

## **Are the problems of moral and aesthetic testimony a unified problem?**

'The problem of moral testimony' and 'the problem of aesthetic testimony' arise from our intuitive resistance towards relying on moral and aesthetic testimony. Papers on these topics often briefly suggest that their proposal may apply to the other problem (see Hills (2013) and Robson (2012) as examples), but unified, systematic accounts are rare. I argue that we have much to gain from identifying the parallels between these problems, but we should be hesitant towards accounts which unify or generalise at the expense of the specificity of each problem.

I briefly set out the intuitive basis for the two problems (§1), outline common responses (§2) and consider why we might treat these as analogous problems (§3). I then present three recent attempts at generalised or unified accounts – Hills' (§4), Fletchers' (§6), and Wodak's (§8). Whilst responding to these, I raise six problems with generalisation and unification (§5, §7, §9). These lead me to conclude that the two problems are analogous, but we should not cling on when the analogy breaks down.

### 1. The problems of moral and aesthetic testimony

The problems of moral and aesthetic testimony are structurally similar, generated by asymmetries in our intuitions. Both recognise that we unproblematically defer to many forms of testimony (Hills 2013: 553) (Robson 2012:1). We ask strangers for directions, ask our classmates what the homework is, and listen to our doctor's diagnosis. It is widely held that we are generally justified to do so and that we can form knowledge from it. We would typically consider James and Jenny's beliefs in the following cases to constitute knowledge:

HOLST (non-aesthetic) – James has not heard of Holst's *The Planets*. His friend Jeremy tells him that 'Mars' is the first movement of *The Planets*. James believes this.

MALARIA (non-moral) – Jane tells Jenny that donating \$10 to the Against Malaria Foundation can buy five nets to protect around ten people from being bitten by malaria infected mosquitoes. Jenny believes this.

Both problems contrast this with the claim that relying on moral or aesthetic testimony seems ‘fishy’ (Wodak forthcoming: 204) – we intuitively think that we cannot gain knowledge from it or that we should not defer to it. We tend to be resistant towards accepting that James and Jenny’s beliefs constitute knowledge in these cases:

HOLST (aesthetic) – James has never listened to Holst’s *The Planets*. His friend Jeremy tells him that ‘Mars’ is ominous. James believes this.

MALARIA (moral) – Jane tells Jenny that (morally) she should donate \$10 to the Against Malaria Foundation. Jenny believes this.

These intuitions generate an asymmetry between aesthetic/moral and non-aesthetic/non-moral testimony, which requires an explanation.

Hills offers an alternative characterisation of the problem as being the issue of why we should not rely on moral (or aesthetic) testimony, even when moral advice (or aesthetic recommendation) is acceptable (2009: 97). This reflects the idea that there are asymmetries within forms of moral and aesthetic testimony.

I am concerned with direct deference to pure testimony. These are cases where the speaker presents no evidence for their claim and the hearer forms their belief solely based on this claim (Robson 2012: 2).

## 2. Responses to the problems of moral and aesthetic testimony

Both problems involve a debate between ‘optimists’ and ‘pessimists’. Optimists resist the asymmetry observation – they maintain that there is no difference between moral/aesthetic and non-moral/non-aesthetic testimony and suggest that we sometimes can gain knowledge on this basis (Hills 2009: 95).

Pessimists argue that we (generally) cannot or should not gain knowledge from moral/aesthetic testimony (Robson 2012: 2). They endorse and justify the asymmetry observation. Following Hopkins, we can distinguish between ‘unavailability pessimism’ and ‘unusability pessimism’. For unavailability pessimists, we (generally) cannot gain knowledge from moral/aesthetic testimony. Unusability pessimists accept that we can gain knowledge from moral/aesthetic testimony but argue it is (generally) illegitimate to do so. (Robson 2012: 7).

### 3. Why treat these as a unified problem?

The structural parallels I have presented offer a *prima facie* reason for treating these problems at least as analogous. Given the strong similarities, it is plausible that insight offered about one problem could illuminate the other by identifying otherwise unseen features. We may offer a ‘generalised account’ where we take a response to one problem and apply it to the other. Generalisability may also be a good test for a proposed account.

Nevertheless, we may want to go further and explain why these parallels are not merely coincidental. One route is to consider that moral and aesthetic testimony are testimony about normative properties, about what it is for an action or work of art to be ‘good’. This may motivate a ‘unified account’ which offers a shared explanation of moral and aesthetic testimony as tokens of the wider problem of (problematic) normative testimony.

I now turn to three examples of generalisation and unification to identify instances where this is philosophically useful and highlight the problems that such accounts face.

### 4. An example of generalisation: Alison Hills and moral/aesthetic understanding

Hills is an unusability pessimist about moral testimony. She argues that what is wrong with direct deference to pure moral testimony is that we do not acquire moral understanding, which is vital to moral virtue and morally worthy action (Hills 2009:

97). Morally understanding  $p$  involves a set of abilities, such as being able to explain and follow explanations for why  $p$ , draw the conclusion  $p$  from the reasons why  $p$ , and do so in relevantly similar cases (Hills 2009: 102-103). She argues that moral testimony does not lead to moral understanding as it does not develop these abilities, which are skills requiring practice to learn (Hills 2009: 119-120). Moral understanding is important because Hills sees it as the only way to reliably do the right thing and as being essential to our ability to justify ourselves to others (2009: 106-107). More significantly, moral understanding is essential to moral virtue as it allows one to be sensitive to the features of an action which determine its moral status, and this correct sensitivity is not provided by moral testimony (Hills 2009: 111-112). Furthermore, Hills argues that morally worthy actions (right actions performed for the reasons that make the action right) require moral understanding (2009: 113-117).

Hills has generalised her understanding explanation to aesthetic testimony; what is wrong with direct deference to pure aesthetic testimony is that we do not acquire aesthetic understanding, which is vital to aesthetic virtue and aesthetically worthy action (2022: 21). Aesthetic understanding involves a set of abilities that allow you to master the connection between aesthetic judgements and aesthetic reasons. Hills argues that this must be developed through practice, and that pure aesthetic testimony will not provide the necessary grasp on aesthetic reasons (2022: 26-30). Hills suggests that aesthetic virtue is “the orientation of the whole person towards aesthetic values and aesthetic reasons” (2022: 24) and this is involved in creating and/or appreciating valuable works of art, having the right emotions and motivations, and basing one’s aesthetic judgements on the right kinds of reasons (2022: 24-25). Aesthetically worthy action is “doing the right thing for the right reasons” (Hills 2022: 25). Hills maintains that aesthetic understanding is necessary for aesthetic virtue and worthy action, and that it is not typically produced by relying on testimony (2022: 29-32).

Hills presents a generalised account. She uses the similarity between the problematic status of moral and aesthetic testimony to argue that there is a structurally identical explanation for both. (Hills 2022: 34). She argues the generalisability of the understanding explanation is a strength of her account (Hills

2022: 22). Her generalisation offers insight into the problem of aesthetic testimony. She provides a motivation for the popular acquaintance principle (the idea that aesthetic judgements require first-hand experience of the aesthetic objects) by suggesting that (virtuous) aesthetic judgements require understanding the reasons for them, and understanding relies on acquaintance. This recognises the importance of forming aesthetic judgements for the reasons that make them right. Without generalising from morally worthy action, this is not immediately obvious.

### 5. Two problems with generalisation

Despite this, Hills faces two problems which I worry will apply generalised accounts. First, her account relies on taking well-established moral concepts, like virtue and morally worthy action, and developing aesthetic analogues. Whilst this can offer novel insight into the problem, the flipside is that it introduces new and potentially unintuitive concepts.

Take the example of virtue. There is a longstanding tradition of recognising the importance of virtue and good character in ethics. Hills' account of moral understanding fits naturally within it. By contrast, Hills is one of few, if not the only, author(s) to speak of aesthetic virtue. By itself, this need not be a problem; philosophers develop new concepts all the time. However, virtue does not seem to be of such central importance to aesthetics. Virtue is more conceptually powerful in ethics; it is more wide-reaching as 'good ethical character' is interchangeable with good character as a whole. Furthermore, for some moral philosophers, the agent's character is itself the subject of our moral judgements. By contrast, having good aesthetic understanding and judgement relates only to one's 'aesthetic character', and aesthetic character is not the subject of our aesthetic judgements. Character, and consequently virtue, is a central component of ethics but is brought into aesthetics in an ad hoc way.

Fletcher similarly argues that generalised concepts have weaker explanatory force when outside the context they are developed for. He argues that the understanding explanation cannot be generalised to prudential testimony (testimony about what it is better for one to do). Fletcher suggests that there is no concept of prudential worth to

motivate the importance of prudential understanding, or at least such a concept would not be strong enough to explain the problem with deference to prudential testimony in the same way that moral worth purportedly can. (Fletcher 2016: 55) I worry that generalisations are vulnerable to ad hoc developments of concepts that lack sufficient importance and explanatory weight within the discipline.

A second problem arises when these generalised concepts obscure elements that differentiate the problems of aesthetic and moral testimony. For example, aesthetic experience, appreciation, and acquaintance are popular explanations of the problem of aesthetic testimony. Whist Hills takes these as compatible with her account (2022: 31), I worry that she does not give adequate attention to this disanalogy with the problem of moral testimony. The idea that aesthetic judgements rely on first-hand experience of the work seems to imply unavailability pessimism, rather than unusability pessimism (as suggested by the understanding explanation). Furthermore, the importance of experience and acquaintance seems distinctive to aesthetics. Consider an analogous principle of moral acquaintance which claims that one must have direct experience of a moral situation to base one's moral judgements upon. This seems mistaken – we regularly form appropriate moral judgements based on reports and descriptions, rather than direct experience. And even if we were to develop a more plausible principle of moral acquaintance, it does not seem to explain the 'fishiness' of moral testimony.

My concern is that if we focus on the parallels and analogies that motivate a generalisation, we sacrifice the specificity of each problem. This is not sufficient to defeat a generalised account, but it does give us reason to be hesitant towards it.

#### 6. A second example of generalisation: Guy Fletcher and sentiments

Perhaps the issue for Hills is that she takes an account of moral testimony and generalises it to aesthetic testimony over a decade later. This leads me to consider Fletcher's account as he generalises to develop a common explanation for problematic forms of normative deference (2016: 46-47).

Fletcher observes that aesthetic and prudential forms of pure deference to testimony are comparably problematic to pure moral deference. He suggests that there is sufficient commonality that it is plausible to seek a common explanation and to think that this will be superior to domain-specific explanations. (Fletcher 2016: 54). He focuses on moral testimony to produce a generalisable explanation (Fletcher 2016: 59). Fletcher proposes that it is difficult (or impossible) to form moral sentiments (like anger or blame) from pure testimony, which we struggle to rationally influence, and which rely on an awareness of the object's features (2016: 60-61).

Fletcher generalises this to other problematic forms of deference to testimony – they are cases in which the relevant judgements closely relate to affective responses which are difficult (or impossible) to form based on pure testimony (2016: 68). He argues that “[a]esthetic sentiments are at least difficult to form on the basis of pure, direct, testimony” (Fletcher 2016: 67). Similarly, prudential judgements (judgements about the correctness of valuing something) are difficult to form simply on another person's say-so (Fletcher 2016: 68).

Fletcher argues that this explains the common problem that arises with deference to these kinds of testimony, and why this only applies to certain kinds (2016: 68-69). I think his account allows for the individuality of each problem. It can explain the acquaintance principle in terms of the necessity of acquaintance with the artwork (or a sufficiently similar copy) for generating the relevant aesthetic sentiments. By linking aesthetic attitudes to reactive attitudes, he draws potentially otherwise unseen parallels between the two problems.

## 7. Two more problems with generalisation and unification

Fletcher is an unavailability pessimist (2016: 52-53). He wants to provide a meta-(ethical/aesthetic) and epistemic explanation for the difficulty of gaining moral/aesthetic/prudential knowledge through pure testimony.

I worry that he struggles to account for differences in the importance of relying on testimony in different domains. Hills suggests that we have stronger reasons to trust or rely on moral testimony than aesthetic testimony; we have a greater motivation to

'correctly' believe that an action is morally right than we do to 'correctly' believe that a work of art is beautiful (2022: 33). This implies that sometimes deference to moral testimony may be more easily justified or less problematic than aesthetic testimony. I think that Fletcher struggles to explain this without implausibly suggesting that moral affective responses are less important in general. I worry that generalised accounts struggle to accommodate such differences as they are not sufficiently fine-grained.

My second concern is that generalised and unified accounts may overlook cases where there is intuitive support for deferring to otherwise problematic forms of testimony. For example, Nguyen suggests that cases involving knowledge that something merits a certain aesthetic response or should be regarded as aesthetically valuable are cognitive matters that can be transmitted through testimony (2017L 29-31). For example, a teacher telling a parent that rap is a valuable music form for the child to study, even when the parent cannot appreciate it (Nguyen 2017: 22-23).

I worry that Fletcher may not be able to account for these kinds of cases. For Nguyen, in these cases, the testimony is about the appropriateness of aesthetic responses, and he is optimistic about transmitting this kind of knowledge (2017: 31). Fletcher explicitly rejects this. He proposes that we can offer a realist version of his sentimentalist explanation by suggesting that moral/aesthetic judgements are beliefs about the fittingness of moral/aesthetic sentiments (Fletcher 2016: 63-64). He is pessimistic about this as he sees there being a pressure for one's beliefs and sentiments to align to avoid irrational incoherence, which presents a problem for forming beliefs when one lacks the appropriate sentiment. (Fletcher 2016: 64) Fletcher consequently struggles to explain why we have positive intuitions about the transmission of knowledge about the appropriateness of aesthetic responses. To do this, he would need to reject his realist-sentimentalism proposal and endorse a form of anti-realism that could accommodate Nguyen's account.

As it stands, Fletcher's argument overlooks cases in which we intuitively support direct deference to pure testimony. Perhaps his focus on unifying problematic forms of normative testimony has led him to overlook asymmetries within the intuitive acceptability of testimony. He should address Nguyen's cases as well as their moral



analogues (e.g., testimony about the appropriateness of having a blaming reactive attitude).

#### 8. An example of a unified account: Daniel Wodak on normative testimony

My final example is Wodak's unified argument that normative testimony gives us strong reason for approval (Wodak forthcoming: 183). He starts by setting up "minimal contrastive pairs" (Wodak forthcoming: 186). For example, a case in which a highly reliable testifier tells me that *x* is a song and I approve of it on this basis, compared with a case in which a highly reliable testifier tells me that *x* is a *beautiful* song and I approve of it on this basis. Wodak argues that I have more reason to approve in the latter case than I do in the former, implying that I must have some reason to approve of the song in the latter case and that normative testimony must be what makes this difference. Furthermore, we would have less reason to approve based on a less reliable testifier, suggesting that there must be some reason for approving based on testimony. (Wodak forthcoming: 187-188)

Wodak takes this to be a unified method for arguing that we have reason and justification for approving based on normative testimony. We can construct cases involving testifiers of increasing reliability as well as a comparison case of approving based on non-normative testimony. These show an increasing reason to approve, implying the reasonableness of approving at all. (Wodak forthcoming: 190-191) However, Wodak admits that his argument leaves open the problem of explaining our intuitions that it is 'fishy' to believe or act based on these kinds of testimony (forthcoming: 203-204).

Wodak's project differs from Hills' and Fletcher's. He provides an optimistic account rather than an explanation of the intuitions that generate the asymmetry observation (like Sliwa (2012) does). His account is closer to a unified method for responding to pessimism than it is a unified account of the problem of moral and aesthetic testimony. He treats moral and aesthetic testimony as tokens of a wider problem of normative testimony.

#### 9. Two problems with a unified theory of problematic normative testimony

My first concern with unified theories such as Wodak's is that, to develop a unified pattern of cases across various forms of problematic normative testimony, they abstract away from the cases which generate the asymmetry observation. Wodak's minimal contrastive pairs involve bizarre cases of approving based on minimal non-normative testimony (such as  $x$  being a song). This seems wholly inappropriate as approval is a normative attitude, so it is no wonder that approval seems more appropriate when based on normative testimony. These cases are not those that generated the problem of 'fishy' types of normative testimony in the first place.

Second, I am concerned that a unified theory of normative testimony may overgeneralise. Fletcher argues that direct deference to pure testimony is not a problem for all kinds of normative testimony, including about linguistic or epistemic norms (2016: 58), although I do not categorically rule out there being problematic instances of these. This presents a problem for accounts of normative testimony, like Wodak's, which do not adequately specify which kinds of normative testimony will generate 'fishiness' intuitions, as they may overgeneralise to non-problematic forms of normative testimony. More deeply, this presents a challenge for accounts of problematic forms of normative testimony that explain our 'fishiness' intuitions in terms of moral/aesthetic testimony being normative. If there are non-problematic forms of direct deference to pure normative testimony, then the commonality between problematic forms requires further explanation than merely suggesting that it is because they are normative.

## 10. Conclusion

Through my limited survey of generalised and unified accounts of the problems of moral and aesthetic testimony, I have tried to highlight the insights they offer, as well as anticipating the challenges they face. This leaves me with three broad concerns. First, in generalising and unifying the problems, we abstract away from their specific features which generate disanalogies. Second, the intuitions that ground these problems are too nuanced to be accounted for at this level of abstraction. Nguyen's positive intuition cases, the acceptability of moral advice, and non-problematic forms of normative testimony collectively imply that our intuitions are highly complex.

Treating moral and aesthetic testimony as a unified problem may not have the theoretical nimbleness to account for these nuances, especially if they are not mirrored across the two domains.

Third, we currently lack an explanatorily powerful connection between the two problems, beyond their striking resemblance. Being kinds of normative testimony provides a partial explanation, but I have argued that is unsatisfactory. Without a sufficiently deep connection between the problems, they are analogous rather than unified. Fletcher's account offers a promising answer, through highlighting the significance of affective responses in these domains, but it requires further development and inspection.

For now, I argue that identifying parallels between the problems can be genuinely fruitful; I have suggested that Hills, Fletcher and Wodak all offer novel insight. However, until my concerns are addressed, I suggest that these insights are better utilised to improve our domain-specific accounts. We should not hold too tightly to the analogy between the problems when doing so can overlook specificity and nuanced intuitions, especially until we have a deeper explanation of their connection.

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