

## Chapter 8

# SOLVING THE PUZZLE OF AESTHETIC TESTIMONY

Aaron Meskin

Anti-realism holds an attraction for many philosophers across the range of evaluative domains. But while some of the motivations for anti-realism are shared in the ethical and aesthetic domains (e.g. the existence of widespread and apparently ineliminable disagreement, worries about verification), others are domain-specific. For example, internalism – in particular motivational internalism (the view that there is an internal connection between moral judgment and motivation) – drove much of the ethical anti-realism of the latter half of the twentieth century, but motivational internalism has never played a significant role in arguments for aesthetic anti-realism, since the internalist intuition is much less robust in aesthetics than in ethics.

In this paper I focus on a distinctive motivation for aesthetic anti-realism – a motivation that I refer to as *the puzzle of aesthetic testimony*. This puzzle has to do with a noticeable difference between the way we treat aesthetic and non-aesthetic testimony. While we are quick to form beliefs on the basis of what others tell us about many non-aesthetic matters, we are hesitant to form aesthetic judgments on the basis of what others tell us. And while we are often comfortable counting someone as justified on the basis of non-aesthetic testimony, we tend not to be so inclined in the aesthetic case. These are puzzling disanalogies, and – as I shall show – they lend some attraction to aesthetic anti-realism. But aesthetic anti-realism can be resisted. I offer a solution to the puzzle of aesthetic testimony that is perfectly consistent with full-fledged aesthetic realism.

## THE PSYCHOLOGY AND EPISTEMOLOGY OF INFORMAL TESTIMONY

One common process of human belief-formation involves the informal testimony of others. Particularly dramatic evidence of this can be found in the development of scientific and metaphysical beliefs in young children (Harris 2002). And this process of belief-formation is – at least in many cases – an epistemically valuable one. Although Locke denied the possibility of knowledge on the basis of informal testimony (1690/1975: 1.4.23, 4.16.10–11), and although thoroughgoing skeptics will no doubt concur with Locke, there is widespread agreement among philosophers that the testimony of others can be – and often is – a source of both justification and knowledge. Not only do we often form beliefs on the basis of others' testimony, we are often warranted in so doing; hence, the beliefs that result from the process of testimonial uptake often possess justification and may even underwrite knowledge. For example, we regularly form beliefs about the biographies of our friends and loved ones on the basis of their testimony about these domains, and these beliefs are often justified. In fact, without the capacity to acquire knowledge by testimony, our epistemic situation would be seriously compromised. Much of what we know – and most of what we know in certain domains (e.g. the natural sciences) – is acquired by means of what we are told.

The central dispute among epistemologists is why, and under what conditions, testimony provides justification and knowledge. Reductivists hold that testimonially supplied justification is essentially dependent on other, more basic, sources of justification and knowledge (e.g. induction). Non-reductivists, on the other hand, hold that testimony is an independent source of justification, neither dependent on prior justification nor on some other more basic epistemic faculty. Much ink has been spilled in the dispute between these two camps (e.g. Coady 1992; Burge 1993; Webb 1993; Audi 1997; Graham 1997, 2000; Schmitt 1999; Elgin 2002; Weiner 2003). Nonetheless, that testimony may, at least under some circumstances, provide justification and knowledge is as close to beyond dispute as philosophical matters get.

## THE ACQUAINTANCE PRINCIPLE AND THE PUZZLE OF AESTHETIC TESTIMONY

Before I discuss the puzzle of aesthetic testimony, I should say a bit more about what I mean by 'aesthetic testimony.' I use the expression to refer to informal testimony about beauty, artistic value, or aesthetic value. I understand such informal testimony to consist in the expression of