good (or bad); they provide information about the features of the work that make it good (or bad). In that case, they do not provide *bare* testimony.

than a (non-probabilistic) aesthetic belief and, if the attitude is held on that basis, nothing I have said here implies that it is irrational.²⁰

So, to claim that it is not rational for Harry to desire to see the Rembrandt on the basis of a belief that it is good acquired via bare testimony alone is *not* to suggest that it is impossible for a conative attitude held in some other way as a result of testimony to be rational, let alone to cast aspersions on our everyday habits of consuming reviews. However, I have not yet said anything in support of the relevant claim. I find it simply intuitive that a desire to see a work grounded *only* in a belief that it is good grounded *only* in bare testimony is not rational. But, if that intuition is not shared by or as strong in others, consider the following.

Suppose that an aesthetic belief acquired via bare testimony *can* rationalize a conative attitude. In that case, the aesthetic belief must itself be rational. In that case, in turn, it should be capable of rationalizing further attitudes, including affects. But, as shown above, it is not so capable.

To bolster this line of thought, note that it seems generally to be the case that, if a belief can provide rational support for one kind of attitude, it can provide rational support for another kind of attitude. Stanley's belief that there is a rabid dog behind the door can rationalize his fear of opening it *and* a corresponding desire not to do so. Hayley's belief that Kelly ran a marathon can rationalize her admiration for Kelly *and* a corresponding desire to congratulate her.

This is reflected in the use we make of our beliefs in deliberation. When reasoning, we do not 'segregate' our beliefs into those which support theoretical conclusions, those which support practical conclusions, those which support affective responses, and so on. If Stanley believes that a rabid dog is behind the door, it would be very odd (to say the least) for

²⁰ For a similar point, from an optimist, see Meskin, 'Aesthetic Testimony', 71-72.

him to treat this as a premise in his reasoning as to whether to decide to open it, but then to put the thought to one side when thinking about whether his fear of doing so has any basis. This accords with the idea that the kinds of considerations which can rationalize one kind of attitude, say, conative, are the very same considerations which can rationalize another kind of attitude, say, affective.²¹

To pursue the issue further, suppose that Harry's testimonial belief that the Rembrandt is good makes it rational for him to want to see it but *not* to admire it. What could explain this? Perhaps Harry has beliefs which defeat the rationality of admiring the painting but not the desire to see it. But I stipulated that he has no such beliefs. Perhaps the belief stands in the rationalizing relation to the desire but not to the affect. But, as seen above, it is hard to see how that relation could fail to hold between his belief and his admiration for it. Perhaps there is more at stake for Harry in admiring the painting than in desiring to see it. But I stipulated that the stakes are low. So, assuming Harry's belief makes rational his desire, I am at a loss to see what prevents it from making rational his admiration. Since it does not rationalize his admiration, we should reject the assumption that it rationalizes his desire.²²

²¹ Jeremy Fantl and Matthew McGrath develop a 'segregation' argument along these lines, though in a different context and in support of a different point, in *Knowledge in an Uncertain World* (Oxford: OUP, 2009), 73ff.

²² Suppose that Harry is told that Rembrandt's paintings are good. One might think that it is rational for him on that basis to admire Rembrandt (as opposed to his works). But if the belief that Rembrandt's paintings are good is not rational, as I claim, it cannot rationalize admiration for Rembrandt.

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, I deny that it is rational for Harry to admire Rembrandt on the basis of a bare aesthetic belief acquired due to such testimony (alone). To support this, I could rehearse the arguments from this section. For example, if the belief that Rembrandt's paintings are good rationalizes one attitude, namely, admiration for Rembrandt, it must be capable of rationalizing another, namely, admiration for his paintings. Moreover, for all I say here, there might be other beliefs acquired in response to the testimony which could rationalize admiration of Rembrandt, for example, the belief that the critics think that his paintings are good, or that he won them over.

7 Impossible Attitudes

One might argue that it is *impossible* to hold an affective attitude toward something on the basis of a belief acquired via bare aesthetic testimony alone.²³ If it is impossible to have such an attitude on such a basis, it is impossible for an attitude held on that basis to be irrational or otherwise. Hence, the argument against optimism is unsuccessful.

Why think that it is impossible to feel admiration for a painting on the basis of bare testimony? One might suggest that it is in the nature of such an attitude to be directed toward *features* of the work. Alternatively, the *object* of favour is the work's properties. Since bare testimony does not convey information about the work's features or properties, it is impossible to have that attitude on its basis.

But surely goodness is a property of a work. In that case, bare testimony *does* make it possible to have the relevant attitude.

In response, the proponent of this objection might insist that an affect like admiration is directed, not at the goodness of the painting as such, but at the particular *way* in which it is good. Since bare testimony provides no information about the way in which the work is good, it does not provide admiration with its object. Hence, it is impossible to admire a work on the basis of a belief acquired due to bare testimony.

Suppose, however, that Harry's friend tells him that there is a particular way in which the Rembrandt is good. Harry might come to believe that the painting is good in *that way*, that is, in the way his friend refers to. In that case, it should be possible for Harry to admire

Analogous points apply to the suggestion that, though a belief like Harry's cannot rationalize affective or conative attitudes, it can rationalize further *cognitive* attitudes.

²³ Cf. 'Attitudes and reactions linked to appreciation – liking or disliking, admiration, contempt, revulsion, and so on – are denied to you [in testimonial cases]: you cannot like a work's gracefulness if you are unacquainted with the work' (Budd, 'The Acquaintance Principle', 392).

the work, where his admiration is directed toward *that* way in which the work is good. Still, such admiration would not be rational. Hence, the belief on which it is based, due to bare testimony, is not rational either.

Moreover, it is false that affects in general are directed, not at something's features, aesthetic or otherwise, but at ways in which it manifests those features. If Stanley is told (only) that a certain dog is rabid, he might come to believe that it is rabid and, on that basis, fear the dog's rabidity. This seems possible, even though he knows nothing about the particular way in which the dog is rabid.

Alternatively, the person claiming that it is impossible to have an affective attitude on the basis of a belief acquired due to bare testimony might insist that an attitude of admiration is directed, not toward goodness or any other aesthetic feature, but toward the non-aesthetic features of the work in virtue of which it is good. Alternatively, the object of admiration is the work's non-aesthetic properties. Since bare testimony does not provide information about such properties, it is not possible to have the relevant attitude on its basis.

This is a controversial claim. The onus is on the proponent of the objection to provide some evidence in its support. Certainly appearances do not support it. It is perfectly legitimate to talk of admiring the beauty of a performance, of approving of how good a painting is, and so on.

Moreover, if the claim has any plausibility with respect to the affective attitudes, it has none whatsoever with respect to the conative attitudes. It is confused to suggest that the object of desire must be, or could be, the features of the work in virtue of which it is good – it is not even clear what it would mean to say that Harry wants the painting's sweeping lines. What Harry might want is *to see* the painting or *to examine* its sweeping lines. Since an attitude like this is not directed toward a work's features, that is, since it does not take those

features as its object, the fact that bare testimony provides no information about a work's non-aesthetic features does not prevent a subject from forming such an attitude on its basis.

So, there is little reason yet to think it impossible to be moved to an affective attitude by a belief acquired through bare aesthetic testimony, and none at all to think it impossible to be moved to a conative attitude in this way. Thus, there is no reason yet to take the objection to the argument seriously.

8 Rationality

Throughout I have made claims about the rationality of attitudes and the beliefs on which they are based. I suggested earlier that whether an attitude based on a belief is rational depends in part on whether that attitude is right (fitting, appropriate, etc.) in light of that belief. This might seem okay if one understands rationality in something like the following way:

When we call some act [or attitude] 'rational', using this word in its ordinary, non-technical sense, we express the kind of praise or approval that we can also express with words like 'sensible', 'reasonable', 'intelligent', and 'smart'. We use the word 'irrational' to express the kind of criticism that we express with words like 'senseless', 'stupid', 'idiotic', and 'crazy'.²⁴

If Stanley believes that a gentle puppy is behind the door, it is stupid (senseless, etc.) for him to fear opening it.

Not everyone accepts this conception of rationality. Some suggest that it is rational for a person to have an attitude just in case it is consistent with other attitudes she holds or with her beliefs about the attitudes she ought to have.²⁵ In view of this, one might worry that my argument turns on a controversial conception of rationality.

²⁴ Derek Parfit, *On What Matters: Volume I* (Oxford: OUP, 2011), 33.

²⁵ Cf. John Broome, *Rationality Through Reasoning* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013); T. M. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

The debate over what makes an attitude rational is not one I can resolve in this paper. Fortunately, for present purposes, I do not need to do so. The argument could be run without talking in terms of rationality at all but only in terms of when it is sensible (reasonable, etc.) or otherwise to hold a certain an attitude. It is silly (senseless, etc.) for Harry to admire the Rembrandt on the basis of a belief acquired due to bare aesthetic testimony. This suggests that it is silly for him to have that belief. And one cannot know that p if it is silly to believe that p .

So, while I am sympathetic to the above conception of rationality, the argument against optimism does not depend on it. Having made this point, I revert to talk of rationality.

9 Baring All

I suggested that an aesthetic belief due to bare testimony cannot rationalize affective or conative attitudes and that the best explanation of this is that the belief is not rational. If it is not rational, it is not knowledge. So, aesthetic knowledge due to bare testimony is not possible.

I focused on a narrow range of cases in support of this argument, cases of bare testimony. One might wonder, then, if the problem lies not so much with the testimony as with its bareness. Perhaps a bare aesthetic belief that a Rembrandt is good, whether acquired via testimony or in some other way, cannot rationalize admiration for that work. In that case, one might think, arguments parallel to those I gave above would suggest that that belief is not itself rational, hence, not a candidate for knowledge. More generally, perhaps bare aesthetic knowledge is simply not possible, and focusing on the particular case of testimony serves merely to bring this to light.

If that is right, and I allow that it is, it is grist to the mill. After all, if bare aesthetic knowledge is not possible, it follows immediately that bare aesthetic testimony cannot provide it.²⁶

It is important to note, however, that to allow that the belief that a Rembrandt is good cannot rationalize admiration for it when *bare* is *not* to allow that that belief cannot rationalize admiration when *clothed*, that is, when accompanied by further non-aesthetic beliefs about the respects in which the painting is good, or about the features which realize its goodness, and so on.²⁷

If no belief that a painting is good can rationalize admiration for it, whether bare or clothed, arguments parallel to those I gave above might suggest that no such belief can amount to knowledge! While this claim is consistent with my argument – and, of course, provides a straightforward explanation for why testimony is not a source of aesthetic knowledge – it is not one I want to endorse (cf. §2).

Fortunately, I do not have to do so. While the argument of this paper does not depend on it, there is a story to tell, one which is consistent with what I say above, for how the belief that a Rembrandt is good might, when clothed, rationalize admiration for the painting, hence, for how such a belief might be a candidate for knowledge.

As noted earlier (§3), whether a subject's belief rationalizes further attitudes depends on what else she believes. Suppose that Stanley fears opening the door on the basis of his belief that a gentle puppy is behind it. Considered on its own, the belief might seem not to rationalize the fear. But suppose that Stanley also believes that the puppy's rabid companion

²⁶ In closing (§11), I will introduce some ideas which bolster this point.

²⁷ Or when it is accompanied by perceptual experiences (as) of the respects in which the painting is good or the features which realize its goodness. Compare the revised case in §4 in which Harry's perceptually-based belief that the Rembrandt is good rationalizes his admiration for it.

invariably accompanies it. Given this additional background belief, Stanley's belief that a gentle puppy is behind the door might rationalize the fear it gives rise to.²⁸ Likewise, suppose that Harry admires *Abraham's Sacrifice* on the basis of his belief that it is good. Considered on its own, the belief might seem not to rationalize his admiration. But suppose that Harry also has beliefs about the non-aesthetic features of the work which make it good, or the respects in which it is good. Given such additional background beliefs, Harry's belief that the Rembrandt is good might rationalize the admiration it gives rise to. Hence, the arguments above allow that, when accompanied or clothed in this way, the belief that a painting is good might itself be rational and (so) knowledge.

In light of the above, it is worth asking whether testimony could be a source of aesthetic knowledge when it is *not* bare. Suppose that, in addition to or instead of claiming that *Abraham's Sacrifice* is good, Harry's friend conveys information about the features in virtue of which it is good, about the respects in which it is good, and so on. Might Harry come to know, on that basis, that the painting is good?

Perhaps knowledge of some of these features can only be conveyed via the use of perceptually-based demonstratives. That would depend on the individual case. Otherwise, I see no reason to deny that testimony of this sort might provide knowledge of a sort in a fashion. But note that it does so by providing *non-aesthetic* knowledge, specifically, knowledge of the non-aesthetic properties in virtue of which something possesses aesthetic properties. If the testimony in question is not bare, by the same token it is not really, or not merely, aesthetic. So, to grant that such testimony provides knowledge is not to concede

²⁸ Instead of saying that, given the background belief, Stanley's belief that a gentle puppy is behind the door rationalizes his fear, one might prefer to say that it is the set containing both beliefs which rationalizes his fear. This makes no difference to what follows.

ground to the optimist. It is not in dispute that testimony can be a source of non-aesthetic knowledge, which might in turn deliver aesthetic knowledge.

10 In the Thick of It

Suppose that we lift the restriction to testimony involving only *thin* evaluative concepts, such as beauty and goodness, and consider cases in which the testifier makes a claim involving a *thick* concept, such as that Wim Wenders' *Paris, Texas* is cool, that Southampton architecture is brutal, that the Shostakovich jazz suites are delightful, and so on. As noted above, what, if anything, makes for a thick concept is a controversial matter, which I cannot adequately address here.²⁹ Nonetheless, I will offer some remarks about the bearing of my argument on the debate concerning thick concepts.

Consider an aesthetic analogue of a Hare-style analysis of thick moral concepts.³⁰ According to it, a thick concept involves a purely descriptive component and a separable thin evaluative component. On this view, to say that something is delightful is to say that it possesses such-and-such descriptive properties and is good (or beautiful) for doing so. If an analysis of thick concepts of this form is correct, aesthetic testimony involving a claim in which a thick concept figures is not really bare. The testifier not only claims of the work that it is good but in addition conveys information about the non-aesthetic properties it possesses which make it good. Hence, it is consistent with my argument that, in such cases, the hearer might acquire testimonial knowledge that a work is delightful. Once again, to admit this is not to concede ground to the optimist. It is not in dispute that testimony can be a source of non-aesthetic knowledge, which might in turn deliver aesthetic knowledge.

²⁹ For an overview of the debate, see Debbie Roberts, 'Thick Concepts', *Philosophy Compass* 8 (2013), 677-688.

³⁰ See R. M. Hare, *Freedom and Reason* (Oxford: OUP, 1963).

Interestingly, however, the considerations I appealed to in arguing against optimism with respect to cases of testimony involving thin concepts appear equally to show that one cannot acquire knowledge via testimony involving (some) thick concepts. Suppose that Alex's friend tells her that a Shostakovich jazz suite is delightful. As a result, Alex comes to believe that the piece is delightful. This moves her to feel delight toward the jazz suite. In this case, it does not seem rational for Alex to be delighted, which suggests that the belief on which her attitude is based, a result of testimony, is not rational. If a belief is not rational, it is not knowledge. Hence, the belief Alex acquires via aesthetic testimony falls short of knowledge.

Suppose that Dave tells Kelly that a Haneke film is shocking. As a result, Kelly comes to believe that the film is shocking. This moves her to feel shock toward the film. In this case, it does not seem rational for Kelly to feel shock, which suggests that the belief on which her attitude is based, a result of testimony, is not rational. If a belief is not rational, it is not knowledge. Hence, the belief Kelly acquires via aesthetic testimony falls short of knowledge.

In support and defence of these lines of thought, one can rehearse the points made in previous sections.

So, my argument against optimism, if successful, seems also to cast doubt on a Hare-style analysis of thick concepts. Of course, there are more sophisticated analyses of thick concepts in non-evaluative and thin terms available. It is not my aim here to assess all such alternatives, or compare them critically with views according to which thick concepts are wholly evaluative or wholly non-evaluative. My aim has only been to indicate how my argument against optimism might bear on the debate concerning those views.

11 Concluding Remarks

At the outset, I suggested that we can settle the dispute between optimists and pessimists concerning aesthetic testimony by turning attention away from the basis for the belief in question – testimony – and toward what that belief might provide a basis for – other attitudes. This led to an argument against optimism, according to which the fact that an aesthetic belief due to bare testimony cannot make it rational to have an affective or conative attitude shows that the belief falls short of knowledge, indeed, that it is not rational.

It would be interesting and worthwhile to explore *why* aesthetic knowledge is not possible due to testimony of the sort I have considered. Since one can acquire testimonial knowledge about meteorological matters, what could explain the fact that one cannot acquire testimonial knowledge about aesthetic matters? While it is beyond the scope of this paper to provide, let alone defend, a full answer to this question, I will close by indicating what I think such an explanation might look like. It would be easier to accept the pessimist conclusion, one might think, if one had some idea of how it could be true.³¹

To start with, consider a suggestion from Scanlon:

Being valuable is not a property that provides us with reasons. Rather, to call something valuable is to say that it has other properties that provide reasons for behaving in certain ways with regard to it.³²

Applied to the aesthetic domain, the suggestion is that to claim or believe that an object is good or beautiful is to claim or believe that that there *is* a reason for, say, admiring it but,

³¹ I am grateful to an anonymous referee for this journal for urging me to address this point.

³² Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, 96. Scanlon's suggestion is associated with the so-called *buck-passing* analysis of value, according to which the evaluative can be analysed in terms of the deontic, specifically, in terms of reasons for affective attitudes. The explanation to follow is not committed to such an analysis; it requires only the claim that facts about value are not reasons for attitudes but rather entail the existence of such reasons. An opponent of buck-passing could accept this.

importantly, it is not to make a claim or have a belief about *what* that reason is, or about the features which provide it.

Next, consider a suggestion from Parfit:

We are rational insofar as we respond well to reasons, or apparent reasons. We have some *apparent* reason when we have beliefs about the relevant facts whose truth would give us some reason.³³

Applied to the aesthetic domain, the suggestion is that what one believes makes it rational for one to admire an object, say, just in case what one believes would be (or provide) a reason for admiring it were it to be true.

Finally, consider the suggestion that, if it is to some degree rational to believe that there is a reason for you to hold some attitude, it is to some degree rational to hold that attitude.³⁴ Applied to the aesthetic domain, the suggestion is that, if it is in no way reasonable (sensible, smart, etc.) to admire an object, it cannot be in any way reasonable (etc.) to think that there is a reason to admire it. After all, whatever would make the belief reasonable would surely make the corresponding attitude to some degree reasonable.

Needless to say, each of the suggestions above requires further discussion and defence. My aim here is only to show that, if true, they together explain why bare testimony

³³ Parfit, *On What Matters*, 5. I consider in detail and defend a version of this proposal in ‘Keep Things in Perspective: Reasons, Rationality, and the A Priori’, *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* 8 (2014), 1-22.

³⁴ Many philosophers make the related claim that if it is to rational (overall) for you to believe that there is *conclusive* reason for you to ϕ , or to believe that you ought to ϕ , it is to rational (overall) for you to ϕ . See, for example, John Brunero, ‘The Scope of Rational Requirements’, *Philosophical Quarterly* 60 (2010), 28-49; John Gibbons, ‘You Gotta Do What You Gotta Do’, *Noûs* 43 (2009), 157-177; and Jonathan Way, *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* (2009), 1-8.

is not a source of aesthetic knowledge.³⁵ Importantly, the above argument for pessimism is independent of that explanation – they do not stand or fall together.

Suppose that Harry's friend tells him (only) that the Rembrandt is good and Harry comes as a result to believe (only) that it is good. According to the Scanlon-inspired suggestion, this is to believe that there *is* a reason for admiring the Rembrandt. Were what Harry believes true, it would not on its own *be* (or provide) such a reason. So, according to the Parfit-inspired suggestion, what Harry believes does not on its own make it rational for him to admire the Rembrandt. And, according to the final suggestion, if Harry's belief does not on its own make it (at all) rational for him to admire the painting, his testimonially-acquired belief is not itself rational. Hence, that belief is not knowledge.

The proposal, then, is that the explanation for why bare testimony cannot deliver aesthetic knowledge is to be found by reflecting, not on the nature of testimony, but on connections between values, reasons, and rationality.

While each of the ideas introduced above is independently plausible, spelling out those ideas and how together they add up to an explanation for an otherwise puzzling phenomenon is a task for another occasion. The aim of this paper has been to show that, by reflecting on how a belief might motivate and rationalize further attitudes, one finds support for the conclusion that, when it comes to aesthetic testimony, one should expect the worst.³⁶

³⁵ If successful, the explanation shows that bare aesthetic knowledge of any sort is not possible. But I will here not consider how it might be generalized beyond the case of testimony.

³⁶ I am grateful to the Arts and Humanities Research Council for funding which supported the writing of this paper (AH/K008188/1). For comments and discussion, thanks to Conor McHugh, Jonathan Way, Guy Fletcher, Jon Robson, an anonymous referee for this journal, and members of audiences in Fribourg, Dublin, York, Cardiff, and Manchester. Special thanks to Aaron Ridley – my efforts to address his penetrating criticisms of an early version led to a very different (and, I hope, much better) paper.

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