

Testimony, Understanding, and Art Criticism

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Forthcoming in C. Mag Uidhir (ed.), *Philosophy and Art: New Essays at the Intersection* (Oxford University Press).

DRAFT

Here is the movie critic Roger Ebert on *Jaws* (1974):

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

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

This conclusion is important for (at least) two reasons. First, it provides a counterexample to the claim that testimonial understanding is impossible, which is (so I shall argue) a dogma in the epistemology of testimony and the philosophy of understanding.² Second, it undermines accounts of the badness of deferential aesthetic belief that appeal to said dogma.³

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

1 The puzzle of aesthetic testimony

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

1.1 The puzzle

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

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

² See Zagzebski 2007, p. 260, Roberts and Wood 2007, p. 261-6, Hills 2009, pp. 19-20, 2016, p. 671; cf. Grimm 2006, pp. 531-2, Pritchard 2010, pp. 82-3. See also Plato, *Theatetus* (201b-c), Locke, *Essay concerning Human Understanding* (Book I, Chapter III, Section 24; cf. *On the Conduct of the Understanding*, §24), Descartes, *Rules for the Direction of the Mind* (“Rule Three,” AT 366).

³ See Hopkins 2011, §V.

testimonial aesthetic belief problematic (if indeed it is)? This is puzzling because (but only if we assume that) neither testimonial belief nor aesthetic belief is problematic in general.⁴

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

I use “aesthetic belief” to cover a broad category of beliefs about the instantiation of aesthetic properties, both in the narrow sense of “aesthetic properties” where this includes only such properties as beauty, deformity, grace, unity, and grotesqueness, but also in the broad sense of “aesthetic properties” where this includes such properties as artistic goodness or greatness, being a masterpiece, being an artistic failure – and being suspenseful.⁵ It is unclear where the vague boundary between intuitively problematic testimonial aesthetic belief and intuitively unproblematic testimonial belief about related matters lies: although it seems problematic to believe that *Sea View* is beautiful on the basis of someone else’s say-so, it does not seem problematic to believe that *Sea View* is a watercolor seascape on the basis of someone else’s say-so.

1.2 The argument from the impossibility of testimonial understanding

Robert Hopkins (2011, §V) argues that the impossibility of testimonial understanding explains the badness of testimonial aesthetic belief.⁶ He writes that “[h]aving the right to an aesthetic belief requires one to grasp the aesthetic grounds for it,” where “to grasp the aesthetic grounds for an aesthetic belief is to grasp those facts in virtue of which the belief is true.” (pp. 149-50) His view, in other words, is that you ought not believe that an aesthetic property is instantiated unless you understand why it is instantiated, given the instantiation of the non-aesthetic properties on which it supervenes. Since testimony cannot provide understanding (p. 150), testimonial aesthetic belief always violates this requirement. Call this the *argument from the impossibility of testimonial understanding*.

The argument is based on the premise that permissible aesthetic belief requires a certain kind of *explanatory understanding*, i.e. understanding why p. In particular, it assumes that aesthetic belief requires understanding why relevant aesthetic properties are instantiated, given the instantiation of the non-aesthetic properties on which they supervene, which we can label *aesthetic understanding*. This assumption is problematic, for at least two reasons. First, there does not seem to be any reason to think that aesthetic belief without understanding (of the relevant kind) would be unjustified or irrational. There are cases in which belief without understanding would be unjustified or irrational: sometimes you ought not believe that p unless you can understand how it could be the case that p. Even if you have strong evidence that p, your inability to understand how it could be the case that p can serve as an undermining

⁴ Cf. Hazlett forthcoming a, §1. It is worth noting that a more precise formulation of what is puzzling here would proceed in terms of deferential aesthetic belief rather than in terms of testimonial aesthetic belief, where deferential belief is belief that p on the basis of another person’s believing that p. It seems to me (although this is controversial) that testimonial belief is a species of deferential belief: when you base your belief that p on someone’s telling you that p, you do so on the assumption that they believe that p. However, because we are interested here specifically in the possibility of testimonial aesthetic understanding, we will stick with the formulation of the puzzle in terms of testimonial aesthetic belief.

⁵ Is being suspenseful really an aesthetic property? Yes, given a correct analysis: to say that a fiction is suspenseful is not merely to say that it would cause suspense for most normal people, but that it would *warrant* such a response, by expressing or representing suspenseful content or by expressing or representing its content in a suspenseful way.

⁶ Cf. Hopkins 2007 and Hills 2009 on testimonial moral belief. My argument in this paper, if sound, undermines their arguments as well.

defeater for that evidence. But that is not what is going on in the case of testimonial aesthetic belief. Not understanding how *Sea View*'s beauty supervenes on hits non-aesthetic properties is not an undermining defeater for strong evidence that *Sea View* is beautiful. So if testimonial aesthetic belief is bad, it is not bad because it is unjustified or irrational.⁷ Second, let's assume that understanding is always valuable, and thus that belief without understanding (of such-and-such a kind) always lacks something valuable. However, belief that lacks something valuable is not thereby *bad*. Perhaps belief accompanied by or grounded in understanding is a kind of intellectual *ideal*. But falling short of an ideal is not always bad. In particular, it is not bad when you partially fulfill some ideal. But belief that p without understanding why p often seems like a case of this: we often first learn that p and only later come to understand why p. Indeed, this seems like how it often goes in the case of aesthetic understanding: I can see that *Sea View* is beautiful, and thus come to know that it is beautiful, but I do not yet understand why it is beautiful. Further study and reflection may yield such understanding. But I have done nothing bad by believing that the painting is beautiful without understanding why.

However, for my purposes here, I want to grant that premise, as well as the validity of the argument.⁸ I want to focus on the premise that testimony cannot provide understanding.

Given our interest in the argument from the impossibility of testimonial understanding, our focus will be on explanatory understanding. There are perhaps other species of understanding, but I have nothing to say here about whether they can be testimonial. As well, given our interest in this argument, our focus will be on aesthetic understanding. There are perhaps other species of understanding that are important in the context of art and art criticism – including understanding an artwork, understanding the historical context of the creation of an artwork, and understanding the processes and intentions constitutive of its creation – but I have nothing to say here about whether they can be testimonial.

1.3 Digression: acquaintance

Suppose I accept Ebert's explanation of why *Jaws* is suspenseful. Above, I suggested this case as a candidate for being a case of testimonial aesthetic understanding. You might object, however, that since I have seen *Jaws*, my understanding of why *Jaws* is suspenseful cannot be testimonial. What is needed, you might argue, is a case in which I am not acquainted with the relevant object (or objects), i.e. the bearer (or bearers) of the relevant aesthetic properties (cf. §1.3). Only such a case, so the argument might go, can be a candidate for *testimonial* aesthetic understanding.

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

Indeed, my conclusion in this paper is consistent with Gary Iseminger's (2004) observation that "[p]ictures are to be seen; musical pieces, to be heard; poems, to be read," and that "only "acquaintance" with the work ... puts us in a position to understand, to appreciate, and to judge it." (p. 10) Perhaps acquaintance with relevant objects is necessary for aesthetic understanding; but this is consistent with the possibility of testimonial aesthetic understanding. Consider the fact that acquaintance with relevant

⁷ Cf. Robson 2015a; Hopkins (2011) concedes this point by characterizing his requirement as a "norm of Use." (p. 149 and *passim*)

⁸ For critical discussion, see Hazlett forthcoming a, §2.

objects is sometimes necessary for testimonial propositional knowledge. “Look at those ears,” the zookeeper says, “those are the distinctive ears of the wombat.” You now know that wombats have ears that look like that, but you could not come to know this unless you were acquainted with the wombat and its ears. Moreover, the same kind of requirement sometimes exists in the context of art and art criticism. “Look at the brushwork here,” your art history teacher says, “this is distinctive of Cezanne’s style.” Acquaintance with the relevant painting is necessary for acquiring this item of testimonial propositional knowledge.

We should distinguish between the idea that there is something problematic about testimonial aesthetic belief and the idea that there is something problematic about aesthetic belief without acquaintance with relevant objects. First, testimonial belief does not entail belief without acquaintance with relevant objects – consider the case of the wombat, above. Second, belief without acquaintance with relevant objects does not entail testimonial belief – consider paradigm cases of inference to the best explanation, e.g. you believe that there was a burglar in your house on the basis of the broken glass, ransacked rooms, and muddy footprints the burglar left behind. Therefore, it seems to me, given our interest in the puzzle of aesthetic testimony, we are right to focus on a case in which the recipient of testimony enjoys acquaintance with relevant objects – e.g. someone who has seen *Jaws*. One possibility, of course, is that this focus will lead us to conclude that there is nothing wrong with testimonial aesthetic belief, per se, but rather with aesthetic belief without acquaintance with relevant objects. But focusing on a case of testimonial aesthetic belief without acquaintance with its object would only create intuitional “noise.”

2 Testimonial understanding

In this section, I shall argue that testimonial understanding is possible. The key idea behind my argument is that testimony comprises not only cases in which one person tells another person that p, but also cases in which one person explains to another person why p.⁹ I shall concede an important claim about explanatory understanding (§2.1), defend an assumption about testimony (§2.2), argue that testimonial understanding is possible outside of aesthetics (§2.3), argue that testimonial understanding is possible within aesthetics (§2.4), and conclude with a discussion of the functions of art criticism (§2.5).

2.1 Understanding and explanatory structure

It is often argued that no amount of propositional knowledge is sufficient for explanatory understanding, because the latter is partly constituted by a non-propositional representation of explanatory structure.¹⁰ Why think this? Consider the fact that it seems possible to possess *explanatory propositional knowledge* – e.g. knowledge that p because q – and yet not understand why p. As Stephen Grimm (2006) argues:

I get into my 1991 Volkswagen and none of the gauges—the speedometer, tachometer, etc.—come to life; they’re all dead. [M]y mechanic tells me that the reason why the gauges are dead is because I have a bad ignition switch. I then seem to have excellent

⁹ Cf. McGrath (2011) on “the apparent possibility of an agent’s deferring to another person not only about the claim that a particular course of action is right, but also about the underlying reasons that make it right.” (p. 136)

¹⁰ See Zagzebski 2001, §III, 2012, p. 175, Grimm, 2006, pp. 532-4, 2014, §§1-5, Hills 2009, pp. 100-1, 2016, p. 663, Hazlett forthcoming b; cf. Kvanvig 2003, p. 192, p. 198, p. 202, Hopkins 2007, p. 630. [Cf. debates about whether practical knowledge and “knowledge-wh” are “non-propositional” or “reducible” to “propositional” knowledge: Stanley, Cath, Stanley and Williamson, Schaffer, Brogaard] Why “representation” instead of “grasp”? Because “grasp” implies success; we seek a state that stands in the same relation to explanatory understanding as belief stands to propositional knowledge (see below).

reason to assent to the claim that my gauges are dead because of a bad ignition switch, even though I fail to grasp how a bad ignition switch might lead to this result. (p. 531)

You know that the gauges are dead because of a bad ignition switch, but do not understand why the gauges are dead. What is missing? So the argument goes, a correct non-propositional representation of the explanatory connection between whatever explains the fact that p (the *explanans*) and the fact that p (the *explanandum*)¹¹ – in this case, the explanatory connection between the bad ignition switch and the dead gauges. In the same way that propositional knowledge that p is partly constituted by a correct representation of the truth of the proposition that p – in the form of a true belief that p – understanding why p is partly constituted by a correct non-propositional representation of the explanatory connection between whatever explains the fact that p and the fact that p. Propositional knowledge is a species of true belief, and explanatory understanding is a species of such non-propositional representation; just as knowledge and error have something in common – namely, belief – understanding and misunderstanding have something in common – namely, non-propositional representation of explanatory structure. It is annoying, but unimportant for our purposes here, that, unlike belief, this species of representation has no common name in English, although when we speak of a person’s picture of, construal of, or take on something, we are often speaking of their non-propositional representation of explanatory structure.

This argument seems just as plausible if we add further individual items of propositional knowledge, e.g. *counterfactual propositional knowledge* (e.g. that the gauges would come back to life if the ignition switch were replaced) and *general propositional knowledge* (e.g. that the gauges on the ’91 Volkswagen are powered by the ignition switch). So I shall concede the conclusion – that no amount of propositional knowledge is sufficient for explanatory understanding, which is a species of non-propositional representation of explanatory structure – for the sake of argument.

However, two worries deserve mention here. (Neither of these will make a difference for what follows.) First, although it seems possible that we might not understand why the gauges are dead despite knowing that the gauges are dead because of a bad ignition switch, that the gauges would come back to life if the ignition switch were replaced, and that the gauges on the ’91 Volkswagen are powered by the ignition switch, the more explanatory, counterfactual, and general propositional knowledge we imagine ourselves possessing, the harder it is to imagine ourselves not understanding why the gauges are dead. It is not yet clear that we can imagine someone possessing *all* the propositional knowledge relevant to the question of why p who does not yet understand why p. Second, whether the above argument is sound depends on what we mean by “non-propositional representation,” which depends (assuming whether a representational is propositional depends on whether its content is propositional) on what we mean by “proposition.” When Linda Zagzebski (2001) argues that “*understanding is the state of comprehension of nonpropositional structures of reality*,” (p. 242) it is clear that she takes a “proposition” to be a sentence, or at least to have the structure of a sentence: she concedes that “there is a form of knowledge that is mediated through a sentential structure” and that (in connection with this) “reality has a propositional structure” (ibid.); she says that “[t]he structure of works of art ... nonpropositional, and for this reason it is very difficult for interpreters of art to translate their understanding of that structure into a propositional form” (ibid.); she speaks of “propositions and their constituent concepts,” conceding that the “advantage of language is that we have rules codifying the logical relations among propositions.”

¹¹ It is sometimes suggested that understanding is not a species of correct representation at all (Zagzebski 2001, §§IV – V, Elgin 1996, pp. 122-9, 2006, 2009; see also Elgin 2004; cf. Hazlett forthcoming b). If understanding were merely an “internal” state – e.g. the pleasant “ah-ha!” feeling of discovery and seeing how things fit together – it would be natural to argue that it could not be transmitted through testimony. But understanding is a species of correct representation, because otherwise misunderstanding would be impossible (cf. Kvanvig 2003, pp. 191-1, p. 202, Trout 2002, §1, Grimm 2006, p. 530).

(ibid.) But if propositions are not essentially sentential – as on familiar Fregean, Russellian, and sets-of-worlds accounts – then there is no reason to draw this conclusion. Therefore, if we assume any of these accounts, we could concede that explanatory understanding is a species of non-sentential representation, without conceding that it is a species of non-propositional representation.

[Despite the concession that explanatory understanding is a species of non-propositional representation, it would be a mistake to conclude that explanatory understanding is not partly constituted by relevant propositional knowledge (e.g. explanatory, counterfactual, and general knowledge). Knowing that the gauges are dead because of a bad ignition switch is part of what it is to understand why the gauges are dead – and the same, *mutatis mutandis*, for other relevant instances of propositional knowledge. Why accept this claim of constitution? Because we cannot imagine someone who possesses explanatory understanding without possessing relevant propositional knowledge.¹² We cannot imagine someone who understands why the gauges are dead, for example, and yet does not know that they are dead because of a bad ignition switch.]

2.2 Testimony and intellectual dependence

I shall assume that a *testimonial exchange* is an interaction between a hearer and a speaker, in which there is a distinctive kind of intellectual dependence of the hearer on the speaker, such that the hearer relies on the speaker for the correctness of their testimony.¹³ In a case of testimonial belief that *p*, for example, the hearer, who comes to believe that *p*, relies on the speaker, who tells the hearer that *p*, for the truth of the proposition that *p*.

What does it mean to rely on someone for the correctness of their testimony? The distinctive reliance I have in mind can be characterized by appeal to three features of testimonial exchanges. First, in a testimonial exchange the hearer's acceptance of the speaker's testimony is conditional on the perceived credibility of the speaker. If you have formed some beliefs about the solar system on the basis of what you were told by someone whom you took to be a distinguished professor of astronomy, when you discover that they are, in fact, an undistinguished practitioner of astrology, you will be inclined to give up the beliefs that you had formed on their say-so. Second, the hearer in a testimonial exchange is entitled to blame the speaker for problems with the content of their testimony, e.g. if what they say turns out to be false, as in the case of the would-be the professor's claims about the solar system, which turn out to be wrong.¹⁴ Third, as Sandy Goldberg argues (2006, pp. 133-7, 2011, pp. 177-8), the hearer in a testimonial exchange is entitled to "pass the buck" to the speaker in the event that what they have accepted on the basis of the speaker's testimony is challenged. If someone asks you to defend your astronomical beliefs; you could in that case refer them back to your source.

The requirement of intellectual dependence rules out the following kind of case as not a case of testimonial belief: you believe that *q* on the basis of being told that *q*, and infer – perhaps immediately

¹² [For this reason, we should not conclude that relevant *abilities*, *skills*, or *practical knowledge* are partly constitutive of explanatory understanding, *pace* Grimm 2006, p. 12, 2014, p. 340, Hills 2016, p. 663; cf. Kvanvig 2003, p. 298. Compare disabled know-how, as in the case of the injured skier. We are misled by the fact that the lack of the relevant abilities or skill is almost always *evidence* of a lack of explanatory understanding. And we can concede that we can concede here that there is no such thing as testimonial ability, skill, or practical knowledge (cf. Coady 1994, p. 68-9, Hills 2009, p. 121, 2016, p. 670).]

¹³ Note well that the speaker need not speak and the hearer need not hear; testimonial exchanges can go via writing, sign language, semaphore, etc. And note well that hearer and speaker need not be individual persons; they can be groups, institutions, etc.

¹⁴ Cf. Goldberg, *op. cit.* My understanding of this idea is, I think, importantly different from Goldberg's, but the spirit is the same.

and without any conscious deliberation – that p.¹⁵ For example: you ask a stranger for the time and when they tell you, you immediately realize that you are late for a meeting. Your belief that you are late for a meeting is non-testimonial; testimonial belief requires that the content of the belief be the same as the content of the telling on which the belief is based.¹⁶ You rely on the stranger for the truth of the proposition about the time, but not for the truth of the proposition about your meeting that you infer from it. And the requirement of intellectual dependence also rules out the following kind of case as not a case of testimonial belief: your coming to believe that p on some non-testimonial basis is caused by your being told that p. For example: your math teacher tells you the answer to some problem, which enables you to construct a proof of it. Even though in this case the content of your belief is the same as the content of the telling on which the belief is based, your belief is not testimonial, because the intellectual dependence distinctive of testimonial exchanges is absent.

The present assumption concerns the nature of testimony, and as such it leaves open controversial questions about testimonial justification and knowledge. It is consistent with both skepticism and anti-skepticism about testimonial knowledge, with both “reductionism” and “anti-reductionism” about testimonial justification¹⁷, and with both the “assurance view” and its negation.¹⁸

2.3 Explaining why p (in general)

What motivates the premise that testimonial understanding is impossible (§1.3)? Here is an argument:

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

I granted (§2.2) that no amount of propositional knowledge is sufficient for explanatory understanding. However, even in that case, the argument is unsound. Not all testimonial exchanges are interactions in which the speaker *tells the hearer that p*; in some testimonial exchanges, the speaker *explains to the hearer why p*.¹⁹ Testimonial exchanges can involve either of these kinds of speech act – telling that p and explaining why p – on the part of the speaker.²⁰ In cases of testimonial propositional knowledge, the speaker expresses their knowledge that p by telling the hearer that p, who comes to know that p on that basis; propositional knowledge is thus transmitted from speaker to hearer. The speaker’s telling is a non-mental representation of a particular proposition as true – namely, the proposition belief in which partly constitutes their propositional knowledge. In cases of testimonial explanatory understanding, the speaker expresses their understanding of why p by explaining to the hearer why p, who comes to understanding why p on that basis; explanatory understanding is thus transmitted from speaker to hearer. The speaker’s explanation is a non-mental representation of particular explanatory connections as real – namely, those

¹⁵ Cf. Boyd forthcoming, [on “direct” vs “indirect” sources of knowledge or understanding].

¹⁶ Where the boundary lies between what is told and what is (perhaps immediately and without conscious deliberation) inferred from what is told is an important topic in the philosophy of language, related to, but not the same as, the question of where the boundary lies between what is said and what is implicated.

¹⁷ Cf. Coady 1992, Chapter 1, Fricker 1994, 1995, Lackey 2006.

¹⁸ Cf. Hinchman 2005, Moran 2005; Lackey 2008, Chapter 8.

¹⁹ Note well that “explanation,” “explains,” etc., are polysemous, referring sometimes to a speech act – e.g. “my mechanic explained to me why the gauges are dead” – and sometimes a metaphysical relation – e.g. “the bad ignition switch explains the dead gauges.”

²⁰ Note that the distinction between telling and explaining is not grammatical: you can tell someone why p and you can explain to someone that p.

explanatory connections representation of which partly constitutes their explanatory understanding (cf. §2.1).

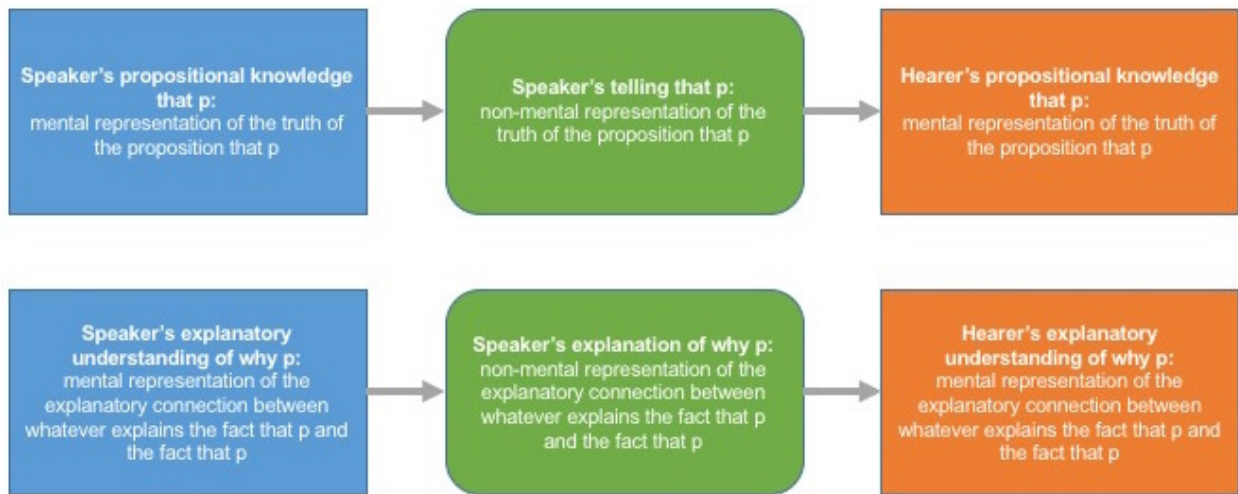


Figure: transmission of propositional knowledge and transmission of explanatory understanding

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

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

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

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

second mechanic might still have grasped the connection for themselves, without reliance on my mechanic. (Compare the case, from §2.2, of proving what your math teacher tells you.)

[That my understanding of why the gauges are dead is testimonial is further supported by the observation that my relevant explanatory, counterfactual, and general propositional knowledge (§2.1) is testimonial – or so we can easily imagine. I know that the gauges are dead because the ignition switch is bad, and I know that the gauges would come back to life if the ignition switch were replaced, and I know that the gauges on the 1991 Volkswagen require a working ignition switch to operate correctly – but I know all this only because this is what my mechanic tells me. (The second mechanic, by contrast, knows all this non-testimonially, by inference from their expert knowledge of auto repair along with the testimonial knowledge that the ignition switch is bad.) Explanatory understanding is partly constituted by relevant explanatory, counterfactual, and general propositional knowledge (§2.1). So my understanding of why the gauges are dead is partly constituted by testimonial knowledge.²¹ This supports the conclusion that my understanding is testimonial.²²]

You might object that, in this and other cases of would-be testimonial understanding, the hearer must still grasp the speaker's explanation for herself – they must still “connect the dots” or “put it all together” on their own. However, it seems to me that this is just to say that the hearer must non-propositionally represent explanatory structure (§2.1); therefore, in this respect testimonial explanatory understanding is no different from testimonial propositional knowledge, where the hearer must believe – for herself, on their own – what the speaker tells her. The appeal of this objection may derive from the mistaken idea that explanatory understanding is especially difficult to acquire. Explanatory understanding is sometimes difficult to acquire, but sometimes it is easy to acquire.²³ Likewise propositional knowledge is sometimes easy to acquire, but sometimes it is difficult to acquire – including in cases of testimonial propositional knowledge, as when it is difficult to identify a credible source of information or when it is difficult to grasp the concepts required to accept some expert's testimony.

I have suggested one diagnosis of the appeal of the mistaken view that testimonial understanding is impossible: the mistaken assumption that all testimonial exchanges are interactions in which the speaker tells the hearer that p. Another reason that testimonial understanding may seem impossible is a mistaken, but perhaps initially attractive, picture of testimonial exchanges that overestimates the intellectual contribution of the speaker and underestimates the intellectual contribution of the hearer. If we think of cases of testimonial propositional knowledge as cases in which the knower blindly and passively trusts the speaker, treating the mere fact that someone said that p as conclusive evidence that p, then we will struggle to make sense of testimonial understanding – for (so the argument might go) understanding is incompatible with blind and passive trust of this kind. (On this mistaken picture, the

²¹ [This speaks against Boyd's (forthcoming) claim that understanding's distinctive “grasp” cannot be transmitted through testimony.]

²² [Objection: the argument of §2.1 suggests that your knowledge that p is partly constitutive of your understanding why p, as well as your knowledge that q (when it is the case that p because q); but it seems like non-testimonial understanding why p is compatible with mere testimonial knowledge that p and/or mere testimonial knowledge that q.]

²³ The thought that understanding is especially difficult to acquire is motivated by its promise vis-à-vis explaining the supposed fact that understanding is especially valuable. Kenneth Boyd (forthcoming) argues that testimonial understanding is possible so long as the relevant understanding is easy to acquire – either absolutely or relative to the person who understands. On my account, there is no requirement that the relevant understanding be relatively or absolutely easy to acquire. The crucial question is the presence or absence of intellectual dependence (§2.2). [Is understanding in some sense more difficult to transmit through testimony than knowledge? We could say that explaining why p is, in general, more difficult than telling that p. But should we really accept the premise?]

speaker metaphorically inserts a proposition into the inert head of the hearer – but understanding requires more activity on the part of the person who understands.) However, propositional knowledge is also incompatible with blind and passive trust of this kind, and for this reason testimonial propositional knowledge requires a significant contribution from the hearer. To acquire knowledge, the hearer must manifest a sensitivity to evidence of sincerity or insincerity on the part of the speaker, a sensitivity to the plausibility or implausibility of what the speaker asserts, and a disposition to select reliable sources of testimony.²⁴ So the fact that understanding requires a significant contribution from the person who understands – that they must be active and not passive – is no mark against the possibility of testimonial understanding.

2.4 Explaining why p (within aesthetics)

Testimonial understanding is possible (§2.3). But perhaps the defender of the argument from the impossibility of testimonial understanding (§1.3) could respond by arguing that, although testimonial understanding is possible in general, testimonial *aesthetic* understanding is impossible. Is this response plausible? I think not. To see this, however, we need to say more about the specifics of *aesthetic explanation*, i.e. explanation of why some aesthetic property is instantiated, given the instantiation of the non-aesthetic properties on which it supervenes.

Much of this work has already been done by Frank Sibley, in his influential paper “Aesthetic Concepts” (1959). Sibley’s description of how people justify their aesthetic judgments provides us with the specifics we need to appreciate the possibility of testimonial aesthetic understanding. Sibley (1959) observes that:

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

And he later gives a description of the methods that art critics use when they do this (pp. 438-5). These include:

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

These are the means by which we “defend or support our [aesthetic] judgments, and convince others of their rightness.” (p. 438) Central to this activity is “mentioning or pointing out the features, including

²⁴ See Fricker 1994, pp. 135-5, pp. 148-51, 1995, pp. 404-8, p. 409, Audi 1997, pp. 406-7, Lackey 2008, pp. 160-4, pp. 178-85; cf. (in connection with moral testimony) Driver 2006, pp. 635-6, (in connection with aesthetic testimony) McKinnon forthcoming, [“However, even accepting the case as described, is it really true that Kathy plays no active role in coming to believe,” etc.], and (in connection with testimonial understanding) Boyd forthcoming, [“The acquisition of knowledge, then, can be primarily a passive affair,” etc.].

easily discernible non-aesthetic ones, upon which the aesthetic qualities depend”; by doing this “the critic is thereby justifying or supporting his judgments.” (p. 439) My contention is that, by doing this, the critic is also explaining why certain aesthetic properties are instantiated, given the instantiation of the non-aesthetic properties on which they supervene – and on the basis of such an explanation someone else might come to understand why those properties are instantiated, given the instantiation of the non-aesthetic properties on which they supervene, i.e. they might acquire testimonial aesthetic understanding.

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

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

You might object that Ebert’s explanation is *prima facie* compelling, and therefore that once you come to see the fact that the shark is generally unseen as the decisive factor, you no longer rely on Ebert in your understanding of why *Jaws* is suspenseful. There is something right in this thought, but it does not suggest that my understanding is non-testimonial. It sounds right that that unexploded bombs and unseen sharks are more suspenseful than their alternatives, but I do not think I could *know* this without Ebert telling me so. Similarly, although Ebert’s explanation sounds right, I do not think I could genuinely understand why *Jaws* is suspenseful without relying on him. In this connection, note well that tellings that p can be *prima facie* compelling and this can be part of the reason that we accept them (in a testimonial exchange).²⁵ In the same way, explanations why p can be *prima facie* compelling and this can be part of the reason that we accept them (in a testimonial exchange).

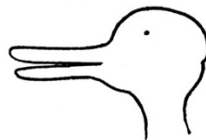
Although this feature is not present in the case of Ebert’s explanation, non-linguistic expression seems important in many cases of aesthetic explanation. Already in our case of mechanical explanation (§2.3) there was pointing, and pointing, in particular, seems like a paradigm way of “pointing out” the relevant features of a visual artwork (p. 439, p. 440, p. 442). Sibley writes that “[a] critic may sometimes do more with a sweep of an arm than by talking.” (p. 444) As well, Sibley’s catalog of methods of aesthetic explanation – which is also a catalog of methods of explanation, in general – should be expanded to include dialogical elements of explanation. Explanation often involves a conversation, which includes

²⁵ Cf. the mistaken picture of testimony that underestimates the intellectual contribution of the hearer (§2.3).

both questions and answers and objections and replies. In the course of giving an explanation we often both ask questions of our interlocutors and invite them to ask questions of us. As well, inviting and meeting criticism of an explanation is a powerful way of making that explanation compelling. In any event, we should bear both non-linguistic and dialogical elements of explanation in mind to emphasize the inadequacy of the idea that all testimonial exchanges involve nothing more than propositional telling (§2.3).

2.5 The many functions of art criticism

I have suggested (2.4) that art critical explanations can be a source of testimonial aesthetic understanding. This conclusion is consistent with the fact that art critics have more to offer than explanations – that professional art critics do other things is no objection to the claim that they sometimes transmit understanding to their interlocutors. For example, art critics sometimes provide us with a critical vocabulary with which to articulate our inchoate aesthetic understanding. For another example, in some cases “[t]he critic’s talk ... gets us to *see* what he has seen”; in these cases the process involves “bringing others to see what we see.” (Sibley 1959, p. 439) At least some cases of this kind, I want to concede, do not involve a testimonial exchange. After you are instructed to attend not to the intrinsic properties of a Pollack canvass, but rather to imagine the activity of his painting, you now see the painting in a new way – here the intellectual dependence distinctive of testimonial exchanges is absent. However, other cases in which a critic “gets us to see what he has seen” involve a testimonial exchange. First, note that in some cases the critic gets us to see an *explanans*, which we missed on first engaging with the relevant artwork – you might not have noticed the relative hiddenness of the shark in *Jaws*; part of Ebert’s explanation involves pointing this out. But these are not cases in which we are shown why some aesthetic property is instantiated, etc., but rather cases in which we are shown the non-aesthetic properties on which some aesthetic property supervenes. When Ebert points out the relative hiddenness of the shark, we are shown the relative hiddenness of the shark, not the explanatory connection between this and the suspensefulness of the movie. (Compare the case, from §2.2, of my mechanic’s pointing out the bad ignition switch to the second mechanic.) Second, consider the ways in which “seeing” can be mediated by intellectual engagement with other people. Consider a case of putative aesthetic understanding involving a visual artwork (which seems like at least the paradigm kind of artwork where it would make sense to talk about “showing” and “seeing”): understanding why *Sea View* is beautiful. There is an important sense in which the only thing we literally see here are properties of the painting, both non-aesthetic (e.g. colors and shapes, brushstrokes, the texture of the paper, that it is a seascape, the sun obscured by clouds) and aesthetic (e.g. its beauty) – and not the supervenience of the latter on the former. (This is an instance of Hume’s insight that we do not observe necessary connections: just as we do not literally *see* the causation that binds cause and effect, we do not literally *see* the supervenience that binds aesthetic and non-aesthetic properties.) Nevertheless, there may be a broader or figurative sense in which we can see supervenience, and thus see why some aesthetic property is instantiated, etc. Still, it seems like our seeing, at least in this broad or figurative sense, can involve the intellectual distinctive of testimonial exchanges. Other people can “get you to see” something by saying and doing the right sort of things. Suppose you are considering the question of what this picture depicts:



And I say: “It’s a duck – look, here is the bill; it’s facing left,” etc. Have I shown you that it is a duck, so that you now see that it is a duck? It may seem that way to you; certainly you now see the picture as a

picture of a duck because of what I have said and done. I think something similar can happen with art critical explanations. Consider *Sea View*; suppose someone indicates the two dark lines in the distance and says that these are the key to the beauty of the painting. It is easy to imagine coming to see things that way – you imagine them gone and it all seems different; there is some kind of important triad comprising the light, the two dark lines, and the sailboats tossed about in the foreground; etc. But now imagine that your interlocutor reveals they were joking – those lines are nothing important; everyone who has thought for long about the painting agrees; etc. It could happen that you continue to see an explanatory connection between the two dark lines and the beauty of the painting; joke or not, the explanation seems right. But it could easily happen at that point that you realize that what you “saw” was not really there, and you return to thinking that you do not understand why the painting is beautiful. So, even when art critics show us something that we then see, it does not rule out the possibility of a testimonial exchange.

3 Conclusion

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

On the one hand, given the possibility of testimonial aesthetic understanding, aesthetic testimony seems in better shape than its reputation would suggest. We might thus re-evaluate the truism that testimonial aesthetic belief is problematic (§1.1).²⁶ On the other hand, the argument from the impossibility of testimonial aesthetic understanding is just one possible solution to the puzzle of aesthetic testimony.²⁷ We might simply need to look elsewhere to explain why testimonial aesthetic belief is problematic. Consider, for example, the idea – one interpretation of what is known as the “acquaintance principle” – that testimonial aesthetic belief is impossible, since aesthetic judgment is partially constituted by experiences prompted by perceptual acquaintance with relevant objects.²⁸ Consider, for another example, the idea, which I have suggested elsewhere, that testimonial aesthetic belief is undesirable from a broadly

²⁶ Cf. Meskin 2004, Robson 2015, 2015a, 2015b, McKinnon forthcoming.

²⁷ In addition to the two ideas described below, consider also Whiting 2015.

²⁸ Cf. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, §33 (cf. §8, §34), Wollheim 1980, p. 233, Pettit 1983, §§III – IV, Tanner 2003, p. 33; see also Budd 2003, Livingston 2003. For an empirical argument against this, see Robson 2014. In connection with the “acquaintance principle,” note well (cf. Robson 2015b) that the oddity of expressing an aesthetic belief whilst disavowing acquaintance with its object – e.g. saying “*Sea View* is beautiful, although I have not seen it” – is at least in part a matter of conversational pragmatics: expressions of aesthetic judgment generally imply acquaintance with their objects; cancelling this implication can be jarring for the listener, along the lines of “I’d like you to pass me the salt, although I am not requesting that you do so.” As well, we should distinguish between the intuition that testimonial aesthetic belief is problematic from the intuition that a life without acquaintance with artworks would be bad. Acquaintance with artworks (whether high or low, whether literary or visual or musical, whether accompanied or not by critical engagement with said work, whether undertaken seriously or casually) seems like part of the good life for creatures like us (at least in as much as any one thing or type of thing could be said to be part of the good life for creatures like us). But this fact is orthogonal to the status of testimonial aesthetic belief. The reason is that there are many things that seem like part of the good life for creatures like us, but about which testimonial belief is not problematic. A life without friendship or travel or sex seems bad in the same way that a life without acquaintance with artworks seems bad, but testimonial belief about these activities is not problematic. (It is true that in some cases we can identify a person’s wealth of testimonial knowledge about some good as an obstacle to their acquiring it – think of the self-described “foodie” whose gastronomic expertise prevents them from enjoying a simple meal. But there are just as many cases in which testimonial knowledge facilitates the acquisition of some good – think of someone who is inspired to visit Malaysia after reading extensively about Malaysian history.)

“social” perspective: testimonial belief is counter-conducive to certain valuable features of an intellectual community of art critics.²⁹ In any event, I have argued that the puzzle of aesthetic testimony cannot be solved by appeal to the impossibility of testimonial understanding.

However, even if there is something problematic about testimonial aesthetic belief, my argument suggests that there are many contexts and situations in which we can improve our understanding of artworks by accepting what other people have to say about them.³⁰

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²⁹ Hazlett forthcoming a.

³⁰ I presented this paper in 2015 at the American Society for Aesthetics Rocky Mountain Division Meeting in Santa Fe and in 2016 at a workshop on *Varieties of Understanding* at Fordham University (which was sponsored by a grant from the John Templeton Foundation); I owe thanks to my audiences on those occasions, and to Anne Baril and Wayne Riggs.

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