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# Should We Believe Philosophical Claims on Testimony?

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**Abstract:** This paper considers whether we should believe philosophical claims on the basis of testimony in light of related debates about aesthetic and moral testimony. It is argued that we should not believe philosophical claims on testimony, and different explanations of why we should not are considered. It is suggested that the reason why we should not believe philosophical claims on testimony might be that philosophy is not truth-directed.

## 1. Philosophical Testimony

It is sometimes claimed that we should not believe philosophical claims on testimony. According to Locke, for instance:

*Aristotle* was certainly a knowing Man, but no body ever thought him so, because he blindly embraced, and confidently vented the Opinions of another...Such borrowed Wealth, like Fairy-money, though it were Gold in the hand from which he received it, will be but Leaves and Dust when it comes to use (1690, 1.4.23)

Similarly, Reid states that:

no philosophical opinion, however ancient, however generally received, ought to rest upon authority (1785, 2.14, p. 211)

The question of whether we should believe philosophical claims on testimony is reminiscent of the questions that have been discussed in the philosophical literature on aesthetic and moral testimony. ‘Optimists’ in these debates argue that we can legitimately form aesthetic or moral beliefs on the basis of testimony, and thereby often acquire knowledge: for example, that we can legitimately come to believe—indeed, typically know—on someone else’s say-so that a painting is beautiful or that tax avoidance is morally impermissible. ‘Pessimists’, by contrast, argue that there is something problematic or illegitimate about believing aesthetic or moral claims on the basis of testimony.

Both optimism and pessimism come in different forms. The optimist’s claim that there is no principled reason why we should not form aesthetic or moral beliefs on the basis of testimony is consistent with mitigated forms of pessimism: for example, there might be a (limited) range of aesthetic or moral propositions that it is not in principle legitimate to believe on the basis of testimony; alternatively, the optimist might think that there are contingent reasons in practice why we should not believe some aesthetic or moral claims on testimony, for instance because testifiers tend to be untrustworthy or inconsistent. Conversely, pessimism comes in stronger and weaker forms depending on whether justified belief or knowledge of aesthetic and moral matters is supposed to be strictly speaking *unavailable* on the basis of testimony, or merely *unusable*, for instance because there are further norms that govern belief in these areas of discourse.

Perhaps surprisingly, there has been little acknowledgement in the philosophical literature on aesthetic and moral testimony that similar questions arise in relation to philosophical testimony.<sup>1</sup> We can, however, use the same framework for

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<sup>1</sup> Meskin (2004, pp. 88-90) briefly discusses aesthetic judgments about theories and proofs, including, but not restricted to, philosophical theories and proofs, but he doesn’t consider philosophical judgments

addressing the corresponding question of whether we should believe philosophical claims on the basis of testimony. Whereas optimists will be those who think that can in principle legitimately believe philosophical claims on the basis of testimony, pessimists will be those who deny this. Again, different forms of optimism and pessimism will be possible.

This paper has three main aims. The first is to suggest that there is at least an interesting question about whether and why we should or should not believe philosophical claims on the basis of testimony. The second is to propose a diagnosis of why similar questions arise for philosophical testimony as arise for aesthetic and moral testimony. The third aim is to argue that should not believe philosophical claims on the basis of testimony, and, more tentatively, to suggest an explanation of why we should not. I present a case for pessimism about philosophical testimony in §2. §3 considers a form of unusability pessimism about philosophical testimony, and §4 considers contingent pessimism about philosophical testimony. §5 provides a diagnosis of the similarities between aesthetic, moral and philosophical discourse, and §6 concludes by tentatively outlining an alternative explanation of why we should not believe philosophical claims on testimony.

## **2. Pessimism about Philosophical Testimony**

If Locke and Reid are right that we should not believe philosophical claims on testimony, then we can't take their word for it. The claim that we should not believe philosophical claims on testimony is (plausibly) itself a philosophical claim, and so if we should not believe philosophical claims on testimony in general, then we should not believe this philosophical claim in particular. So are there good reasons for accepting that we should not believe philosophical claims on testimony?

Locke's pessimism about philosophical testimony reflects a more general scepticism about testimony as a source of knowledge. Locke is working with a model of knowledge according to which knowledge implies certainty. According to Locke, knowledge consists in perceiving agreements or disagreements between ideas (1690, 4.1.2). It is therefore only possible to know a proposition if you both possess the constituent ideas and yourself perceive the agreement between them. Testimony of any kind is insufficient for knowledge understood in this way. But this is not a convincing reason to think that there is anything problematic about philosophical testimony in particular, because in general Locke's account of knowledge is overly restrictive, and as such his pessimism towards testimony is implausible given the role that it plays in our epistemic lives.<sup>2</sup>

Reid is more interesting in this respect, because he is not generally sceptical of testimony as a source of knowledge; indeed, he emphasises the importance of testimony to humans, given our social nature (1764, 6.24, pp. 194-5). Reid's scepticism represents a form of philosophical exceptionalism: although he does not think that there is a general problem about believing on the basis of testimony, he does seem to think that there *is* a problem where philosophical claims are at issue.

The stated reason that Reid gives for accepting a form of pessimism about philosophical testimony is that 'There is no presumption in requiring evidence for it [i.e. a philosophical opinion], or in regulating our belief by the evidence we can find'

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themselves. Hopkins (2011) discusses philosophical testimony briefly, but (unlike moral and aesthetic testimony) he does not think it is intrinsically problematic. See §3 for discussion.

<sup>2</sup> Although a more nuanced interpretation of Locke can allow that testimony provides evidence for belief (Shieber 2009), since it can't provide certainty it necessarily falls short of knowledge on Locke's view.

(1785, 2.14, p. 211). Reid's thought here appears to be that it is always permissible to enquire into the evidence for philosophical opinions that others express. However, it is not clear that this establishes that there is anything distinctive about philosophical testimony—even if we accept Reid's wider views about testimony. Reid defends a 'non-reductive' account of testimony, according to which we have a default entitlement to believe what others tell us (see also Burge 1993). But even if we are in general under no epistemic obligation to determine whether testimony of a certain kind tends to be reliable in order to be warranted in believing it (as on 'reductive' accounts of testimony associated with Hume 1748), a non-reductivist will normally allow that we *can* always inquire further into the evidence for opinions that we receive on testimony. Without a particular reason to suspect that philosophical opinion is not, in general, regulated by evidence, there is so far no difference between philosophical and non-philosophical testimony. Besides, this is only to say that it is *permissible* to inquire further into the grounds of philosophical opinions presented by testimony; but Reid seems to claim that we *ought not* accept philosophical claims solely on the authority of others, and so that doing this is *impermissible*.

But although the reasons that Locke and Reid present for thinking that we ought not to believe philosophical claims on testimony might not be persuasive, there is nevertheless something appealing about this claim. If an established physicist tells us that black holes exist, or an established climate scientist tells us that there is human-made global warming, then it seems reasonable to think that we should believe him. But what if, for example, Lewis tells us that free will is compatible with determinism, Burge tells us that perceptual experience is representational, or for that matter if Reid tells us that we ought not to accept philosophical claims on the basis of testimony? It is tempting to think that there is an important difference between these kinds of cases. Whereas it is legitimate to believe that black holes exist on the say-so of a scientific expert, there seems something problematic about believing that free will is compatible with determinism simply on the say-so of a philosophical expert. What these examples suggest is not that there is merely no presumption in requiring evidence for a philosophical claim, but rather that there is an expectation or requirement that when we believe philosophical claims, we do so on the basis of first-hand acquaintance with evidence for them.

These examples involve propositions that express what might be described as philosophical theorems or theories. These are not the only kinds of propositions that philosophers are interested in. But other classes of proposition that are philosophically interesting can also seem problematic as far as testimonial belief is concerned. One relevant class of propositions, for instance, express intuitions: for example, in the Gettier case that Smith does not know that the person with ten coins in their pocket will get the job. Should we believe propositions expressing intuitions on the basis of testimony? At least in the context of philosophical theorising, if these propositions are themselves supposed to provide evidence for philosophical claims, then the answer is plausibly no.<sup>3</sup> On standard accounts, these are not themselves supposed to be theoretical claims, but rather evidence to which philosophical theories are responsive.<sup>4</sup> Propositions expressing intuitions are supposed to be claims which we are disposed to believe when we hear them, and which provide a fixed point for philosophical theorising. Having these cases presented to you is important; but you are supposed to

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<sup>3</sup> This leaves open the possibility that we could legitimately believe claims of this kind in non-philosophical contexts, where they are not supposed to provide evidence for philosophical claims—for instance, if we are hearing a report of an actual situation.

<sup>4</sup> For a recent discussion and defence, see Climenhaga (2018).

believe them because they seem evident to you, rather than on the say-so of the person presenting them.

A second important class of propositions are those that express arguments for philosophical claims: for instance, the consequence argument for incompatibilism about free will, or the argument from the transparency of perceptual experience for representationalism. But just as there seems something problematic about believing a philosophical claim on testimony, there seems something problematic about believing on testimony that there *is* a compelling argument for or against a philosophical claim, without actually having the argument presented to you. Yet once the argument is presented to you, it is tempting to say that the testimony no longer functions—or at least, ought not to function—as the basis for your believing the claim. The report of the argument puts you in a position to appreciate the argument; but you ought to believe the argument supports the conclusion, if you do, on the basis of your consideration of the argument, not on the basis of being told that it does.

Not all broadly philosophical claims are obviously problematic. Claims about who defends which theories and advances which arguments are often unproblematic; so are claims setting out the commitments of different theories. Beliefs about these kinds of claims are often formed on the basis of testimony, and in many cases there does not seem anything particularly problematic about doing so; indeed, this is a standard way for students to learn about the subject and for professionals to extend their areas of competence and specialisation.

But just because we can be justified in believing philosophical claims of this kind on the basis of testimony, it doesn't show that there is no general problem about believing philosophical claims on testimony—or at least, philosophical claims of an important kind. A natural way to characterise the difference is that the unproblematic cases involve purely descriptive claims, whereas the problematic cases involve evaluative claims, and require philosophical appreciation and assessment. Indeed, where there does seem something problematic about believing otherwise descriptive claims on testimony, this will normally be because determining the views of others, or the commitments of a theory, involves some non-negligible degree of evaluation: for instance, about what is the most coherent or philosophically compelling interpretation of someone's remarks, or which commitments of a theory, given the arguments that can be used to motivate the theory, are philosophically dispensable.

It might be suggested that there are situations in which we believe evaluative philosophical claims on the basis of testimony: students learning about the subject or professionals who are new to an area might be examples. But it is important to distinguish the genesis of a philosophical belief from its justification. The pessimist can allow that as a matter of psychological fact we *do* form philosophical beliefs on the basis of testimony; they might even add that insofar as we are liable to form philosophical beliefs in this way it is not (in some sense) 'unreasonable' to do so. But to say that we do in fact form beliefs in this way is not to say that we *ought* to form beliefs in this way, or that the beliefs so formed are justified.

In saying that we ought not believe evaluative philosophical claims on the basis of testimony, my particular interest is with contemporary Anglophone analytic philosophy; I leave it open whether the point generalises to other philosophical traditions or periods.<sup>5</sup> It is not my intention to provide a precise definition of exactly what an evaluative philosophical claim is. My preferred view is that evaluative philosophical claims are answers to 'external questions' in something like a Carnapian

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<sup>5</sup> I also want to set aside the question of whether there are other academic disciplines about which testimonial pessimism is warranted, either in whole or in part.

sense: questions that ask about conceptual frameworks *as a whole*, rather than questions asked from within the perspective of a particular framework (cf. Carnap 1950). On this view, the very same words can be used to express different types of proposition depending on whether they are used ‘internally’ or ‘externally’. This means that there could be sentences which, when understood internally, it would be appropriate to believe on the basis of testimony, but which when understood externally, it would not be appropriate to believe on the basis of testimony: examples might include ‘God exists’ (which could be understood as either internal to or external to the theological framework) or ‘humans are animals’ (which could be understood as internal to or external to the biological framework). However, I don’t want to rely on this particular understanding of the relevant class of claims. For the purposes of my argument it will be sufficient that we can identify some clear examples of claims that it would seem problematic to believe on the basis of testimony.

### **3. Pessimism and the Philosophical Acquaintance Principle**

Assuming that there is an expectation or requirement that when we believe philosophical claims we do so on the basis of evidence, how should we explain this?

The claim is reminiscent of what in debates about aesthetic and moral testimony have been called ‘The Acquaintance Principle’ (Wollheim 1980) or ‘The Requirement’ (Hopkins 2011). Pessimists in these debates who think that there is *in principle* a difference between different regions of discourse have appealed to variations on the Acquaintance Principle and the Requirement to argue that testimonial knowledge is either unavailable, or at least unusable, in some regions of discourse. According to Hopkins, for example—one of the most prominent recent pessimists—although testimony can make aesthetic and moral knowledge available to the recipient, this knowledge cannot be exploited by the recipient because there are further norms governing its use: either that to be entitled to use the knowledge we need to grasp the moral or aesthetic grounds for it, or we need to have some form of acquaintance with the object of the judgment, or some combination of the two (cf. Hopkins 2007, 2011; see also Gorodeisky 2010). Applying this in the philosophical case, the idea would be that being entitled to form a (useable) philosophical belief requires you to understand the philosophical grounds for it, and this in turn may require some form of acquaintance with those grounds—either by apprehending the intuitive plausibility of a claim, or else by appreciating an argument or arguments for the claim.

Of course, it cannot simply be assumed that there *is* a further norm governing moral, aesthetic, or philosophical belief. Indeed, one of the central challenges for the unusability pessimist is to explain why any extra non-epistemic norm governing aesthetic, moral or, by extension, philosophical belief is required (Hopkins 2011, p. 145; cf. Robson 2013). Assuming that belief aims at truth, and that the attitudes that we bear towards moral, aesthetic and philosophical propositions are beliefs, why should any further norms governing beliefs in these areas be needed?

As it happens, a central line of Hopkins’s response to this objection in the moral and aesthetic case promises to *undermine* the claim that a further norm is required in the philosophical case. Hopkins’s response is to argue that there are similar non-epistemic norms in force elsewhere, and so there can, at least in principle, be additional norms in the moral and aesthetic cases, too. The example of an additional norm that Hopkins gives is that of an expert who forms beliefs in their area of expertise on the basis of testimony, rather than investigating the issues for themselves. Hopkins argues that although testimony can make knowledge available to

the expert, there is something illicit about them forming beliefs in this way—even though it would be perfectly legitimate for a non-expert to form beliefs in this way. And the specific type of expertise that Hopkins discusses is *philosophical* expertise.

This suggests an explanation of why there is something problematic about believing philosophical claims on testimony that does not support a form of pessimism about philosophical testimony, but rather explains the problem with philosophical testimony as an instance of an entirely general point about expertise. On this view, it isn't that there is anything wrong in general with philosophical beliefs formed on the basis of testimony, it's only an issue if you are an expert.

The suggestion, however, is problematic. On the one hand, we may doubt the claim that experts cannot justifiably form beliefs—and thereby come to know—on the basis of testimony, even where the beliefs concern their particular areas of expertise. As McKinnon (2017) argues, for example, expert health care professionals will often—of necessity, given workload demands—form beliefs about a patient's health on advice from other experts, without themselves investigating the matter further: for instance, a consultant can come to know that a patient has a certain kind disease without themselves analysing their blood, even if they are perfectly capable of doing so.

On the other hand, and more fundamentally, nor is it clear that the relevant factor in the philosophical case is *expertise*. Hopkins's appeal to non-epistemic norms governing expert belief are not themselves supposed to explain why there is something problematic about using aesthetic and moral beliefs formed on testimony. Rather, norms governing experts are supposed to provide examples of norms that are in force in different contexts that are at least analogous to those that he thinks might govern belief formation in aesthetics and ethics; as such, he doesn't suggest that there are norms that apply to experts in aesthetic and moral matters that don't apply to non-experts. But philosophy might seem more like the moral and aesthetic cases in this respect—indeed, this might seem even more plausible in the philosophical case than in the aesthetic and moral cases. If we think, for example, about teaching philosophy to students, we encourage students to think things through for themselves, without uncritically accepting the views of others. Of course, it might be suggested that in doing this we are seeking to train future experts in the field. But the problem is arguably deeper than that. There is, at least on the face of it, something peculiar about the idea of a non-expert seeking to acquire philosophical knowledge without any appreciation of the grounds of their beliefs—where this knowledge consists in knowledge of evaluative philosophical propositions of the kind identified in §2, and not simply knowledge of 'who said what'. At least part of the reason for this is that approaching philosophical texts in this way seems counter to the spirit of the philosophical enterprise.

This, however, brings us back to the 'aim of belief' objection: if belief aims at truth, and the attitudes that we bear towards moral, aesthetic and philosophical propositions are beliefs, then why should further norms governing these beliefs be required? It isn't obvious that expert belief formation is governed by analogous norms. And although we might think the problem is slightly more extensive than just the ethical and the aesthetic—encompassing, too, the philosophical—this does not necessarily make the moral and aesthetic cases seem any less problematic; particularly not if, as I will argue in §5, there is an underlying similarity between these cases.

It might be suggested that properly engaging in the philosophical enterprise involves seeking *understanding*, rather than knowledge.<sup>6</sup> This may provide an alternative

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<sup>6</sup> For a version of this claim, see Hacker (2009).

explanation of why we should only believe philosophical claims on the basis of evidence: understanding cannot be transmitted via testimony, and so acquaintance with the evidence for philosophical claims is required if we are to understand them.<sup>7</sup> But philosophy is not the only academic discipline that can plausibly be said to seek understanding. And even if we cannot understand on the basis of testimony in other disciplines either, the challenge is to explain why there nevertheless seems to be something particularly problematic about philosophical testimony. One way of pressing this challenge is by noting that understanding is often associated with propositional knowledge: we can know that something is the case and want to understand why. Whilst the understanding might not be something that can be transmitted via testimony, the associated propositional knowledge can be. But what is the relevant propositional knowledge in the philosophical case? As is often noted, it is difficult to identify a substantive, established body of philosophical knowledge.<sup>8</sup> And this, in turn, suggests an alternative explanation of why there may be something problematic about believing philosophical claims on testimony.

#### **4. Contingent Pessimism and Philosophical Disagreement**

It is possible to explain differences in attitudes to testimonially-based belief in different regions of discourse without thinking that there is any difference in principle between these regions of discourse, if there is a contingent fact about a region of discourse that makes belief on the basis of testimony problematic. So, for instance, forming beliefs of a particular sort on the basis of testimony might be problematic if your interlocutors are unreliable. If defeating conditions like these obtain, then this will generate a form of contingent pessimism.<sup>9</sup>

There is widespread disagreement about philosophical claims, and this alone might seem sufficient to explain our attitudes towards philosophical testimony—including the sense, identified at the end of the previous section, that there is something odd about seeking to acquire philosophical knowledge solely on the basis of testimony. For many, if not all, philosophical propositions  $p$ , there is disagreement about  $p$ : for example, whether the mental is identical to the physical, whether an action is good if it maximizes utility, whether (and why) we should (or should not) believe aesthetic and moral claims on testimony, and so on. Indeed, it is tempting to say that it goes without saying that disagreement is a pervasive feature of philosophical discourse, but it is possible to disagree about even this. It is reasonable to assume that two people only disagree if one denies the very same proposition that the other asserts (although this too can be denied, cf. MacFarlane 2007). Intuitively, however, we might suspect that many *apparent* philosophical disagreements aren't in fact *genuine* disagreements, but either cases of people speaking past each other, and failing to deny the very same proposition that another has asserted, or else failing to express propositions at all.<sup>10</sup>

Whether widespread philosophical disagreement is alone sufficient to explain our attitudes towards philosophical testimony depends in part on whether there is a plausible explanation of why accepting testimony in this region of discourse is problematic, even though the discourse itself is truth-directed.

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<sup>7</sup> For a defence of this idea in the moral case, see Hills (2009).

<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, Hacker (2009), Brennan (2010), and Beebee (2018) for discussion.

<sup>9</sup> For contingent pessimism in the aesthetic case, see Meskin (2004). For contingent moral pessimism, see Lillehammer (2014).

<sup>10</sup> For further discussion of philosophical disagreement, see, for example, Brennan (2010) and Beebee (2018).

One possibility, for instance, is that philosophers are unreliable. By comparison, Meskin argues in defence of mitigated contingent aesthetic pessimism that large amounts of aesthetic testimony are unreliable, and this is why attitudes formed on the basis of testimony will often not count as knowledge. According to Meskin (2004, pp. 86-7), many aesthetic judgments will be unreliable because many of the people who make aesthetic judgments lack the relevant sensibilities, training and knowledge, and more generally because we are apt to confuse what we like with what is beautiful. His pessimism is mitigated and contingent, however, because he thinks that widespread aesthetic unreliability is consistent with warranted aesthetic judgments made by people with the appropriate sensibilities and training, at least in particular genres.

But these reasons for thinking that aesthetic judgments are often unreliable do not translate easily to the philosophical case. Even restricting ourselves to the judgments of those who have requisite training, there is widespread disagreement. And at least if genres are understood as topic-based areas—for instance, philosophy of perception, the metaphysics of properties, meta-ethics—this disagreement is not offset by agreement between experts. If genres are understood instead as philosophical ‘approaches’—for instance, realism, pragmatism, naturalism—then there is more likely to be agreement between experts within an approach; although this obviously raises different concerns at the level of philosophy as a whole (I return to this in §5).<sup>11</sup>

Besides, a more general problem with this type of approach concerns the specific *character* of many philosophical disagreements. Philosophical disagreements often have the characteristic of being *intransigent*, in the sense that parties to the dispute maintain their views in the face of others and are not considered irrational for doing so.<sup>12</sup> Philosophers often maintain their views in the face of reasons-based disagreement. In some cases, these disagreements can span years, even entire academic careers. And although we might think that those philosophers with whom we disagree are mistaken, we typically don’t think that they are *irrational* for maintaining their views in the face of the arguments that can be marshalled against their preferred position and in favour of others; that is, we normally think that holding competing philosophical views is at least rationally permissible given the evidence and arguments available. So, for instance, we continue to discuss the philosophical issues with them in a way that we may not if we thought that they were simply irrational, we recommend their articles and books for publication, we may even be prepared to employ them as colleagues (cf. Lewis 2000).

Of course, not all parties to philosophical disputes maintain their views in the face of counter-argument. It is relatively common for philosophers to amend or give up specific claims that they have made, whilst at the same time maintaining the general theory or approach that they have adopted—at which point, disagreements often transfer from specific to more general claims. So, for instance, someone might reject a specific proposal for physicalistically reducing the mind to the brain, whilst nevertheless accepting the more general claim that the mind can be reduced to the brain. It is less common, though not unprecedented, for philosophers to give up more general philosophical views, as when philosophers have distinct ‘early’ and

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<sup>11</sup> There might be other reasons suggested for why philosophers tend to be unreliable: for instance, that they haven’t yet—or have only just—found the appropriate method. But after repeated iterations of this throughout the history of philosophy, this claim is apt to seem implausible (cf. Hacker 2009; Brennan 2010, pp. 11-12).

<sup>12</sup> See Kalderon (2005) for further discussion of this understanding of intransigence. For a related concern about moral discourse—that the intelligibility of intransigent disagreement suggests that it is non-cognitive—see Rowland (2018).

‘later’ periods. These more general changes of view are often noteworthy; and the fact that they are noteworthy suggests that there is no general expectation that individuals will, or ought to, change to their views in the face of reasons-based disagreement.

To say that philosophical disagreements are often intransigent need not be to say that *all* philosophical disagreements have this characteristic. There may, for instance, be claims in more formal areas of philosophy that either receive universal assent, or are such that those who deny them can reasonably be considered to be irrational. The truth of Gödel’s incompleteness theorems or the rationality of the one-box solution to the Newcomb problem may be examples (cf. Kornblith 2010). Within less formal areas of philosophy, there may also be claims that are at least very widely accepted, and whose rational denial is close to inconceivable (cf. Van Inwagen 2009). There may be some very basic positive truths about which rational disagreement appears to be all but impossible—for instance, that there are mental states (although contrast eliminativists). Negative truths, particularly those that rule out particular theories, or particular types of theory, might be another kind of case. Possible candidates here include archaic theories—for instance, Berkeleyan idealism—or very simple versions of a theory—such as the claim that knowledge is justified true belief (although contrast Weatherston 2003). Even so, there remain a wide range of claims about which intransigent disagreement persists.

The existence of intransigent philosophical disagreement is consistent with thinking that philosophical discourse is truth-directed, and so an area in which knowledge can (eventually) be attained and transmitted. Elgin (2010, pp. 66-8), for example, argues that it is rationally permissible to allow persistent disagreement where evidence is scarce or equivocal, because this may be best for the epistemic community as a whole: it allows for competing theories to be fully developed and robustly tested, which may eventually lead to consensus. As Elgin acknowledges, however, whether this hope is eventually realised remains to be seen. Without ruling this out in advance, the next section explores a different explanation of why many philosophical disagreements may be intransigent.

## **5. Aesthetic, Moral, and Philosophical Discourse**

The claim that philosophical disagreements—like many disagreements about aesthetic and moral matters—are often intransigent is a primarily descriptive claim. The similarities between these types of disagreement may go deeper, however, by admitting of similar explanations.

In the case of moral and aesthetic discourse, it is often suggested that intransigent disagreements reflect differences in aesthetic and moral sensibility, where aesthetic and moral sensibility is something that is determined by (amongst other things) education, experience, social and historical context, personal constitution, fashion, values, and so on. The same might be suggested of intransigent philosophical disagreements: that they reflect differences in *philosophical sensibility*, where these too depend on differences in education, context, personal constitution, fashion, wider beliefs, and values.<sup>13</sup>

Like aesthetic and moral sensibilities, philosophical sensibilities plausibly differ across time and place. Consider, for instance, the difference between the dominant philosophical approaches in Oxford in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with the shift from British Idealism to neo-Kantian Oxford Realism; compare the difference between Oxford Realism and the more austere forms of realism that tend

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<sup>13</sup> Compare James’s (1907) claim that proponents of different philosophical theories have different temperaments.

to be popular in Cambridge or Australia; or think about the greater interest in, and influence of, pragmatism in America than in Britain. Of course, there are exceptions to these generalisations, just as there are people who do not share the dominant moral and aesthetic sensibilities of their context. But the way that shared philosophical outlooks tend to ‘clump together’ in time and place is, presumably, no coincidence.

It might be suggested that this ‘clumping’ of philosophical outlook reflects the fact that philosophy, like science, develops via research programmes or paradigms, where philosophers in a particular programme tackle a common set of questions, accept a shared set of presuppositions, and employ a broadly similar methodology.<sup>14</sup> To the extent that philosophy is similar to science in this respect, then it might seem that the appeal to philosophical sensibilities is unmotivated—or at best fails to establish that philosophical discourse is more like aesthetic or moral discourse than scientific discourse. The obvious concern with this response, however, is whether philosophical research programmes do or could lead to convergence and consensus in the way that scientific research programmes appear to.

At least part of the reason for the pervasive and intransigent disagreement in philosophical discourse appears to be the lack of generally agreed upon criteria by which to judge philosophical theories. Philosophical theories are normally assessed on the basis of criteria such as internal consistency, simplicity, systematicity, fit with relevant scientific theories, and fidelity to experience, intuition and/or common sense. But in each case, there are different ways of understanding the different criteria, and different philosophical theories will often perform better or worse according to these criteria depending on how exactly they are understood. Moreover, these criteria, and different precisifications of them, often pull in different directions. So, for instance, theories that are faithful to the appearances will often perform less well when considered from the perspective of their fit with our best scientific theories; theories that are less parsimonious with respect to the number of kinds of things they postulate are often more parsimonious with respect to the number of instances of the kind that they postulate. Even when different criteria and their interpretation are held fixed, there can be disagreement about exactly how to weight these criteria: for instance, it may be agreed that fidelity to intuition is important, but there may still be disagreements about when exactly intuitions can be discounted.<sup>15</sup>

Indeed, part of the explanation why there is pervasive and intransigent disagreement in philosophical discourse, as there is in aesthetic and moral discourse, is that philosophical disagreements are themselves, at least in part, moral and aesthetic disagreements. Philosophers often attribute moral and aesthetic properties to philosophical theories, and many of the criteria by which philosophical theories are assessed either are themselves, or at least form the supervenience base for, the moral and aesthetic properties that philosophers attribute to philosophical theories (cf. Benovsky 2013). Quine’s objection to the postulation of *possibilia* is a famous example of an argument against a philosophical theory on the basis of broadly aesthetic considerations: ‘Wyman’s overpopulated universe is in many ways unlovely. It offends the aesthetic sense of us who have a taste for desert landscapes’ (1948, p. 4). Russell’s description of his rejection of British Idealism is another nice example of a range of moral and aesthetic sentiments:

I felt it, in fact, as a great liberation, as if I had escaped from a hothouse on to a wind-swept headland. I hated the stuffiness involved in supposing that space and time were only in my mind. I liked the starry

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<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Fish (forthcoming).

<sup>15</sup> For further discussion, see for example, Rescher (1985), Weatherston (2003), and Beebe (2018).

heavens even better than the moral law, and could not bear Kant's view that the one I liked best was only a subjective figment. In the first exuberance of liberation, I became a naïve realist and rejoiced in the thought that grass is really green, in spite of the adverse opinions of all philosophers from Locke onwards... As time went on, my universe became less luxuriant... Gradually, Occam's razor gave me a more clean shaven picture of reality (Russell 1959, pp. 48-49).

For Russell, British Idealism was both aesthetically unpleasant—it was 'stuffy', like being in a confined, humid, space—and also, in a sense, morally repugnant—he 'could not bear Kant's view that the one I liked best was only a subjective figment'. By contrast, naïve realism was aesthetically pleasing: not only was it like going for a bracing walk in a wide open space, but Russell seems to have taken pleasure from the fact that it was contrary to the received wisdom of philosophers since Locke. These aesthetic considerations, however, were eventually superseded by the kind of taste for desert landscapes described by Quine.<sup>16</sup>

To the extent that philosophical theory choice depends on aesthetic and moral considerations, this suggests that there may be more than a superficial similarity between apparent problems about aesthetic, moral, and philosophical testimony.

### **§6. Conclusion: Philosophical Fictionalism?**

In §2 I argued (in favour of pessimism about philosophical testimony) that we should only believe philosophical claims on the basis of argument. §3 suggested there are problems with thinking (like the unusability pessimist) that the requirement that we be acquainted with the grounds of a philosophical claim represents an *additional* norm governing our attitudes to philosophical claims—assuming that the attitudes we bear towards philosophical claims are beliefs and aim at truth. In §4 I suggested (in response to the contingent pessimist) that the existence of intransigent philosophical disagreement calls into question the assumption that philosophical discourse is truth-directed. Bringing these together suggests the outline of *one* solution to the puzzle about philosophical testimony.

On this view, philosophical belief does not aim at truth; or, if it is constitutive of belief that belief aims at truth, then the attitudes that we bear towards philosophical propositions are not—at least, should not be—beliefs, but rather attitudes that are not truth-directed such as 'entertaining' or 'accepting'.<sup>17</sup> The aim of philosophical discourse may still be to make sense of how 'things in the broadest sense of the word hang together in the broadest sense of the word' (Sellars 1963, p. 1). Part of the reason why we should not accept philosophical claims on the basis of testimony is that an essential aspect of philosophical practice is that we appreciate the reasons for the claims we accept, and this appreciation is not something that can be transmitted via testimony (§3). But how different people make sense of the world and their experience of it also varies depending on their philosophical, and perhaps moral and aesthetic, sensibilities (§§4-5). So part of the reason why there is something problematic about accepting philosophical claims on testimony is that we cannot guarantee that the reasons that someone else has for accepting a philosophical claim, determined by their particular philosophical sensibilities, are reasons that we would ourselves share. Justified philosophical belief on the basis of testimony is therefore not available.

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<sup>16</sup> For further discussion of this passage, and the role of aesthetic and moral considerations in the philosophy of perception, see Allen (2019).

<sup>17</sup> For a similar view, see Beebe (2018). A more radical option would be that the attitudes are really just expressions of sentiment. Expressivist views of philosophical discourse, however, face analogous problems to expressivist views of moral and aesthetic discourse, including accommodating disagreement.

The resulting view can be thought as a form of ‘philosophical fictionalism’. The philosophical fictionalist is not committed to thinking that sentences in philosophical discourse express propositions that are systematically false—which would threaten to be self-refuting insofar as it itself expresses a philosophical proposition. Philosophical fictionalism is consistent with thinking, less radically, that sentences in philosophical discourse express propositions whose truth is, or cannot be, determined. Whilst it is possible that adopting non-truth directed attitudes towards philosophical propositions may eventually lead to knowledge on behalf of the epistemic community as a whole (as Elgin suggests), the fictionalist need not insist that the value of philosophical practice rests on this possibility being realised. The project of making sense of how things fit together can still be worth engaging in—both as individuals and as a community—even if we are ultimately unable to decide between competing understandings. The world is complex, and our experiences of, and attitudes towards, it raise a number of puzzles and problems. Philosophy enables us try to make sense of the world, at least to our satisfaction and those who share similar sensibilities. Perhaps this is a sufficiently worthwhile endeavour.<sup>18</sup>

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