

Aesthetic Disagreement, Aesthetic Testimony, and Defeat

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Introduction

The phenomenon of defeat is hot in epistemology. However, surprisingly little attention has been paid to defeat in the semantics of aesthetic discourse and aesthetic epistemology.¹ We think that this is a lack that needs supplying. Here, we argue for a conditional claim: if epistemic defeat about aesthetic matters – what we will call, for convenience, aesthetic defeat – exists, this gives us (*pro tanto*) reason to worry about several views in the semantics of aesthetic discourse – to wit, contextualism and relativism – and one major player in the epistemology of aesthetic testimony – i.e. pessimism about the capacity of aesthetic testimony to generate knowledge. None of these can straightforwardly accommodate aesthetic defeat. The alternative is to endorse scepticism about aesthetic defeat; however, there is reason to believe the latter move is highly implausible. We conclude that the theorist of aesthetic discourse is faced with a choice between either being a realist about the semantics and an optimist about the epistemology, or coming up with a thorough defence of defeat scepticism.

Here is the game plan: We start off by motivating the claim that scepticism about aesthetic defeat is implausible (Section 1). Further on, we discuss consequences for the semantics of aesthetic discourse and the epistemology of aesthetic disagreement and testimony (2 and 3). Last, we show how a view that combines realism in semantics with optimism in epistemology has all the resources we need to accommodate the data on the ground, in that it can explain both aesthetic defeat and different levels of faultlessness on the side of the disagreeing parties.

1. Aesthetic Defeat

Consider the following exchange between a traditionalist about fashion and her avant-garde friend:

Veggie Hat §1

Ann: Wow, sorry to say, Mary, but that hat you're wearing is exceptionally ugly. What got into you to buy such a thing? Really? Velvet aubergines on felt?

¹ But see aesthetic testimony optimism (e.g. Robson 2023) for related work.

Mary: I love it, it's gorgeous! You're just a bit of a traditionalist, Ann, I didn't quite expect you to like it anyway, to be honest.

Ann: Dearest Mary, ever so avant-garde. I guess we can just agree to disagree.

Whatever we might think about veggie hats ourselves, one thing is clear: we are not convinced that Mary is doing something terribly wrong in dismissing Ann's testimony in this case. Indeed, knowing Ann to be such a traditionalist, Mary seems right to hold steadfast in her aesthetic beliefs about avant-garde fashion in spite of Ann's assertion, and vice versa.

Contrast the conversation in Veggie Hat §1 with the following exchange between Mary and her friends who, like Mary, are also avant-garde fashionistas:

Veggie Hat §2

Mary: Folks, check out what a gorgeous hat I found at the boutique down the street! So avant-garde!

Mary's entire group of friends: Wow, sorry to say, but that's one ugly hat, Mary! Really? Velvet aubergines on felt? There's avant-garde, and then there are fashion car crashes!

Finally, consider the following case:

Veggie Hat §3

Mary just bought a new hat from the boutique down the street, which she finds fabulous and very avant-garde. It's a felt hat featuring velvet aubergines. Upon arriving home, she googles the model only to find out that the hat in question won the award for the ugliest hat of the year at the most recent expert poll by fashion.com. Indeed, unprecedentedly, fashion experts interviewed unanimously agreed that the hat was spectacularly unsightly.

Our intuition is that, in contrast to Veggie Hat §1, in Veggie Hat §2 and Veggie Hat §3 Mary should seriously consider taking that hat back. We are not wedded to this intuition, though; maybe she could defensibly hold on to it for a bit longer and investigate the issue further; maybe she could even try to launch a new trend; we can get ourselves to think either way. One datum that we take to be very robust, however – bordering on truism – is the following fact: *Mary should be less confident that the hat is pretty in Veggie Hat §2 and §3 than in Veggie Hat §1 (henceforth also 'the defeat datum')*.

Why do we call this datum 'the defeat datum'? To answer this question, we'd like to briefly say a few words about defeat. For present purposes, we will be working with what we take to be a fairly lightweight characterisation of defeat as having a reason against. While defeat is a phenomenon that can be found in all normative

domains, here we will focus on epistemic defeat, and, to be more precise, on defeat for having various doxastic attitudes such as beliefs, degrees of confidence, and so on.

To get a better handle on defeat, it may be worth looking at a paradigm case. First, suppose that I tell you that I will be away from work tomorrow. You come to justifiably believe with a high degree of confidence that I will not be at work tomorrow based on my testimony. When you arrive at work the next day, you are told by a colleague that I am in my office with a client. Your colleague's testimony that I am in the office with a client is a reason against believing with so high a degree of confidence that I will be away from work today and so constitutes a defeater for your high degree of confidence.

A key feature of defeaters for doxastic attitudes is that defeat affects justification of doxastic attitudes negatively. If, in the case above, you hold on to your high confidence that I am not at work, you will at least be less justified in your doxastic attitude. Your justification has been undermined or defeated.²

With these points in play, we can now see why we call the above datum 'the defeat datum'. After all, what the datum indicates is that there is such a thing as epistemic defeat about aesthetic matters. Here is why. By stipulation, Mary starts off with the same degree of justified confidence in all three cases. Crucially, by the defeat datum, in Veggie Hat §2 and §3, she ends up in a situation in which she should be less confident that the veggie hat is pretty than in Veggie Hat §1. But, of course, if Mary should be less confident in Veggie Hat §2 and §3 than in §1, it must be that her justification for believing that the hat is pretty has been affected differentially. In particular, it must be that she has less justification for believing that the hat is pretty in §2 and §3 than in §1. That's why she should have a lower degree of confidence in §2 and §3 than in §1. But, of course, if Mary's justification for believing that the hat is pretty has been affected differentially in this way, it follows that her justification underwent aesthetic defeat in §2 and §3, but not (or less so) in §1.

Note that defeaters can work in different ways. Most importantly for present purposes, defeaters can negatively affect one's justification for believing *p* by providing one with a reason for believing not-*p*. Defeaters that work in this way are known as 'rebutting' defeaters (e.g. Pollock 1986). The case in which you believe that I will not be at work and the next day a colleague tells you that you are in a meeting with a client is a case of rebutting defeat. The colleague's testimony negatively affects your justification for believing that I am not at work today by providing you with a reason for believing that I am at work today. Crucially, the defeaters Mary acquires in Veggie Hat §2 and §3 are also rebutting defeaters. Just as your colleague's testimony negatively affects your justification for believing that I am not at work today by providing you with a reason for believing that I am at work today, so the testimony of the friends/experts in Veggie Hat §2 and §3 negatively affect Mary's justification for believing

² For more on defeat see e.g. (Pollock 1986) and the contributions to (Brown and Simion 2021).

that her hat is pretty by providing a reason for believing that it is not pretty.³

Can one deny the defeat datum? Since our ambition here is merely to defend a conditional claim – i.e., if aesthetic defeat, then realism about the semantics and optimism about the epistemology – , and due to lack of space, we will not explore all possible ways to defend scepticism about aesthetic defeat. However, here are three reasons to think a defence of aesthetic defeat scepticism will not be a trivial endeavour:

Consider, first, an error theoretic response to the cases above: what we take to be ‘the defeat datum’ is not a normative, but a descriptive datum: the intuition does not track a ‘should’ – i.e. that Mary *should* be more confident in one case than in the other that her hat is pretty – but rather a psychological datum – that Mary *would* be more confident in one case than in the other. Compatibly, on this view: Mary doesn’t have to hold these different degrees of confidence in the two cases, in virtue of the fact that there is no such thing as aesthetic defeat. One desideratum on a view like this would, of course, be to explain why, even though she shouldn’t, we intuit that Mary would be more confident in the first case than in the other two cases. Perhaps one can blame peer pressure is the culprit in the first case, and prestige bias in the second. One problem with this reply, however, is that it overgeneralizes to all cases of defeat – i.e. to cases about non-aesthetic defeat as well.

Another, even more serious problem is that we don’t need an epistemic obligation for our argument to go through: a permission to hold different levels of confidence will do. To see this, note that, if aesthetic defeat is not an actual phenomenon, Mary’s evidential situation doesn’t change from one case to another, so changing her levels of confidence would be unwarranted, and thereby epistemically impermissible. But that result seems even more problematic in terms of extensional adequacy: surely, even if we get ourselves in a mindset to reject the obligation claim, Mary is at least permitted to be less confident that the Hat is pretty when there she overwhelming testimony to this effect.

Third: It is plausibly a desideratum on any theory of the aesthetic to accommodate the phenomenon of aesthetic expertise. Insofar as experts exist in the aesthetic domain, though, we need to accept that everyday folk will be more justified to form beliefs based on their testimony about aesthetic matters, than based on layman testimony. Indeed, without this assumption in play, it seems as though the existence of the institution of the aesthetic expert itself remains unmotivated. This difference in justification, in turn, can be in justification to believe that a particular item *x* is pretty, or in the denial of this claim. In turn, justification in favour of believing the denial of ‘*x* is pretty’ will also be justification against believing that it is pretty – i.e. it will constitute a defeater for believing that *x* is pretty. In a nutshell, then, the phenomenon of aesthetic expertise, together with the plausible claim that one should be more confident in what an expert says than in what a layman says, implies that there is such a

³ Defeaters can also negatively affect one’s justification for believing that *p* by providing one with a reason to believe that one’s basis for believing that *p* is not in good working order (aka undercutting defeaters) (e.g. Pollock 1986).

thing as aesthetic defeat: when an expert asserts that *x* is ugly one has less justification to believe that *x* is pretty than when a layman asserts the same proposition. This is precisely the defeat datum we started from. As such, it would seem, denying the defeat datum would commit the contextualist and the relativist to either denying that there is such a thing as expertise in the aesthetic domain, or denying that one should be more confident in what an expert says than in what a layman says – in which case the very existence of institution of the aesthetic expert remains unmotivated. We take it that these are heavy costs. This is why we worry about the prospects of an aesthetic defeat scepticism.

That being said, not much rests on this for our purposes: again, our concern here is merely to defend a conditional claim: As we are about to argue, the defeat datum provides reason for optimism about both the capacity of aesthetic testimony to generate knowledge, and the prospects of a realist semantics for aesthetic discourse.

2. Semantics

Notable views in the semantics of aesthetic discourse aim to explain why, in cases like Veggie Hat §1, it is intuitive that (1) Ann and Mary disagree (henceforth, the disagreement intuition), and (2) they do so faultlessly – in a sense to be further specified (the faultlessness intuition).

2.1 Contextualism and Defeat

Very roughly, a contextualist semantics for a certain term holds that the term can have different contents in different contexts. As a result, sentences featuring context sensitive terms can have different contents, i.e. they express different propositions, in different contexts also. Contextualist approaches⁴ to aesthetic disagreement venture to explain the intuitions about aesthetic disagreement by appealing to a contextualist semantics for aesthetic terms. Contextualist approaches to aesthetic disagreement excel when it comes to handling the faultlessness intuition. For instance, in the Veggie Hat cases, if ‘pretty’ affords a contextualist semantics, the sentence ‘The hat is pretty’ may express different propositions depending on whether it is uttered in Mary’s context or in Ann’s context. In this way, contextualism can allow that Mary’s assertion that the hat is pretty and Ann’s assertion that it is not pretty are both true, in the relevant contexts. Contextualism promises to accommodate the faultlessness intuition in a straightforward way.

The bad news for contextualist approaches to aesthetic disagreements is that they struggle to also accommodate the disagreement intuition.⁵ After all, if ‘The hat is pretty’ expresses different propositions in Mary’s and Ann’s contexts, the contents of their assertions and beliefs are different as well. What’s more, if both of these propositions can simultaneously be true, then they are entirely compatible. In that case, it is hard to see how there could still be a genuine disagreement between Mary and Ann.

⁴ For recent defences see e.g. Sundell 2011, Plunkett & Sundell 2013.

⁵ This point has been pressed forcefully especially by champions of relativism e.g. Kölbel 2002, MacFarlane 2014.

Most importantly for our purposes, in virtue of struggling to predict that there is a genuine disagreement in these cases, contextualism also struggles to explain the defeat datum that we put forth in the previous section. If Ann in Veggie Hat §1, Mary's friends in Veggie Hat §2 and the experts in Veggie Hat §3 alike are all merely asserting propositions that are perfectly compatible with the proposition that Mary asserts, why is it that Mary should be less confident in §2 and §3 than in §1? After all, the content of Ann's friends' assertion that the hat isn't pretty is that the hat isn't pretty-according-to-Ann's friends' (or something similar). But clearly, if that's what Ann's friends' assertion amounts to, it's not the case that Mary should now lower her confidence in her belief that the hat is pretty. After all, what this belief amounts to is that the hat is pretty-according-to-Mary (or something similar).

One popular way to go about accommodating the disagreement intuition within a contextualist framework is to appeal to metalinguistic disagreements: according to one prominent view, due to David Plunkett and Tim Sundell (2013), what is going on in the Veggie Hat cases is a disagreement about whether the veggie hat *should* be included in the extension of 'pretty hat' or not at the context. Now the main reason this is relevant for present purposes is that if contextualists can successfully accommodate the disagreement intuition, then they might also be able to handle the defeat datum. More specifically, in Veggie Hat §2 and §3, the assertions by her fashionista friends/the fashion expert may still provide a defeater for Mary's belief that the veggie hat should be included in the extension of 'pretty hat'.

One problem that this view faces concerns inter-contextual disagreements. Suppose Ann believes the hat is ugly, whilst being in her house in Leeds and Mary believes it's pretty, whilst at work in Bristol. Suppose, further, that they don't even know about each other. In this case, they would still count as disagreeing about whether the hat is pretty or not – although not sharing a context of assessment that the metalinguistic disagreement could pick out. Since they don't share a context of assessment, it's hard to see how it can be that they disagree about what should be included under the extension of 'pretty hat' at a particular context of assessment.

Even if we set this problem aside, there are remaining difficulties. To see the first, note that small children can have aesthetic disagreements. For instance, two three-year-olds may disagree on whether a certain dress featuring a unicorn is pretty. Arguably, however, they don't disagree on whether the dress in question should be in the extension of the term 'pretty'. They don't have the intellectual sophistication required to form beliefs about matters as complex as this.

Another question that arises concerns the type of *should* at issue in the metalinguistic disagreement in question. One way to go would be to take the *should* in question to be an all-things-considered *should*. However, it seems as though we can easily imagine cases in which Mary and Ann agree that the veggie hat should – all things considered – be included in the extension of 'pretty hat' – say, because they both have a gun to their head, in which case prudential considerations override aesthetic considerations. However, even in a

case like this, it seems like they would still be in disagreement as to whether the veggie hat actually is pretty or not.

According to a more plausible alternative, the ‘should’ at stake is an aesthetic should. Unfortunately, this suggestion does not fare much better, for at least two reasons. First, consider the question as to what, if anything, grounds this aesthetic should. The intuitively most plausible answer is that it is the aesthetic truths on the ground. For instance, what explains why Mary’s veggie hat should (aesthetically) fall under ‘pretty hat’ is that it is pretty. However, this answer isn’t available for champions of the present proposal. After all, this leads us right back into the territory of first order aesthetic disagreement, which is what we needed to explain in the first place. What’s more, it is particularly hard to see how learning about the metalinguistic disagreement could still provide a genuine defeater for the first order belief. For instance, if what Mary learns in her exchange with her fashionista friend is that they think that the veggie hat should not be included in the extension of ‘pretty’, it’s not clear that she should lower her confidence that the hat is pretty, given that it is true at her context that it is pretty and given that whether the hat should fall in the extension of ‘pretty’ turns on the first-order truths on the ground. But, of course, since it cannot be aesthetic truths on the ground that explain the aesthetic should under consideration, the question arises as to what does.

Let’s move on to the second reason why the metalinguistic view remains problematic. If the ‘should’ at stake here is indeed an aesthetic should, then it is plausible that something aesthetically should fall in the extension of aesthetic term ‘F’ if and only if it is F. For instance, Mary’s veggie hat aesthetically should fall in the extension of ‘pretty’ if and only if it is pretty.⁶ But now note that since according to contextualists aesthetic terms such as ‘pretty’ are context sensitive, then ‘aesthetically should fall in the extension of “pretty”’ must be context sensitive also. Otherwise, it couldn’t be that something aesthetically should fall in the extension of ‘pretty’ *if and only if* it is pretty. But of course, once we are clear ‘aesthetically should fall in the extension of “pretty”’ is context sensitive in this way, it is easy to see that the exact same problem that we encountered at the first order will resurface at the metalinguistic level. In particular, if ‘The veggie hat is pretty’ means something different when uttered by Mary than when uttered by Ann, then so does ‘The veggie hat aesthetically should fall in the extension of “pretty”’. But if so, we don’t have a disagreement at the metalinguistic level either. Finally, it goes without saying that the problem with defeat will resurface also.

2.2 Relativism and Defeat

What we saw above is that this allowed contextualists to accommodate the faultlessness intuition but not the disagreement intuition. Relativist approaches (e.g. Kölbel 2002, MacFarlane 2014) aim to improve on contextualism by avoiding the idea that aesthetic terms are context sensitive. As a result, sentences featuring them will express the same proposition across all contexts. For instance, ‘The veggie hat is

⁶ Note that this leaves open the question as to what the direction of explanation is here.

pretty' expresses the same proposition no matter whether Mary or Ann utters it, i.e. the proposition that the veggie hat is pretty. Relativists accommodate the disagreement intuition in this way.

This leaves the question of the faultlessness intuition. How can it be that, for instance, Mary and Ann are both faultless given that they are genuinely disagreeing on one and the same proposition, i.e. that the veggie hat is pretty? To answer this question, relativists distinguish between context and circumstance of evaluation. The circumstance of evaluation includes a range of parameters that determine the truth value of the proposition determined at the context. Standard views include worlds and times in the circumstance of evaluation.

With these points in play, here is how the relativist explains the faultlessness intuition. To return to our familiar example, while the sentence 'The veggie hat is pretty' expresses the same proposition no matter whether Mary or Ann utters it, whether it is true or not will turn in addition on who is the judge in question. And the thought is that when Mary is the judge, the proposition comes out true, while when Ann is the judge, it comes out false. In this way, relativism promises to improve on contextualism.

Is the view also, thereby, going to fare better on the defeat datum? Unfortunately, there is reason to think that the answer is no: relativism does no better than contextualism. To see this recall that a defeater for a doxastic attitude that *p* provides a reason against believing *p*. More specifically, a rebutting defeater for believing *p* provides a reason against believing *p* by providing a reason to believe that not-*p*, and thereby that one's belief that *p* is false. That's why one should lower one's degrees of confidence in the face of defeat. The trouble is that, on relativist approaches to aesthetic disagreement, when one believes that *p*, an assertion that not-*p* cannot provide a defeater for one's belief that *p*. This is because the assertion that not-*p* simply doesn't give one a reason to believe that one's belief that *p* is false. After all, whether one's belief that *p* is false turns on who fills the judge parameter. And the fact that if the judge parameter is filled by a different person means that the proposition one believes comes out false is no reason to think that one's own belief is false, given that the truth of one's own belief turns on a different judge parameter. To return to the case of Mary and the veggie hat, on a relativist view, when Mary discovers that her fashionista friends/the fashion experts believe that her hat is not pretty, this gives her no reason to believe that her belief that the hat is pretty is false. After all, whether her belief is true turns on whether its content is true relative to her circumstance of evaluation, at which she, Mary, fills the judge parameter. The fact that the content of Mary's belief is false relative to some other circumstance of evaluation, at which someone else, e.g. her fashionista friends or the fashion experts, fill the judge parameter, is of no consequence.⁷ This is why relativists cannot accommodate the defeat datum.

⁷ One might wonder whether this isn't that too strong. Doesn't Mary know that the standards of taste of her fashionista friends/experts are very similar to her own? In that case, won't their judgement defeat her own? No. To see why not, note that we may suppose that Mary doesn't know that the standards of taste are thus similar. One may now wonder whether in that case the defeat intuition isn't significantly weakened. Even if we allow this in the case of her fashionista friends, it clearly won't work for the case where the disagreement is with fashion experts. After all, clearly we can get the defeat intuition without assuming that Mary knows that the fashion experts have very similar standards of taste to her own.

2.4 Realism and Defeat

According to realist views, there is no semantic mystery about aesthetic disagreements such as the Veggie Hat cases: one of the two parties is right, and the other one is wrong. On this view, short of occasional cases of indeterminacy, disagreements about aesthetic matters are garden variety factual disagreements: there is a fact of the matter as to whether the veggie hat is pretty or not, and thereby one of the parties to the disagreement is making a mistake. Unsurprisingly, realists will have no problem at all accommodating the defeat datum: since, according to realists, aesthetic matters are merely garden variety matters of fact, aesthetic beliefs and their justification are the proper target of epistemic defeat. According to the realist, then, the difference between Veggie Hat §1 on the one hand, and Veggie Hat §2 and §3 on the other, lies in degrees of justification: Mary gets more epistemic support for the denial of ‘the hat is pretty’ from a large number of peers and, respectively, from fashion experts, than she gets from one disagreeing party of no special aesthetic expertise.

Defenders of realism are, however, hard pressed to explain the intuition that, as opposed to non-aesthetic factual disagreements, it feels to us as though neither Mary nor Ann made any mistake in forming the beliefs they formed and, furthermore, that it wouldn’t be an outrage to hold on to their beliefs even post-disagreement.

We believe this datum does not constitute a problem for the realist at all. After all, Ann and Mary’s ‘faultlessness’ need not imply that none of our characters is asserting a falsehood⁸: one can make mistakes faultlessly, after all, in all walks of life. To see this, consider, first, an internalist dogmatism about justification, according to which one is *prima facie* justified in believing that *p* if it seems to one that *p* (e.g. Huemer 2007). Straightforwardly, this view delivers the result that both women are justified in their beliefs about the veggie hat, since they have the corresponding seemings. Compatibly, of course, one of them is wrong: seemings can sometimes lead us astray.

Here is, also, alternatively, how a mainstream externalist theory of justification can explain what is going on in Veggie Hat §1: both women employ their reliable aesthetic belief formation processes in forming their respective beliefs about the veggie hat (e.g. Goldman 1979). Reliability, though, need not imply infallibility. As such, it is hardly surprising that one of them ends up being right, and the other one wrong: it is just an instance in which the otherwise reliable aesthetic beliefs formation process of one of them is failing. What if we stipulate that e.g. Ann is not, in fact, reliable about aesthetic matters; in fact, she gets it wrong all the time? Isn’t it true that the intuition of faultlessness survives this stipulation, while the explanation in terms of reliability justification does not? It may. Crucially, however, when it does, this is just a garden variety case of blameless deception for the reliabilist, in the same category with brains in vats. Since this problem and its solution are not specific to cases of aesthetic false belief, but rather to seemings-sourced deception more generally, we take it that

⁸ Pace Kölbel (2002).

the epistemic reliabilist that likes semantic realism about aesthetic discourse is just as well positioned as the epistemic reliabilist simpliciter to accommodate these cases. Finally, note that should we stipulate that Ann is not blameless epistemically for forming her false belief – say that Ann knows about herself that she has pretty poor taste in fashion, and she gets it wrong all the time – the intuition of faultless disagreement is lost as well: Ann should be more hesitant in forming outright beliefs and making outright assertions in this field.

We will not run through more theories of epistemic justification on the market to make our point. Unless we adopt a factive view of justification, it is open to the realist to say that one of Mary and Ann has a false, albeit justified belief about the veggie hat, and that it is justification that explains the faultlessness intuition. And even if one endorses a factive view of justification, the explanation in terms of blamelessness remains available.

How about the intuition that it is open to the two women to hold steadfast even post-disagreement? Can realism accommodate this datum? We think the answer is yes, and furthermore, that it can do a better job at explaining subtle differences between different ways of thinking about the case. Here is why.

To begin with, suppose that learning about a disagreement on *p* gives one a defeater for one's belief that *p*. If so, it may now seem more difficult than ever to accommodate the intuition that Mary and Ann may hold steadfast in §1. After all, they do learn about a disagreement. On the present view, this means that they do get defeaters for their beliefs on whether the hat is pretty. The crucial point, however, is that defeaters are themselves defeasible. And, in §1, both Mary and Ann have the relevant defeater defeaters. Mary knows Ann to be a traditionalist and so expects her to think that her hat is not pretty. In this way she has a standing defeater for Ann's testimony that the hat is not pretty. And, similarly, Ann knows Mary to be an avant-gardist and so expects her to think that the hat is pretty. In this way, she has a standing defeater for Mary's testimony that the hat is pretty. In light of this, both can justifiably dismiss the other's view and remain steadfast. Note also that, in §2 and §3, Mary does not have a defeater defeater. Here the defeater retains its force. As a result, Mary cannot permissibly remain steadfast.⁹

Interestingly, note that these subtleties are not available to the contextualist and the relativist, precisely because they cannot accommodate aesthetic defeat. For them, then, there can be no difference between the case described as a disagreement between known peers, and one where the two don't trust each other's taste one bit. Realism scores another point on this front.

⁹ There is a large literature on peer disagreement. The leading views are conciliationism (e.g. Christensen 2007, Feldman 2006), which holds that agents need to revise their doxastic attitude in these cases, and their steadfast rivals, according to which it's permissible to remain steadfast (e.g. Kelly 2005, Lackey 2010). Note that our view does not commit us to a steadfast view, or at least not to an implausible version of it. The reason for this is that it can grant a key conciliationist principle, i.e. that disagreement generates defeat, and then go on to explain why Mary and Ann are nonetheless entitled to remain steadfast in §1, by appealing to defeat defeat. As a result, our treatment of the case is compatible with conciliationist treatment of the bulk of cases in the literature that are thought to favour conciliationism.

3. Aesthetic Testimony

Pessimists about the epistemic import of aesthetic testimony think that, as opposed to garden variety matters of fact, we cannot acquire epistemic justification and knowledge of aesthetic matters from the mere say-so of others.¹⁰ Going back to Kant (1952), this view usually takes it that perception needs to be involved in the acquisition of justification about aesthetic matters (henceforth aesthetic justification, for convenience).

Pessimists are mainly motivated by some or all of the following set of data: (1) we tend to be less open to accepting the testimony of others about aesthetic matters than about garden variety factual matters (the psychological steadfast datum henceforth); (2) it seems epistemically permissible to be less open to accepting testimony of others about aesthetic matters than about garden variety factual matters (the epistemic steadfast datum) (3) aesthetic beliefs based on mere say-so seem to provide us with less affordances: e.g., it seems we are less warranted to assert, to admire objects, or to make decisions on aesthetic beliefs based on mere say-so than on garden-variety testimonial beliefs (the affordance datum); (4) wide-spread disagreement about the aesthetic makes the epistemic environment non-fertile for acquiring knowledge (the disagreement datum).

3.1 Justification

We believe testimony about aesthetic matters can generate justification (and knowledge). While space does not permit us thorough responses to all challenges above, here are a few reasons to be an optimist¹¹: first, concerning the psychological datum,¹² we are sceptical about its empirical plausibility. We are in general resistant to accepting the testimony of others when it outright conflicts with our own perceptually formed beliefs. Go ahead and tell us that there's no computer in front of us while we're writing this paper, see if it goes down well. We also strongly disagree that we should be less open to aesthetic than to garden variety testimony: as we have just seen in the previous section, there are cases of aesthetic testimony in which we are equally resistant; §1 be our prime exhibit here.

Third, concerning various affordances: as one of us (and others) has argued extensively in previous work (REDACTED), the heard impropriety of aesthetic assertions based on mere say-so is readily explained by Gricean pragmatics:¹³ when I assert 'The movie is good!', I trigger a conventional conversational implicature – i.e. an implicature carried by the meaning with which the sentence is commonly used – that I've seen the movie.¹⁴ For the rest, we strongly disagree that aesthetic testimony cannot provide us with reasons to act: in §2 and §3 above, the testimony by Mary's fashionista friends/the fashion experts that the hat is ugly may provide her with

¹⁰ For defences of pessimism see e.g. Hopkins 2000, Whiting 2015. The kind of pessimism we are discussing here is also known as unavailability pessimism. It is distinguished from unusability pessimism (e.g. Hills Forthcoming, Nguyen 2020), which we won't discuss here.

¹¹ For other defences of optimism, see e.g. (Lord 2016, Meskin 2004, Robson 2023).

¹² See also (Robson 2014).

¹³ See also (Robson 2015).

¹⁴ Note, also, that the implicature is perfectly cancellable: 'This movie is good – at least that's what I heard from all of my friends'.

reason to return it, or at least, not to wear it.¹⁵ We also disagree with the intuition that aesthetic testimony cannot ever provide one with reasons for aesthetic admiration. To see this, we'd like to turn the focus away from individual works of art to more lofty objects of aesthetic admiration, such as oeuvres. We want to say that we know from experts that Picasso's oeuvre is among the most beautiful in the world. Surely that gives us reason to admire it, even if we have not had the chance to experience it ourselves (perhaps no individual other than Picasso himself has because it is too large and scattered).¹⁶

Finally, we take the disagreement datum seriously and we agree that when widespread disagreement is present, due to defeat, knowledge might not be ubiquitous. We agree, then, that knowledge will not be readily available about hotly disputed aesthetic facts – just like it is not widely available about hotly disputed facts of any other sort. We do, however, disagree with the empirical assumption that disagreement is widely spread about all aesthetic facts, or about aesthetic facts par excellence: we might often disagree about whether avant-garde hats are beautiful. We disagree less about many other aesthetic facts, such as the beauty of flowers, or mountains, or the sunset, or Robert Redford, or Marilyn Monroe. In cases like this,¹⁷ knowledge is readily available.

Most importantly though, and leaving the empirical datum aside, the fact that a domain features widely spread disagreement, and as a result knowledge is less ubiquitous than in calmer epistemic waters, does not tell against the capacity of testimony to generate knowledge in that field. After all, capacities are dispositions (e.g. redacted, Sosa 2015), and dispositions can be masked: vases maintain their fragility in rooms filled with pillows. It just can't manifest itself.

Furthermore, as we are about to argue, if the defeat datum is correct, not only does this not speak against the capacity of aesthetic testimony to generate knowledge, but, to the contrary, it implies that aesthetic testimony has this capacity.

To see this, note that the mechanism by which environments with widely spread disagreement come to be lacking in knowledge is the mechanism of defeat. If there is widely spread disagreement about what the best political system is, we all lack knowledge about what the best political system is – even those of us who started off knowledgeable. We should lower our confidence in whatever position we started with until further investigation. Similarly, if all of us disagree about whether the veggie hat is pretty or not, all else equal (e.g. absent reasons to believe some of us are less reliable than others), we all lack knowledge on this matter – even those who started off knowledgeable.

¹⁵ Might pessimists not hold that the real reason to act is that the hat is considered to be ugly? Not plausibly. Suppose that the hat is indeed ugly. In this case, the pessimist claim would have to be an impossibility claim: that it cannot be that Mary is returning the hat because it's ugly, that it has to be that she does so because other people think it is. This is a very strong and, we think, implausible claim.

¹⁶ Compatibly, it may be thought that testimony from a friend about the Mona Lisa's aesthetic qualities cannot give me reason to admire it. We disagree; but even if our objector is right, note that it is compatible with the thesis that aesthetic testimony can generate aesthetic justification that the particular variety of justification required for admiration is of perceptual variety.

¹⁷ These cases are discussed in the literature on aesthetic testimony under the label 'aesthetic common knowledge'. See (Robson 2012).

Again, though, the very possibility of testimonial aesthetic defeat implies that there is such a thing as testimonial justification about aesthetic matters of fact. After all, what we have in these cases is rebutting defeat.¹⁸ By definition, rebutting defeat for one's justification to believe *p* is, at the same time, justification to believe not-*p* (or, in other words, evidence against *p*). As such, it follows from the fact that testimony is capable to generate rebutting aesthetic defeat that testimony can generate aesthetic justification.

What if one denies the disagreement datum? Again, this will not hurt the optimist much. First, going back to the veggie hat: the intuitive difference between Veggie Hat §1 on one hand, and Veggie Hat §2 and §3 gives us independent reason to believe that rebutting aesthetic defeat exists, as does the possibility of aesthetic expertise, in conjunction with the plausible claim that we should trust the word of experts more than that of laymen in the aesthetic domain.

3.2 Knowledge

What about testimonial knowledge? Can't the pessimist withdraw to the weaker claim that even though aesthetic testimony can generate (some) justification, it cannot generate knowledge (call this 'weak pessimism' henceforth)? We think she can't. To see why not, we'd like to start with a clarification. We agree that testimony that *x* is not pretty from one person and one person alone, about whom we don't know that they're an expert on the matter, might not generate enough epistemic support to defeat our current perceptual justification for a belief that *x* is pretty. Crucially, again, that will be the case with most perceptual beliefs about garden variety medium-sized dry goods. What we do believe, though, and what we take the Veggie Hat cases to show, is that testimony, indeed, can generate some amount of justification. Insofar as that is true, it will be hard, on theoretical grounds, to hold that aesthetic testimony can't generate knowledge, given the available views on the relation between knowledge and justification. There are two main positions available on the market: one can have a knowledge-first view – according to which justification is to be unpacked in terms of knowledge, or a justification-first view – who takes the analysis to go the other way around.

On a non-traditionalist, knowledge-first view of justification, on which justification is to be unpacked in terms of knowledge (e.g. redacted, Williamson Forthcoming), it follows trivially that if aesthetic testimony can generate justification, it can generate knowledge as well. Since it cannot be that justification is present but knowledge is not, we take it that it's clear that the optimist will have no trouble moving from

¹⁸ Couldn't pessimists agree with Christensen and Feldman that cases of (aesthetic) disagreement are cases in which the belief is defeated because the supporting reasons are bracketed or that they involve undercutting defeat? No. Suppose we are at the theatre. I can see the play that's on but can't hear it because my ears are blocked. You can hear the play but not see it because your eyes are shut. I believe it was beautiful because the costumes and the acting were excellent. You think it wasn't because the dialogue was terrible. We tell each other about this and find out that we disagree. In this case, we should both be less confident in our beliefs than we were before discovering the disagreement. This means that there is defeat in this case. At the same time, the reasons for our beliefs are not bracketed nor is the justification undercut. Rather, my reasons provide evidence that the play was beautiful that, once in the balance with your reasons for thinking it was not, require you to decrease your degree of confidence. And, of course, the same holds, *mutatis mutandis*, for me. But this means that the defeat at issue here must be rebutting.

the argument in favour of aesthetic testimony having the capacity to generate the former to its capacity to generate the latter. What if the pessimist wants to take an even stronger stance, and argue that outright justification cannot be generated by aesthetic testimony, but rather only degrees of justification? The problem reappears: since on knowledge-first views degrees of justification (or evidence, or warrant) are commonly (and, arguably, of pain of internal theoretical incoherence, should be) unpacked in terms of knowledge as well, it will be difficult, if not impossible, to combine weak pessimism with a knowledge-first view of the relation between knowledge and justification.

On the vast majority of traditional, justification-first view, *ceteris praesentibus* (i.e. granted that properly based non-Gettierized belief and truth are present), degrees of justification aggregate to generate knowledge. If this is so, enough reliable testifiers – or, alternatively, high degrees of expertise – will aggregate enough testimonial justification for the hearer to come to know based on mere say-so. Thus, granted that aesthetic testimony can generate some justification, it can generate knowledge as well.

How about a view on which knowledge-level justification from aesthetic testimony is a qualitative rather than a quantitative affair? On such a view, some kinds of justification are such that degrees thereof never aggregate to generate knowledge-level justification. One classical example is merely probabilistic justification: most epistemologists agree that we can never come to know based on statistical evidence alone. Couldn't the weak pessimist take aesthetic testimony to fall in the same category? Couldn't she maybe say that what we can gain from the testimony of others is knowledge that it is likely that e.g. the veggie hat is pretty (the more testifiers – or the higher the expertise - the higher the likelihood), but never knowledge that the hat is pretty?

We think that this is implausible, for one key reason, having to do, again, with the phenomenon of defeat. Consider the following case of comparative aesthetic beliefs: I think my drawing is the most beautiful masterpiece in the world, followed closely by Picasso's Guernica. All experts I consult, however, tell me my drawing is rather mediocre. In light of their testimony, while I continue to think my drawing is great, I now come to believe Guernica is better. What is going on in this case? For one, note that I now know (based partially on perception, and partially on expert aesthetic testimony) that the comparative claim: 'Guernica is more beautiful than my drawing' is true. Note, though, that in order to know the comparative claim, it needs be that I know that my drawing is not the most beautiful masterpiece. Since the only justification I have for believing that my drawing is not the most beautiful masterpiece is the expert testimony I have just received, it seems to follow that I came to know that my drawing is not the most beautiful masterpiece based on expert aesthetic testimony. The phenomenon of aesthetic defeat suggests that aesthetic testimony can generate knowledge.

In a nutshell, then, what we have seen is that if testimonial aesthetic defeat exists, then so does testimonial aesthetic justification, and if the latter exists, aesthetic testimony can generate knowledge of aesthetic matters.

Conclusion

This paper has investigated the relation between aesthetic disagreement and defeat. We have argued for a conditional claim: that aesthetic defeat provides support for realism about aesthetic discourse. This is because rival views, such as contextualism and invariantism, cannot accommodate the phenomenon of aesthetic defeat. What's more, aesthetic defeat also supports optimism about aesthetic testimony. The reason for this is that testimony about aesthetic claims can provide defeat for aesthetic beliefs only if it can provide justification for them also. In sum, then, if we like aesthetic defeat, there is reason for us to be realists about aesthetic discourse and optimists about aesthetic testimony.

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