



# *Aesthetic Testimony: An Optimistic Approach* by Jon Robson

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## BOOK REVIEW

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A book review of Jon Robson, *Aesthetic Testimony: An Optimistic Approach*.  
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022, x+166 pp. ISBN 9780192862952.

Jon Robson's recent book, *Aesthetic Testimony: An Optimistic Approach*, fuels the debate on the legitimacy of forming aesthetic judgements based on testimony by defending an optimistic view against the prevailing pessimistic view on the matter. While the pessimistic view denies that testimony can serve as a legitimate source of aesthetic judgement, the optimistic view holds that testimony in aesthetics is not very different from testimony concerning non-aesthetic matters and that the basis for the exceptionality claimed by pessimists is mistaken. Thus, the book offers a dialogue between pessimists and optimists attempting to combat some of the key elements that make pessimism so widely accepted and attractive while presenting optimism not only as a plausible theoretical account but one that is actually closer to our intuitions. As a result, Robson offers a useful and detailed map of different positions taken by those engaged in the aesthetic testimony debate and provides a great source of information for anyone interested in the topic.

The value of the book goes beyond the state-of-the-art overview since it offers new strategies for developing the discussion on aesthetic testimony. As Robson indicates in the introduction, he does not argue 'for any particular account of testimony'; rather, he focuses 'on cases of testimony which we should expect to uncontroversially come out as genuine on any prominent account'. He attends exclusively to 'cases where someone's testimony that "P" is intended to support the claim that P' and 'on what we can learn based on the *content* of this testimony' (p. 4). Therefore, his discussion is not so much about the way in which testimony is delivered but about what we make of its content. Robson argues that testimonial knowledge in aesthetics works very much in the same way as in non-aesthetic domains. His approach is pragmatist at its core;

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through his analysis, he ultimately appeals to a variety of practices that shows how we indeed rely on aesthetic testimony. He also questions why we should suppose that there is something exceptional when it comes to the epistemology of aesthetic testimony.

Of course, the exceptional nature of aesthetic testimony is usually treated as the ground of pessimism. Often appealing to Kant, for whom ‘that a thing has pleased others could never serve as the basis for an aesthetical judgment’<sup>1</sup>, pessimists argue that it is impossible to form aesthetic judgements on the basis of the testimony of others. Thus, ‘constitutive pessimism’ claims that the very nature of aesthetic judgement entails that ‘something can only count as an aesthetic judgement if it is formed on the basis of (something like) first-hand perception’ (p. 32). However, Robson shows that interpreting Kant as a (sort of) pessimist is a highly controversial issue that he would rather leave aside since he thinks that it poses no threat to the kind of optimism he seeks to defend. All he needs to prove is that *some* aesthetic judgements *can* be formed on the basis of testimony of others, a claim that, indeed, some ‘moderate’ contemporary versions of pessimism concede while nonetheless maintaining that in any event they should not be (p. 28). For some, the reason is that we cannot achieve aesthetic knowledge based on testimony (labelled ‘unavailability pessimism’). Others, in turn, allow that aesthetic judgements formed on the basis of testimony can sometimes attain the status of knowledge but are committed to some (non-epistemic) norm that renders such judgements illegitimate (that is, ‘unusability pessimism’).

The thing is that there is no agreement on questions such as ‘how broad the scope of the aesthetic is intended to be here, what precisely is meant by “judgement” and what the (il)legitimacy in questions amounts to’ (p. 13). Hence, Robson’s argument for optimism relies on what he believes is a plausible view of aesthetic judgement. He argues that ‘judgements’ are, on the one hand, a wide range of mental states (including imaginings and suppositions) whose content can be expressed by assertoric, declarative sentences and, on the other hand, that aesthetic judgements rely on properties that are evaluative in a broad (both thick and thin) sense (although not necessarily perceptual). Such an account of aesthetic judgements makes it compatible with taking them to be beliefs, yet we cannot always treat them as such. In any case, for Robson, counting on this particular account of aesthetic judgement would not render his view question-begging since the account would be acceptable for many (moderate) pessimists who thus would find it hard to ‘maintain that it is never legitimate to form aesthetic judgements on the basis of testimony’ (p. 20).

In arguing for the exceptionality of aesthetic testimony and its reliance on first-person experience, moderate pessimists seem to be committed to establishing some sort of ‘asymmetry’ between the aesthetic case and the role of testimony in non-aesthetic realms. Robson proposes two ways in which such asymmetry can be defended. The first is to argue that aesthetic testimony is ‘[somehow] inferior to nonaesthetic testimony’. The second is to claim that ‘aesthetic judgements formed on the basis of testimony are somehow inferior to aesthetic judgements formed on the basis of first-hand experience’ (p. 20). However, these claims will only work when the comparisons are made assuming ‘all else being equal’. Yet Robson describes how in real life, the classes of both first-hand aesthetic judgements and of judgements based on testimony regarding non-aesthetic domains are more versatile than the asymmetry thesis assumes. Signalling how such diversity makes it impossible to generalize, he

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1 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. J. H. Bernard (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2005), p. 94.

draws a complex map of possibilities that ultimately blurs the very distinction between pessimism and optimism about the force of testimony. In order to convince us of the benefits and attractiveness of optimism over pessimism, Robson takes another look at a more simplified understanding of the two rivals, which portrays pessimism as the default position both for philosophers and ‘the folk’. Robson then focuses on arguing against the intuitive appeal of pessimism that, in the end, lies behind the assumed asymmetry between aesthetic and non-aesthetic judgements.

Robson’s portrayal of the simplified version of the positions respects the distinction between constitutive pessimism on the one hand and unavailability and unusability pessimism on the other. Whereas constitutive pessimism typically holds an expressivist view of the nature of aesthetic judgements that differentiates them from ordinary beliefs, unavailability and unusability pessimists need not deny that aesthetic judgements are beliefs. Robson’s discussion deals mostly with the latter since he dismisses crude emotivism about aesthetic judgement. Instead, appealing to, for example, Simon Blackburn’s moral expressivism, he argues that expressivism is compatible with optimism and that his own view can largely remain neutral with respect to cognitivist and non-cognitivist views of aesthetic judgement (p. 46).

Robson is aware of the difference between saying that something is beautiful based on first-person experience and making the same judgement based on the testimony of others. However, whereas he admits that there are surely certain important experiential states, which we cannot obtain on the basis of testimony, they are not the only mental correlates of our sincere aesthetic assertions. In fact, as Robson’s argument continues, most aesthetic assertions are not made in the presence of the object of those assertions (pp. 43–44). So, one option for defending constitutive pessimism would be to differentiate between what it is *believed* about an object and what is actually *appreciated* in the presence of the object. But, again, Robson defends the compatibility of such differentiation with the kind of optimism he advocates, for ‘there is no inconsistency in holding both that aesthetic belief can be based on testimony and that aesthetic appreciation cannot’ (p. 46). It may be the case, quoting Dominic McIver Lopes, that “‘aesthetic judgement’ can refer to both “experience-like states ascribing aesthetic value and non-experiential states ascribing aesthetic value”” (p. 47). Lopes maintains that Wollheim’s ‘acquaintance principle’, often cited by pessimists, is properly concerned only with the former and not the latter. Hence, if contemporary pessimists were not explicitly concerned with aesthetic beliefs, the debate would be dissolved.

But they are and so, in Robson’s view, there is a genuine controversy between his account and that of most moderate pessimists. Robson’s argument moves forward in order to show that optimism, not pessimism, should be our default position in this matter based on the very nature of aesthetic judgement, given that we *do* form aesthetic judgements based on testimony. Moreover, our folk practice is full of assertions made independently of direct experience, in the absence of the object of aesthetic judgement, or by relying on the testimony of others, often remarkably competent critics. Even the pessimists would claim that maybe we *should not* form such beliefs based on the reviews of peers and experts, the works’ success in contests, or their perceived popularity (p. 60), and thus acknowledge that testimony is part of everyday practice. However, Robson argues that there is no principled difference in the role testimonies play in aesthetic and non-aesthetic domains, at least insofar as a legitimate source of belief is uncontroversially acceptable. His pragmatist strategy sets up the challenge of accounting for such ‘descriptive optimism’ for pessimists who

treat the aesthetic cases as exceptional. According to Robson, the pessimists rely too heavily on the acquaintance principle, often taking its correctness for granted. In his view, while drawing an attractive analogy with judgements of gustatory taste, 'we would need some story about what makes these two areas [...] uniquely susceptible to this kind of acquaintance demand' (p. 66).

Robson contests other pessimistic intuitions by showing that they either lack epistemic weight or, if they have any force, they could be counterbalanced by other 'optimistic intuitions' reflecting a set of concrete cases in which we rely on aesthetic testimony. Robson asks us to consider, for instance, situations concerning lost works, assertions regarding the natural beauty, say, of the Aurora Borealis, or claims of 'aesthetic common knowledge' approved by the test of time, such as the excellence of Caravaggio's paintings. He thus expands the selective set of examples usually discussed in order to support pessimism. Yet, Robson argues, any version of optimism could provide a better explanation of such cases than either unavailability or unusability pessimism. Robson himself prefers an optimist view that is linked to a contextualist social epistemology according to which the truth of assertions is related to particular contexts and relevant respects. He claims that this version, which is 'extreme' insofar as it rejects all pessimistic claims, is indeed better equipped to deal with the assertions standardly produced within critical discourse, such as 'the painting is exquisitely beautiful, but I've never seen it' (p. 12). The book ends with the explanation of why assertions of this kind, odd as they might seem, do not violate any norm that qualifies them as knowledge because we *know* what they express, their meanings, and their truth, even in the absence of first-hand experience. The sincere expression of our beliefs makes them legitimate aesthetic judgements.

It is impossible to summarize all of the arguments given for and against the complex and nuanced pessimistic and optimistic views meticulously analysed in this book. Nevertheless, as for Robson's attempt to convince us that pessimism is mistaken and that we should accept (a rather extreme version of) optimism concerning aesthetic testimony, I would say that it still depends on what precisely is meant by 'aesthetic judgement'. This question is all the more relevant considering how broad the scope of the aesthetic covered in the book actually is.

The strategy of displaying the ubiquity of optimistic practices, such as our trust in the testimony of friends or experts when choosing which movie to watch, would still miss the point for a constitutive pessimist who emphasizes the difference made by Lopes between 'experience-like states ascribing aesthetic value' and 'non-experiential states ascribing aesthetic value' even if both can fit under the label 'aesthetic judgement'. Moreover, Robson's discussion with moderate pessimists, who accept that aesthetic judgements are beliefs (yet operate with a different notion of belief), reveals that the assumed agreement on the notion of aesthetic judgement is not that clear. It should come as no surprise then that the last contender Robson discusses in the book is 'an assertoric version of the kind of appreciative account' (p. 151) that would claim the reference to first-hand experience as part of the *semantics* of aesthetic judgements and that therefore, in his view, is incapable of dealing with the meanings of the assertions that permit our optimistic practices. However, the appreciative account is the view that ascribes the acquaintance principle and (by extension) pessimism concerning testimony to judgements that express aesthetic appreciation, leaving judgements that express beliefs, such as aesthetic assertions based on testimony, intact. To me, there is no inconsistency in holding that there are aesthetic beliefs that can be based on testimony and others that can be based on aesthetic appreciation.

Using one of Robson's examples, by sincerely asserting that 'the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel is beautiful' one can express a belief formed on the basis of either personal experience or testimony. We can also learn that it was painted by Michelangelo from the testimony of others, who need not even be experts since the fact could be treated as 'non-aesthetic common knowledge'. There is no difference in the role of testimony in these different domains. However, we consider that 'beautiful' is an aesthetic term because it ultimately refers to the experience of others who have seen the paintings; such an ascription of aesthetic value could not begin with testimony. The very nature of aesthetic judgement is still an open question, because it attains not so much to the semantics of the evaluative properties sincerely asserted, the contents of judgements, or what we do with them, as to what the different experiential and non-experiential sources of such evaluation are.

In my own view, pessimists, even expressivists, are not forced to deny the existence and importance of optimistic practices and the possibility of making sense of them. Aesthetic appreciation is an intelligible, communicable, and shareable practice, which gives rise to aesthetic common knowledge and other norms that connect us to our own history and culture. It is a reflection of the 'forms of life' that Wittgenstein saw behind every aesthetic judgement. Social epistemology can offer us valuable insight into those forms of life since the processes governing the learning and formation of aesthetic values, even of our own preferences, remain largely obscure. I see no problem with calling this spectrum of values, beliefs, norms, practices, knowledge, and so on 'aesthetic' on the grounds that they somehow refer to our or others' sensory and imaginative experiences. But the fact that there is agreement on aesthetic matters and on the acceptability of certain aesthetic criteria should not be confused with the question of the status of aesthetic judgement that, in early modernity and inspired by the analogy with judgements of gustatory taste, was declared autonomous, including with regard to morality. Judgements of aesthetic taste are based in a sort of feeling (typically of pleasure) yet harbour an uneasy tension between the subjective basis that makes them unappealable and notoriously varied, and their claims of normativity, given that they are not arbitrary and completely idiosyncratic but also relevant for others. Hence, agreement on aesthetic matters is as persistent as disagreement, even between those more informed or competent experts, as persistent as the old 'problem of taste'. The puzzles and discussions that this tension generates, such as the legitimacy of testimony, which this book so profoundly analyses, are to be continued.

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