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Should We Believe Philosophical Claims on Testimony?

KEITH ALLEN

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B I O G R A P H Y

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E D I T O R I A L N O T E

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SHOULD WE BELIEVE PHILOSOPHICAL CLAIMS
ON TESTIMONY?

KEITH ALLEN

This paper considers whether we should believe philosophical claims on 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 is that philosophy is not truth-directed.

I. 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 large 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 impermissible 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 in principle no 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 accept 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 *unuseable*, 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.¹ We can, however, use the same framework for 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 argue that there is at least an interesting question about whether and why we should 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, and much more tentative aim, is to suggest an explanation of why we should not accept philosophical claims on testimony. I present a case for pessimism about philosophical testimony in §2. §3 considers a form of unuseability pessimism about philosophical testimony, and §4 considers whether pessimism about philosophical testimony is merely contingent. §5 provides a diagnosis of the similarities between moral, aesthetic, and philosophical discourse, and §6 concludes by tentatively outlining an explanation of why we should not accept 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 their word for it. The claim that we

¹ Meskin (2004, pp. 88-90) briefly discusses aesthetic judgments about theories and proofs (including, but not restricted to, philosophical theories and proofs), but not philosophical judgments 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.

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 accept philosophical claims on testimony?

Locke's scepticism about philosophical testimony reflects a more general scepticism about the role of testimony in epistemology. 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. As such, testimony of any kind is insufficient for knowledge. But this is not a convincing reason to think that there is anything problematic about philosophical testimony in particular, because Locke's general 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.

Reid is more interesting in this respect, because he is not generally sceptical of testimony; indeed, he emphasises the importance of testimony to humans, given our social nature (1764, 6.24, pp. 194-5). Reid's scepticism therefore 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 appear to believe that there *is* a problem where philosophical claims are at issue. The reason that Reid gives for accepting a form of pessimism about philosophical testimony in particular 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' (1785, 2.14, p. 211).

However, this does not establish 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 still allow that we *can* inquire further into the evidence for opinions that we receive on testimony, and that doing so might even be necessary if there are particular grounds for suspicion. Moreover, this only establishes that it is *permissible* to inquire further into the grounds of philosophical opinions presented by testimony; but Reid claims that we *ought not* accept philosophical claims on the authority of others, and so that doing this is *impermissible*.

Nevertheless, even though the reasons that Locke and Reid present for thinking that we ought not to believe philosophical claims on testimony may not be persuasive, there is 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 evidence.

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 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 accept propositions expressing intuitions on the basis of testimony? To the extent that these claims are themselves supposed to provide evidence for philosophical theorising, the answer is plausibly no. On standard accounts, these are not themselves supposed to be theoretical claims, but rather evidence to which philosophical theories are responsive. Propositions of this kind are supposed to be claims which we are disposed to accept 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 accept 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 on the basis of the argument. 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 between these kinds of case is that the unproblematic cases are purely descriptive, whereas the problematic cases are evaluative, and involve philosophical appreciation and assessment. Indeed, where there does seem something problematic about accepting 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 cases which involve accepting evaluative philosophical claims on the basis of testimony: for instance, when editors decide whether to publish philosophical works on the basis of referee reports, when authors defer in the course of their argument to defences of philosophical claims made elsewhere, or simply when we unreflecting accept the claims of others, perhaps because of the suasive force with which they state them. But none of these cases are entirely clear cut.

Referees do not normally make recommendations without providing reasons for their assessment. Moreover, in recommending or rejecting a philosophical work, referees are not necessarily recommending the

philosophical claims expressed. It is possible, and common, to positively assess the merits of a philosophical claim or argument without actually believing it. In part this is because the judgements that referees are asked to make are not simply judgements about whether they find the arguments in a philosophical work compelling, but whether they think that the work is, for example, original, sufficiently grounded in the existing literature, likely to generate further discussion, or well-argued—where this does not necessarily mean correct.

When an author defers to philosophical claims made elsewhere—for instance, in defence of the general framework that they are working in, or in defence of specific claims that they don't have space to substantiate in that context—it isn't clear that we are expected, or even entitled, to believe those claims on the basis of testimony. What references of this kind provide us with are sources of arguments for philosophical claims, and an invitation to accept the claim on the basis of the arguments presented elsewhere; without investigating further we are plausibly only entitled to accept a conditional claim, that if we accept what is said elsewhere, then we should believe what is argued for here.

More generally, we can distinguish between the genesis of a philosophical belief and its justification. The pessimist about philosophical testimony can allow that as a matter of psychology 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.

It is not my intention to provide a precise definition of exactly what an evaluative philosophical claim is. I am tempted by the view that evaluative philosophical claims are answers to 'external questions' in something like a Carnapian sense: questions that ask about particular linguistic, conceptual, or representational 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 accept on the basis of testimony.

3. 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 unuseable 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 judgement, 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, and perhaps philosophical belief. Indeed, one of the central challenges for the unuseability 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 in this respect—indeed, this might seem even more plausible in the philosophical case than in the moral and aesthetic 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? Beliefs formed by experts aren’t uncontroversial examples of similar norms that are in force elsewhere. 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.

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, accepting beliefs of a particular sort on the basis of testimony might be problematic if your interlocutors tend to be dishonest or are otherwise unreliable. If defeating conditions like these obtain, then this will generate a form of contingent pessimism.²

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 maximizes utility, whether (and why) we should (or should not) believe aesthetic and moral claims on testimony, and so on. Indeed, it is

² For contingent pessimism in the aesthetic case, see Meskin (2004). For contingent moral pessimism, see Lillehammer (2014).

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.³

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. However, putative explanations face a number of problems.

It is not especially plausible to suppose that there is widespread disagreement because philosophers are dishonest. The suggestion that philosophers are unreliable is more promising. 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 judgements will be unreliable because many of the people who make aesthetic judgements 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 judgements made by people with the appropriate sensibilities and training, at least in particular genres.

But these reasons for thinking that aesthetic judgements are often unreliable do not translate easily to the philosophical case. Even restricting ourselves to the judgements 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 off-set 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).

³ For further discussion of philosophical disagreement, see, for example, Brennan (2010) and Beebe (2018).

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 may not seem especially plausible (cf. Bennan 2010, pp. 11-12).

Besides, a more general concern with this 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 (cf. Kalderon 2005). Philosophers often maintain their views in the face of 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 disagreement. 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 '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 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 theorem 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 archiac theories—for instance, Berkelian idealism—or very simple versions of a theory—such as the claim that knowledge is justified truth belief (although contrast Weatherson 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 the 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 moral and aesthetic 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 moral and aesthetic sensibility, where moral and aesthetic 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 can 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.⁴

⁴ Compare James's (1907) claim that proponents of different philosophical theories have different temperaments.

Like moral and aesthetic 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 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.⁵ 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 moral and aesthetic 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

⁵ See, for example, Fish (forthcoming).

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.⁶

Indeed, a potentially deeper explanation of why there is pervasive and intransigent disagreement in philosophical discourse—as there is in moral and aesthetic 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 possibilities 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 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.

To the extent that philosophical theory choice depends on aesthetic and moral considerations, this suggests that there may be more than a

⁶ For further discussion, see for example, Rescher (1985), Weatherston (2003), Beebe (2018).

superficial similarity between apparent problems about aesthetic, moral, and philosophical testimony.

6. CONCLUSION: PHILOSOPHICAL FICTIONALISM?

In §2 I argued that we should only accept 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 raises a question about 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’.⁷ 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 as I argued in §5, 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. 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.

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 threatens to be self-refuting, insofar as

⁷ For a related 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.

it itself expresses a philosophical proposition. It is also 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, 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. And perhaps this is a sufficiently worthwhile endeavour.

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