

How To Learn about Aesthetics and Morality Through Acquaintance and Testimony^{*†}

Errol Lord

University of Pennsylvania

There are parallel debates in aesthetics and metaethics about the epistemic merits of aesthetic and moral testimony.¹ Most participants in both debates hold that there is something amiss with beliefs formed merely on the basis of aesthetic and moral testimony. The similarities between the two debates dry up quickly, though. The main controversy in aesthetics is whether it is even *possible* to acquire aesthetic knowledge from testimony. While a select few have taken this tack in metaethics, most agree that we can acquire moral knowledge via testimony.² The trick is explaining why, despite this, there is something fishy about moral beliefs purely based on testimony.

A plausible hypothesis about why the two literatures diverge when they do is that it is widely accepted in aesthetics that *acquaintance* with things that have aesthetic value is necessary to have paradigmatic aesthetic knowledge.³ Since (usually) one doesn't become acquainted with things that have aesthetic value when one purely defers to someone else, this explains why many have thought that knowledge is impossible via aesthetic testimony.

In metaethics, on the other hand, relatively little has been said about the role of acquaintance in the acquisition of moral knowledge and how this might bear on the debate about testimony. In this paper, I argue that it's plausible that acquaintance does play a prominent role in the acquisition of paradigmatic moral knowledge and that this helps explain what's amiss

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¹As has been pointed out many times in the literature (e.g., [McGrath \(2009\)](#), [Howell \(2014\)](#)), the puzzle is not restricted merely to testimony. Rather, the puzzle is about *deference*. Relying on the testimony of others in certain ways is a way of deferring, but there are other ways (e.g., if you find out what they believe in some other way). I am going to focus on cases of testimony given how central testimony is to common ways of thinking. However, I will also often speak of deference.

²On the aesthetics side, see [Robson \(2012\)](#) and the citations therein. On the metaethics side, see [Hills \(2013\)](#) and the citations therein.

³Below I will explain what I mean by paradigmatic aesthetic knowledge.

with moral testimony. In fact, I will defend a general theory of what is going on in both the moral case and the aesthetic case. According to this theory, acquaintance enables the possession of certain facts as reasons. It does this by enabling one to acquire a certain type of know-how—by being acquainted with certain normatively relevant facts, we come to know how to use those facts in various ways. Neither aesthetic nor moral testimony acquaint us with the full range of normatively relevant properties. Thus, we cannot come to possess the full range of reasons. This limits what we can *do* with the normative information. This is what is amiss with moral and aesthetic testimony.

The plan is as follows. In the next section I will introduce the puzzles of moral and aesthetic deference. In §2 I will defend a story about what is amiss with aesthetic deference. This story relies on the claim that acquaintance is required for what I call appreciative aesthetic knowledge. In §3 I will sketch a way to generalize this story to the moral case. While I take the generalization to have serious appeal, a full defense requires that I further defend the claim that acquaintance is important for the acquisition of moral knowledge. In §§4-5 I will argue that it is by responding to two powerful objections. §6 wraps up.

1 The Puzzle of Moral and Aesthetic Deference

Testimony is a quick and usually easy way to extend our knowledge. It is thus hugely valuable when it comes to our common project of learning about the world. With this as the backdrop, it is especially surprising that it is intuitive that there is something amiss with relying on testimony in forming aesthetic and moral beliefs, at least in certain circumstances. We can see this by reflecting on particular cases. Consider the following two cases.

Nefertiti: Hanna just returned from a trip to Berlin during which she saw *Nefertiti's Bust*. Hanna's sister Clara asks her about the museums. Hanna tells her that *Nefertiti's Bust* was especially beautiful. Clara comes to believe that *Nefertiti's Bust* is beautiful solely on the basis of Hanna's word.

Newbie: Edmund is a new anglo police officer in the 1920s Burmese police force. As is the tradition for Anglo police officers in Burma, Edmund is immediately scheduled to guard over a hanging of a Burmese prisoner the next morning. Edmund has no opinion about the moral status of hanging and has not thought about it much in his short life (although he knows what hanging is). One of his fellow police officers, George, tells him that hanging is wrong. Edmund comes to believe that hanging is wrong solely on the basis of George's word.

Both Clara and Edmund defer to their informants. There is something odd about this. That is, there is something odd with Clara and Edmund relying solely on others about which aesthetic and moral views to adopt. And this oddness does not go away when we stipulate that Hanna and George are known by Clara and Edmund to be reliable about such things. It has seemed

to many—and this thought goes back to at least Kant—that when it comes to aesthetics and morality, one should think through the issues for oneself. One should not farm out one's views to others.

As it often is, it is important to be clear about the boundaries of this particular intuition. First, it's important to be clear that, following much of the literature, I will focus on a particular kind of case (both Nefertiti and Newbie are members of this kind).⁴ The cases I will focus on are all cases of *direct deference* about a *pure* assertion that makes a *thin* normative evaluation.⁵

Someone's deferential belief is direct when that belief is *solely* based upon the testimony of someone else. An assertion is pure when the proposition uttered is only about the particular normative fact—i.e., the content does not include any descriptive or explanatory information. An evaluation is a thin evaluation when it only ascribes thin normative properties. It is of course controversial which normative properties are thin and which are thick. I won't wade into these waters. Instead, I'll stick to beauty and wrongness.

The basic reason why I will focus on these cases is that these cases are the best ones for isolating the merits of deference about moral and aesthetic matters. All three restrictions help secure this. The direct deference restriction helps isolate the merits of deference by ensuring that the relevant characters don't hold their beliefs for some other reasons. For example, in a different version of Hanna and Clara's case, Clara has seen photos of *Nefertiti's Bust* and believes it is beautiful partially on the basis of those experiences. In that case Clara might know that *Nefertiti's Bust* is beautiful independently of Hanna's testimony even if she partially believes it is beautiful on the basis of the testimony. Thus, allowing one to believe for other reasons presents a confounding factor for our evaluation of the merits of Hanna's testimony.

The restriction to pure assertions of thin evaluations helps for similar reasons. Impure assertions mention a purported ground for the claim asserted. This information can help the hearer learn the normative fact on other grounds. So, for example, if George said that hanging is wrong because it tramples upon human dignity, Edmund might come to know it is wrong by inferring that it is wrong from his antecedent knowledge that acts that trample on human dignity are wrong. In that case George's testimony about the wrongness doesn't seem to do much epistemic work. His testimony about the grounds plus Edmund's antecedent knowledge is what is doing the epistemic work. Thick evaluative facts entail certain descriptive facts. Thus, one can learn about some of the descriptive facts via testimony about thick evaluations. One might then use antecedent moral knowledge about the aesthetic or moral upshot of those descriptive facts to come to know the aesthetic or moral fact via inference. In this case testimony is not doing all of the epistemic work. It looks like the antecedent normative knowledge is doing important epistemic work.

⁴There are other testimonial cases that interest epistemologists of aesthetics; e.g., cases involving the testimony of critics that not only expresses a view about the thin aesthetic features, but also gives explanations for why the work has those features. These cases receive some attention in metaethics (see, e.g., Hills (2012), Howell (2014)).

⁵This terminology follows Fletcher (2016). See his discussion for discussion about how earlier participants in the literature misled by not clearly distinguishing these features.

So, a more precise statement of the intuitions I am interested in is that it is odd to directly defer to someone else about a pure normative claim about a thin normative property. Herein I will say that one defers only when someone does this. This, however, is still too broad. This is because everyone agrees that there are some circumstances where it is not only permissible for one to defer but required that one defer. Some examples: One must make a decision before one can think the issue through, one is morally stunted to the point that one cannot think it through, one knows that one is extremely unreliable when one thinks things through. In these cases, it is intuitive that one should defer. Nevertheless, deferring is still very odd in a subset of cases that involve healthy and mature moral and aesthetic agents that have time to reflect and have good reason to think that such reflection will be successful. Once one morally and aesthetically matures, it is odd to farm out one's views, at least when one has the time to think things through.

Here's the rub: Upon reflection, it is puzzling why this would be so. After all, it is more than okay to farm out one's views on nearly all other subjects, at least if those to whom you defer know what they are talking about. No one is puzzled about why we defer to accountants about tax matters, doctors about health, or chemists about molecular bonding. So it looks like there is a striking asymmetry between the merits of deferring on moral and aesthetic matters and the merits of deferring on all other matters. This asymmetry needs to be explained.

Many theorists in both aesthetics and metaethics are *pessimists* about the merits of testimony in these cases. Pessimists think that we *ought not* defer in these sorts of cases. There are different sorts of explanation of why we shouldn't defer. Some—call them epistemic pessimists—hold that we ought not defer because testimony is simply not a source of knowledge in these cases. Epistemic pessimism has been a popular view in aesthetics since at least Kant. The foremost reason for this is that it is plausible that *acquaintance* is required for well-formed aesthetic beliefs. In most cases testimony does not acquaint one with aesthetically relevant features of a work. Thus, if one has a very strong acquaintance requirement, epistemic pessimism seems to follow.

Epistemic pessimism is not particularly popular in metaethics.⁶ Most agree that one can gain moral knowledge in these cases. The trick in metaethics has been to explain what is amiss with testimony despite this. Thus, most pessimists in metaethics (and some in aesthetics) are *non-epistemic* pessimists. The most popular kind of non-epistemic pessimism holds that direct deference is morally or aesthetically forbidden.⁷

Optimists about testimony—i.e., those who think that deference is often (epistemically, aesthetically, morally) permitted in these cases—have an explanatory burden. What this burden is will depend on whether they think there is still something amiss with deference. If they do, then they have to explain why there is still something amiss with deference even though we

⁶There are some arguments that raise epistemic problems for moral deference, most prominently in Jones (1999), Driver (2006), McGrath (2009). The basics of these arguments are addressed below.

⁷Alison Hills is a prominent defender of non-epistemic pessimism in metaethics (see especially Hills (2009)). See also McGrath (2011c), Howell (2014), Hopkins (2007). Robert Hopkins is the primary defender of non-epistemic pessimism in aesthetics (see especially Hopkins (2011)).

are often permitted to defer. If they don't think that there is something amiss when deference is permitted, they have to explain why so many have thought otherwise.

I am an optimist that thinks that there is still something amiss with (direct and pure) deference. One of the two main goals of this paper is to explain why this is the case. My explanation of this crucially relies on claims about the importance of acquaintance to the acquisition of an important kind of moral and aesthetic knowledge. Thus, my explanation does not work if acquaintance does not play this role. The second main goal of the paper, then, is to argue that acquaintance does in fact play this role. In the next section I will explicate my explanation of the aesthetic case before extending the explanation to the moral case.

2 Acquaintance, Appreciative Knowledge, and the Possession of Reasons

In this section I am going to lay out my view of how acquaintance helps enable an important kind of aesthetic knowledge. I'll do this in three stages. First, I'll describe the intellectual benefits of being properly acquainted with the aesthetic features of art. Second, I'll introduce my account and show how it provides elegant explanations of these benefits. Third, I will clarify and defend my particular view about the role that acquaintance plays in acquiring this knowledge.

2.1 The Perks of Aesthetic Acquaintance

It is doubted by no one that aesthetic acquaintance has certain intellectual perks. To see what some of these perks are, let's think more about Hanna:

Examining Nefertiti: Hanna is visiting Berlin for the first time. On the very first morning of her stay, she rushes to the Neues Museum to see *Nefertiti's Bust*. As she enters the room where the bust is kept, she is overwhelmed by the beauty of the bust. She paces around the bust for an hour, taking in its various features. She not only passively looks at the bust, but she also actively thinks about how the various features of the bust interact. She also knows a bit about the paint available to ancient Egyptian artists. She thinks about how this contributes to the achievement of the bust.

Hanna has a host of reactions to *Nefertiti's Bust*. She believes that it is beautiful, awesome, graceful, and powerful. She is impressed by it and in awe of it. She desires its preservation, intends to do what she can to promote it, and hopes it persists forever. Given her interaction with the work, it's plausible that all of the beliefs cited above constitute knowledge. Further, it's plausible that the other reactions are fitting as well. There is, in this case at least, an important connection between Hanna's affective and conative reactions being fitting and Hanna knowing the important aesthetic features of *Nefertiti's Bust*. Hanna's conative and affective reactions

are fitting in part because she knows the aesthetic facts. Those facts themselves make the affective and conative reactions fitting—e.g., the fact that *Nefertiti's Bust* is awesome makes awe fitting. Finally, it's plausible that the way in which Hanna acquired her aesthetic knowledge is important. Hanna is put in a particularly good position to have fitting attitudes in response to the work by interacting with the work in the way that she does.

Cases like Hanna's involve what I will call *appreciative* aesthetic knowledge. Appreciative aesthetic knowledge is the kind of knowledge that allows one to fittingly have the full range of affective and conative reactions. In short, it is the kind of knowledge that enables *appreciation*. This kind of knowledge is central to our lives as aesthetic agents. Further, explaining how it is that we acquire such knowledge has been a central task of the epistemology of aesthetics.

2.2 Acquaintance and the Possession of Reasons

So far, this should all be plausible to a very wide range of theorists. Now I want to explain why Hanna's knowledge allows her to rationally appreciate the bust. To start towards an answer, notice that the fact that *Nefertiti's Bust* is beautiful provides a reason to appreciate the bust. That is, the fact that *Nefertiti's Bust* is beautiful recommends that Hanna (and me and you and your best friend) react to *Nefertiti's Bust* in various ways. It recommends being moved by the bust, wanting to protect the bust, intending to look at the bust, caring about the bust etc. It contributes to the case for having those reactions. I take this to be an entrenched piece of common sense about the normative upshot of beauty.

This doesn't by itself help much, since a reason plausibly doesn't justify one's reactions if one is in the dark about the existence of that reason. For example, before Hanna encounters the bust, the fact that it is beautiful does not go any way towards making it rational for Hanna to appreciate the bust. For this reason, it's plausible that in order for a reason to justify or rationalize a reaction, one must *possess* that reason. When one possesses a reason, the fact that provides that reason is intuitively in one's ken *as a reason*. Before explaining Hanna's case more, let me say some general things about possession.⁸

The least controversial feature of possession is that when you possess a reason, you stand in some interesting epistemic relationship with that reason. If you are completely in the dark epistemically about the existence of the fact that provides the reason, you cannot possess that reason. It is controversial which epistemic relation is the relevant relation. Fortunately, I don't think we need to tackle this controversy. I think that it will suffice to assume that all of the characters in the relevant cases know the facts that provide the reasons. The reason why I choose knowledge as the relevant condition is that all plausible views of possession hold that knowledge is sufficient for meeting the epistemic condition.

The reason why we needn't adjudicate the controversy about the epistemic condition is that this is not the aspect of possession that is relevant for my purposes. Instead, the other

⁸For much more, see Lord (2010, 2015, 2014) and especially (Lord, *MSa*, chs. 3-4). See also Schroeder (2008, 2011), Sylvan (2015), Whiting (2014).

major aspect of possession is what concerns me here. To bring out what this other aspect is, let's see why meeting the epistemic condition is not sufficient for possessing some fact *as a reason for a particular reaction*. Consider Watson. Watson was just told by Sherlock that the boot print in the snow was made by a size 9 Red Wing Iron Ranger. Although it is clear that Sherlock has inferred who did it from this information, Watson stares back blankly. It is only after Sherlock informs Watson that the cabby wears size 9 Red Wing Iron Rangers that Watson gets it.

I think it's very plausible that before Sherlock fills Watson in on the cabby's choice of boots, Watson fails to possess the fact that the print was made by a size 9 Iron Ranger *as a reason to believe the cabby did it*. I think this is plausible because I think two other claims are plausible. First, that when you possess a reason to have some reaction, that reason affects the rational case for having that reaction. Second, the rational case for Watson believing the cabby did it is not affected by merely finding out that the boot print was made by a size 9 Iron Ranger. After all, if it were affected, it seems like Watson would have been irrational for not drawing the inference. But he wasn't being irrational. Nevertheless, Watson met the epistemic condition for possessing that fact as a reason. He came to know that the boot print was created by a size 9 Iron Ranger. That fact does provide a decisive reason to believe the cabby did it. Yet, Watson didn't possess that fact as a reason to believe the cabby did it. So meeting the epistemic condition is not sufficient.

What is preventing Watson from possessing that fact as a reason? On my view, what's missing is that, given his epistemic situation, Watson cannot manifest a certain kind of know-how. Watson cannot manifest knowledge about how to *use that fact to believe* the cabby did it. If he were to start inferring claims about who did it from that fact, he would be shooting in the dark. He wouldn't use knowledge about how to use that fact. This is why, I claim, he's not in a position to form a rational belief about who did it on the basis of that fact.

Things change once Sherlock informs him about the cabby's choice of boot. Once Watson finds this out, he is in a position to manifest knowledge about how to use that fact to believe the cabby did it. And he does. He immediately infers that the cabby did it by using a bit of his know-how. His resulting belief is a kind of achievement—it's a rational achievement. This is why the resulting belief is rational.⁹

Now back to Hanna. My view is that, in Hanna's case, her acquaintance with *Nefertiti's Bust* does double duty when it comes to possession. It enables her to meet both conditions on possession. She comes to know that *Nefertiti's Bust* is beautiful and she comes to be in a position to manifest knowledge about how to react to that fact in various ways. She comes to be in a position to manifest knowledge about how to use that fact as a reason to form certain beliefs, intentions, desires, emotions etc. To put the point in a different way, by coming to know that *Nefertiti's Bust* is beautiful via acquaintance, Hanna is put in a position to manifest knowledge about how to react affectively and conatively to the bust's beauty.

While I take this story to be intuitive, a full defense requires an explanation of *why* acquaint-

⁹For much more on this, see [Lord \(MSa\)](#) and [Lord \(FC\)](#).

tance plays the role I am claiming it does. The short answer is that the reactions that require acquaintance are reactions to *very particular aspects* of *Nerfertiti's Bust* that its beauty depends on. (Budd, 2003, p. 392) puts the point well when he writes 'appreciation of a work is not a matter of knowing what its aesthetic properties are, but of perceiving them as realized in the work.'¹⁰ The particular aspects are so fine grained that it is very hard for creatures like us to display the right sensitivities to them just by hearing a description of them. However, we can display the relevant sensitivities when we have a direct access to them via acquaintance. This is why acquaintance is needed in order for us to manifest knowledge about how to react to the aesthetic features of any particular work.

The fundamental rational significance of acquaintance with aesthetically valuable properties, then, is that it puts us in a position to rationally have particular appreciative reactions. It does this by enabling us to possess certain facts as reasons for appreciative reactions. And it does this by putting us in a position to manifest knowledge about how to use those facts as reasons for appreciative reactions.

2.3 The Proper Role of Acquaintance

The story I just told about the origins of appreciative knowledge crucially relied on an appeal to acquaintance. Acquaintance, on my view, is necessary for appreciative (aesthetic) knowledge. While this sort of idea has been popular in aesthetics since at least Kant, recently it has come under trenchant attack. I think that the most serious problems rely on a faulty view of the acquaintance condition. To bolster the previous section and to lay the ground for some of what is to come, in this subsection I will more precisely sketch my acquaintance condition.¹¹

Some common ways of interacting with art raise problems for an acquaintance requirement. The main problem cases are all what I call *missing object* cases.¹² The most obvious problems have to do with copies of works and photographs of works. It is very plausible that I can gain appreciative knowledge of at least some works by looking at a photograph or well done copy of that work. Yet I need not be acquainted with the work itself—i.e., the object that is the work—when I gain such knowledge. Thus, it looks like acquaintance with a work is not necessary for having appreciative knowledge of the work.

Once one sees this, it's plausible that no actual objects seem to be required. This is because it is plausible that with at least some works and some people, one can imagine the work in enough detail to gain appreciative knowledge about the work.¹³ Thus, it doesn't even look like acquaintance with *some* object is necessary for gaining appreciative knowledge.

The most popular solution to this problem has been to insist that acquaintance is required with the work itself or with an 'adequate surrogate' for the work.¹⁴ While it is right that it is

¹⁰As we will see below, I don't think this is entirely correct, but it is a nice expression of the basic idea.

¹¹This view is defended in much greater detail in Lord (MSb).

¹²See Tormey (1973), Livingston (2003), Hopkins (2006), Hanson (2015), Konigsberg (2012).

¹³See, e.g., Hopkins (2006), Robson (2013).

¹⁴See Tormey (1973), Livingston (2003), Hopkins (2006), Hanson (2015).

plausible that photographs and copies are adequate surrogates, it has become very difficult to give an account of adequate surrogates that is both informative and plausible. This has led (Robson, 2013, p. 244) to conclude with some plausibility that 'there are formidable difficulties in attempting to formulate a version of [the Acquaintance Principle] which, after adequate precisification, will not become either trivial—or at least so modest as to be clearly uninteresting—or else vulnerable to clear counterexample, and I know of no extant account which achieves this feat.'

The source of these problems is the widespread assumption that what we are required to be acquainted with are *art objects*. Call this the Objects View about what we are required to be acquainted with. It is tempting to assume the Objects View when one reflects on a certain range of cases involving visual art. But these cases provide a poor diet of examples. This is part of what the missing objects cases show. The surrogate response does not give up on the basic idea behind the Objects View; it just expands the objects that count.

I think a more radical solution is needed. We should completely reject the idea that acquaintance is required with objects. Instead, we should maintain that we are required to be acquainted with *properties and their distributions*. Call this the Properties View. The Properties View avoids the missing objects problems. This is because photographs, copies, and imagined works can *share properties* with the original works. Thus, one can become acquainted with the relevant properties by being acquainted with the tokens of those properties that photographs, copies, or imagined works have. This acquaintance is what enables appreciative knowledge.

There are two important ways in which the Properties View posits a liberal acquaintance requirement that we should keep in mind going forward. The first is that it holds that one can meet the acquaintance requirement when it comes to some particular aesthetically relevant feature whenever one is acquainted with a token instance of that feature. The second way in which the view is liberal is that it does not require that one engage with a work with one's sense modalities. This is how it accounts for the imaginative cases. As we will see, it also helps it account for cases where the normatively relevant facts are not accessible via the senses at all.

3 The Downsides (and Upsides) of Aesthetic Testimony

We are now in a position to explain what is amiss with aesthetic deference. The primary downside is that deference does not put us in a position to gain appreciative knowledge. This is because it does not put us in a position to be acquainted with the specific features that the aesthetic facts depend upon. This is a serious failing given the centrality of appreciation to our aesthetic lives. Few of us are particularly concerned with having mere knowledge of the aesthetic facts; instead, we want to gain appreciation of the aesthetic objects that interest us. This is one reason why we dedicate so many resources to engaging with art (and other things with aesthetic value).

This by itself should not drive us to pessimism. The failure of deference to deliver appreciative knowledge does not entail that we ought not defer. For one, we have good reason to

think that we can gain knowledge by deferring. One piece of evidence is the very common intuition that aesthetic testimony yields knowledge.¹⁵ A second and weightier piece of evidence is provided by the fact that it is plausible that by deferring we can come to possess the reasons *for some reactions* that are provided by the aesthetic facts. On the basis of Hanna's testimony Clara can come to possess the reason *to go to the Neues Museum* provided by the fact that *Nefertiti's Bust* is beautiful. Possession of this reason, it seems, does not depend on one being acquainted with the particular way in which the bust is beautiful. On my view, this is because one can display a sensitivity to this reason without being acquainted with the bust's particular beauty—Clara could rationally go to the Neues *on the basis* of the fact that the bust is beautiful. The same cannot be said for attitudes like awe.

It is worth stressing that listening to trusted informants *also* seems to be a central aspect of our aesthetic inquiries. There are a lot of things in the world to aesthetically engage with. Given various pressures on our time, attention, and stamina, it is important for many of us to be pointed in the right direction by trusted informants. And, I think, most of us often engage in this practice. We do defer to friends and experts (and friends who are experts) when planning about what to engage with. When things go well, we come to know various aesthetic truths and act on that knowledge.

Thus, I think it is plausible that we can gain knowledge via deference. It is thus implausible to think that we *epistemically* ought not defer. Epistemic pessimism should be rejected. This leaves non-epistemic pessimism, which in this case holds that we aesthetically ought not defer.

In order to fully evaluate non-epistemic pessimism, we would need to go through all the various proposed reasons why we aesthetically ought not defer. I won't do that. Instead, I'll consider the basic idea driving Hopkins (2011)'s discussion. This is the idea that we aesthetically ought to make up our own minds about the aesthetic merits of things. He considers two ways of fleshing out what is required for correctly making up our own minds. The first holds that in order to correctly make up one's own mind, one must grasp the grounds for the aesthetic facts. The second holds that in order to correctly make up one's own mind, one must be acquainted with the relevant aesthetic properties.¹⁶

On a flat-footed way of understanding the basic idea, it seems much too strong to say that we aesthetically ought to make up our own minds. This is because, as was already mentioned, it also seems central to our aesthetic lives that we defer to trusted informants, at least when it comes to planning about what to engage with. In these cases it is implausible that we are required in any way to make up our own minds.

Hopkins actually agrees with this, but he thinks his form of non-epistemic pessimism can account for these cases. This is because he maintains that the cases where one is permitted to defer are all cases where one *can't* grasp the grounds or be acquainted with the relevant properties. Since 'ought' implies 'can', it follows that the relevant aesthetic obligation doesn't

¹⁵See, e.g., Meskin (2004), Meskin & Robson (2015), Robson (2013), Hopkins (2011), Budd (2003), Driver (2006).

¹⁶Hopkins is unclear about the objects/properties distinction (although in Hopkins (2015) he is clearer). I'll put it in my preferred terms).

apply.

Assuming this reply works (an assumption I'll make for the moment), the best kind of case to think about is a case where one has interacted with the work and is unsure what to think about it on the basis of this interaction. So, suppose that Clara goes to see *Nefertiti's Bust* and is unsure whether it is beautiful. Hopkins argues that if optimism is true, then Clara should be able to permissibly use Hanna's testimony to make up her mind in favor of believing the bust is beautiful. Hopkins reports a strong intuition that this is not permitted. This provides evidence that there is an aesthetic obligation to make up one's own mind (when one can be acquainted with the relevant properties).

While this line of reply has an obvious appeal, I don't think it works. Both parts are suspect. Let's start with Hopkins' focus on cases like the one just mentioned (this is the second part of his reply). The devil will certainly lie in some very fine grained details of these cases. In many of them it will be right that the protagonist cannot permissibly defer. But this very well might be for epistemic reasons. After all, if it is rational for Clara to be unsure about the bust's beauty after seeing it, she will possess strong reasons not to believe it is beautiful. Given that it is plausible that the evidence acquired through interaction with the bust will generally be of higher quality than the evidence provided by Hanna's testimony, it is plausible that the reasons not to believe the bust is beautiful will outweigh the reason to believe it is beautiful provided by Hanna's testimony. But then it won't be epistemically permitted to deferentially believe.

Other cases look different. Suppose Akshai is in the same position as Clara, with one twist. After he interacts with the bust and gets Hanna's testimonial evidence, he finds out that he was slipped a pill that makes him unreliable at evaluating art. In this case it seems as if it is permitted to defer to Hanna about the bust's beauty even though he was acquainted with the properties that the aesthetic properties depend upon.

Notice that Akshai's case casts doubt on the first part of Hopkins' reply. Hopkins claims that the only cases where deference is permitted are cases where one is not in a position to make up one's own mind. Akshai is in the position to make up his own mind insofar as he has been acquainted with the bust. Thus, Hopkins' view predicts he aesthetically ought not defer. It's plausible that this is the wrong prediction.

The upshot is that despite Hopkins' arguments, it still seems like cases of permissibly deferring to trusted informants is a problem for pessimism of all kinds, including Hopkins' version of non-epistemic pessimism. Further, my optimistic view gives a plausible explanation of what's amiss with deference while also having a nice explanation of why deference is often permissible both epistemically and aesthetically. I see this as strong reason to accept my moderately optimistic view about the power of aesthetic testimony.

4 Generalizing to the Moral Case

So far I have taken myself to show that there is a plausible story to tell about the merits and demerits of aesthetic testimony that crucially appeals to acquaintance. Given the similarities

between the puzzle of aesthetic testimony and the puzzle of moral testimony, it is worth seriously considering whether such a story can be generalized to the moral case. In the rest of the paper I will lay out a package of views that delivers on such a generalization. The goal is not to prove that such a package is true. Rather, it is make a preliminary case for the package of views.

4.1 Becoming Acquainted with Moral Acquaintance

Although not as often remarked upon, I think that there are cases of moral learning that closely resemble cases like Hanna's.¹⁷ Let's fill in the background of George, who is both the protagonist of George Orwell's 'A Hanging' (Orwell (2000)) and Edmund's informant above.¹⁸

A Hanging: George is an anglo police officer in 1920s Burma. As a sort of initiation, he is required to guard over the execution of a Burmese man for an unknown crime. George participates in the walk as the man is marched from the holding area to the gallows. He watches as a rope is fastened around the man's neck, followed by a potato sack over the man's head. He and his companions then wait for the prison's superintendent to give the required order. Minutes pass slowly, during which the man prays out to his God with a simple refrain of 'Ram, Ram, Ram, Ram'. Finally the superintendent makes his decision and the man is killed.

In Orwell's telling of the story—which is plausibly based on his own experiences as a police officer in Burma during the 1920s—George's first hand experience of the execution has a profound impact on him. In a famous passage, Orwell's George describes his experience thusly:

It is curious, but till that moment I had never realized what it means to destroy a healthy, conscious man. When I saw the prisoner step aside to avoid the puddle, I saw the mystery, the unspeakable wrongness, of cutting a life short when it is in full tide. This man was not dying, he was alive just as we were alive. All the organs of his body were working—bowels digesting food, skin renewing itself, nails growing, tissues forming—all toiling away in solemn foolery. His nails would still be growing when he stood on the drop, when he was falling through the air with a tenth of a second to live. His eyes saw the yellow gravel and the grey walls, and his brain still remembered, foresaw, reasoned—reasoned even about puddles. He and we were a party of men walking together, seeing, hearing, feeling, understanding the same world; and in two minutes, with a sudden snap, one of us would be gone—one mind less, one world less (Orwell, 2000, pg. 45)

¹⁷This is remarked upon in one way or another by Oddie (2005), Johnston (2001), McGrath (2011b).

¹⁸Orwell's story is also discussed in McGrath (2011b).

George comes to know that the hanging is wrong. Further, he also seems to come to know that hanging in general is wrong.¹⁹ Although it is not focused on extensively, it is clear that George, not unlike Hanna, has a host of conative and affective reactions to the scene in front of him. We can easily imagine George feeling disgust, repulsion, sadness. We can also imagine that he desires that the man's life be spared, intends to speak out against hanging and capital punishment (as Orwell went on to do), hopes for the abolishment of hanging and capital punishment, and more besides.

George's knowledge that the hanging is wrong is similar to Hanna's knowledge that *Nefertiti's Bust* is beautiful. This is because there is tight connection between his knowledge and the fittingness of his conative and affective attitudes. The facts that he knows are themselves strong reasons to have those reactions—the fact that the execution is wrong is a reason to be repulsed and a reason to desire that the man's life be spared. Finally, the way in which he acquired the set of attitudes seems important. His acquaintance with the particular hanging puts him in an especially good position to not only gain the moral knowledge he gains, but also to have the fitting conative and affective reactions he ends up having. George's knowledge thus seems to be appreciative knowledge.

Just as it is in the aesthetic case, this appreciation is centered on the particular. In George's case it is the particular wrongness of the hanging. It should be said that appreciation of this particular moral fact plays an important role in the development of more general moral sensitivities. By experiencing the particular features of the hanging, George is better equipped to be sensitive to similar features in other situations. Further, he is better equipped to appreciate the force of a certain *type* of consideration—e.g., the great weight of the reason not to kill provided by the capacities of agents like the Burmese prisoner.

4.2 The Downsides (and Upsides) of Moral Deference

The preceding story about appreciative knowledge paves the way for an explanation of what is amiss with moral deference. Deference does not put us in a position to be acquainted with the morally relevant properties and thus does not put us in a position to gain appreciative knowledge. This is because without acquaintance, we do not come to possess the moral facts as reasons for appreciation. Given the importance of appreciative knowledge to our moral lives, this is a serious disadvantage of deference. This, I claim, is what is amiss with direct deference.

This, however, doesn't mean that we ought not defer. We can again draw on the distinction between epistemic pessimism and non-epistemic pessimism. The most popular form epistemic pessimism in metaethics holds that the difference between the moral case and non-moral cases is that in the moral case we cannot identify trustworthy informants.²⁰ This is often

¹⁹It seems all George claims to come to know is the 'unspeakable wrongness of cutting a life short in full tide.' That's fine by me. For reasons that will be articulated below, I will focus mostly on the knowledge that the particular hanging is wrong.

²⁰This is pressed in various ways by Jones (1999), Driver (2006), McGrath (2009, 2011c).

cached out in terms of expertise. Without a way of picking out experts, one epistemically ought not defer. As many have pointed out, this explanation has serious problems.²¹

The first problem is that it is not at all obvious why the transmission of knowledge via testimony requires that one's informants be experts. Now, of course, we could count *A* as an expert relative to *B* when it comes to *p* just in case *A* knows *p* and *B* is ignorant of *p*. This is an uninteresting sense of expertise, though. Further, many will come out as experts relative to others on this view. This by itself doesn't undermine this explanation, for it could be that even though there are many experts, we still can't reliably pick them out. The second problem is that it is unclear why the transmission of knowledge from *A* to *B* via testimony requires that *B* know that *A* is reliable (or trustworthy). Evidence that *A* is *unreliable* will of course cause trouble. But, in the absence of such evidence, it's not clear why one needs to form views about the reliability of one's informants. This seems to overintellectualize the epistemology of testimony.

Further (and this is the third problem), even if we grant that we need to identify trustworthy informants in order to get knowledge via testimony, this does not explain the asymmetry between moral deference and non-moral deference. This is because we are often not in a position to identify trustworthy informants about non-moral matters independently of testimony. This is often the case with expert testimony. In many areas of science only a few people are in a position to identify the experts without relying on testimony. The rest of us rely on testimony. This doesn't mean we ought not defer to the actual experts. It is both permissible to defer and we often ought to defer. It looks as if this story predicts that these claims are false. So much the worse for this story.

Partly because of these problems, non-epistemic pessimism is very popular in metaethics. According to non-epistemic pessimism, we ought not defer for non-epistemic reasons. In metaethics the non-epistemic reasons most often appealed to are moral reasons. This sort of view challenges my moderately optimistic view. Rather than survey all the various possibilities (a task I lack the space for), I will instead investigate one of the most prominent forms of non-epistemic pessimism. According to this view, what is amiss with moral deference is that one cannot gain understanding from deference.²² This is *morally* bad because understanding, according to Hills, is required for virtue and for acting in a morally worthy way. This moral badness provides reasons not to defer that often ground a moral requirement not to defer.

My framework provides a precise way of thinking about what virtue and acting in a morally worthy way involves. Elsewhere I have defended the view that to ϕ in a morally worthy way is to manifest knowledge about how to use certain facts as reasons to ϕ .²³ I have also argued for the view sketched above: that to possess a reason *r* to ϕ is to be in a position to manifest knowledge about how to use *r* as a reason to ϕ .²⁴ Putting these together, we get the view that

²¹See Hopkins (2007, 2011), Howell (2014).

²²The most prominent defender of this view is Hills (2009, 2012). See also Driver (2006), McGrath (2011c), Nickel (2001).

²³See Lord (FC,M).

²⁴See (Lord, MSa, chs. 3-4).

when we possess a fact as a (moral) reason to ϕ , we are in a position to ϕ in a morally worthy way.

The fact that hanging is generally wrong provides a reason not to hang someone. The question is this: Can one possess this reason as a reason not to hang someone without understanding why hanging is wrong? It seems very plausible to me that one can. Suppose that on the day that Edmund is to supervise an execution, the warden decides to try to harden Edmund even more. He does this by leaving it up to Edmund whether to execute the day's prisoner. It is clear that the warden expects him to decide to execute, but it is also clear that it is truly up to Edmund. Suppose he decides not to have the prisoner executed. Could this decision be based on the fact that hanging is wrong? It seems to me that it could. Since Edmund is a decent person, he has the background competence to refrain from doing things because they are wrong. Once he learns that hanging is wrong from George (which even Hills admits he can), he is in a position to manifest his competence to refrain from doing something because it is wrong. Given this, I find Hills' view connecting moral worth and understanding wanting.²⁵

One avenue of response to this is to insist that to act in a morally worthy way is to act for the reasons that *make* the act right. The fact that hanging is wrong plausibly doesn't make it the case that not hanging the prisoner is the right action. Thus, this plausible view of moral worth challenges my argument. I have two replies to this. First, despite the initial plausibility of the making-talk, I don't think this view can plausibly be maintained (at least given how it is usually understood). The right view holds that morally worthy actions are performed for moral reasons that sufficiently recommend those actions. In order for this yield Hills' view, it needs to be that facts about what's wrong do not themselves provide moral reasons. But this is false. Facts about what's wrong do provide moral reasons. They intuitively count in favor of certain reactions, they can be defeated, and they can be rationally acted upon.²⁶ These are the hallmarks of normative reasons.

The second reply is that I think there is a way in which the fact that hanging is wrong can *make* refraining from hanging the prisoner the right thing to do. This is because I think it's plausible that the fact that hanging is wrong can make it the case that Edmund ought not hang the prisoner.²⁷ This is because Edmund's reason to refrain from hanging provided by the fact that hanging is wrong is decisive. This allows us to salvage a version of the Hills' view. On this view, a subset of morally worthy actions are actions that are performed for the moral reasons that decisively support those actions. Edmund, I think, is in a position to refrain from hanging for a reason that decisively supports refraining.

Notice that this mirrors what I said about the aesthetics case above. There I said that we come to possess the aesthetic facts as reasons for action when we defer even though we do not

²⁵For a similar (which is less worked out insofar as it doesn't appeal to a particular view of moral worth), see [Howell \(2014\)](#).

²⁶Further, popular double-counting arguments against the idea that facts about what's wrong provide reasons are problematic for reasons articulated by [Schroeder \(2009\)](#) and [Väyrynen \(2006\)](#).

²⁷This is most plausible if the sort of ought that we are dealing with is perspectival. For a defense of the importance of this sort of ought, see [Lord \(2015\)](#).

come to possess them as reasons to appreciate. This is also what happens in the moral case. We come to possess the moral facts as reasons to act in various ways. This is why we come to be in a position to act in a morally worthy way when we learn moral facts through deference. We don't, however, come to possess those facts as reasons for appreciation.

Matters are more complicated when it comes to virtue. I agree with Hills and others that learning about morality through deference is not a good way to cultivate many of the fine-grained virtues. This is because many of the virtues are sensitivities to particular *types* of reasons. When we defer we fail to come into the right kind of contact with these reasons. This is a bad feature of deference. There are three points to make about this. First, this by itself does not provide an alternative explanation of what is amiss with moral deference. I think my view elegantly explains why we don't gain the fine-grained virtues through deference. This is because appreciative knowledge is crucial to developing the kind of fine-grained sensitivities that are involved in the more fine-grained virtues.

Now this is to disagree with Hills about what is required for the fine-grained virtues. She holds that understanding is required and I don't. I just think appreciative knowledge is required. Appreciative knowledge needn't involve understanding since understanding requires intellectual skills that outstrip the skills required for appreciation. While a full adjudication of the dispute is impossible here, let me note that the issue comes down to whether one needs to be able to *think* about morality in certain ways.²⁸ Hills thinks that it does, as she thinks that understanding requires that one have the ability to explain why the moral facts obtain. I, on the other hand, hold that being able to correctly act and conatively and affectively react to the world is all that is needed.

The second point to make is that the aesthetic analogue of Hills' view is far from obvious.²⁹ It is not particularly plausible that in order to be aesthetically virtuous one needs to understand why the aesthetic facts obtain. Sure, it is nice to have such understanding; such understanding is an intellectual good. However, when it comes to one's aesthetic character, appreciation seems more central. This provides some reason to think that this is also the case when it comes to one's moral character.

The third point is the most important. On my view, when Edmund refrains from hanging the prisoner, he manifests knowledge about how to use the fact that hanging is wrong as a reason not to have the prisoner hanged. This know-how is a competence and thus a virtue. This is why, I claim, Edmund's decision is morally worthy—it is the manifestation of virtue. It is right that given how he learned that hanging is wrong, Edmund is not in a position to cultivate a different virtue that is a sensitivity to the features of hanging that make it wrong. This, though, does not show that Edmund fails to manifest virtue when he decides not to hang the prisoner. This is important because it shows that virtue can still play an important role in these cases. This, in turn, seriously undermines any attempt to show that the fact that deference precludes the cultivation of fine grained virtues provides decisive moral reason not

²⁸For arguments for my side, see Lord (FC), Howell (2014).

²⁹Fletcher (2016) makes a similar point.

to defer. It is simply not plausible to think that the cultivation of fine grained virtues is *that important*. If by deferring one can come to be in a position to do the right thing in a way that manifests a virtue, it is implausible to think that one ought not defer simply because learning the particular moral fact in that way precludes one from cultivating a fine-grained virtue.

The upshot, I think, is that the most popular versions of both sorts of pessimism look like overgeneralizations. While there is something defective about deference, the defect does not make it the case that we generally ought not defer. For this reason, pessimism fails. If this is right, then we should conclude that we often can permissibly defer.

That said, generalizing my view to the moral case is not this straightforward. This is because it is natural to worry that an appeal to acquaintance is innocuous in the aesthetic case but problematic in the moral case. Thus, in order to adequately defend the generalization, I need to argue that my appeal to acquaintance is on solid ground. The rest of the paper will provide such an argument.

4.3 Two Challenges to a Full Generalization

I take it as a datum that George's particular experiences played an important role in his coming to acquire knowledge that the hanging was wrong. Indeed, I take it as a datum that his particular experiences played an important role in his acquiring appreciative knowledge. The question now is whether it is plausible that the moral case is like the aesthetic case in that acquaintance is *required* for appreciative knowledge. In this subsection I will flesh out two challenges to this more ambitious thought.

The first objection is the *Lack of Objects* objection. According to this objection, it is implausible to require acquaintance because many moral cases do not involve objects that one can be acquainted with. This is in contrast, goes the objection, to the aesthetic case, which always will feature an object that we can be acquainted with.

The second objection is the *Different Access* objection. This objection holds that appreciative moral knowledge does not require that we be *acquainted* with objects of moral relevance the way we can be acquainted with objects of aesthetic relevance. This is for two reasons. First, we do not have perceptual access to facts of moral relevance even though we do have such access to objects of aesthetic relevance. Second, we have armchair access to facts of moral relevance in a way that does not involve acquaintance. We lack this kind of access to facts of aesthetic relevance.

Both of these objections have serious merit. This is so for at least two reasons. First, the ideas at their heart are very plausible—they both seem to point out important differences between the way we think about aesthetic matters and the way we think about moral matters. Second, they both are anchored in views that are at the heart of orthodox theories in both aesthetics and metaethics. This is no accident given that they are built on top of views that are independently plausible. That said, the remainder of the paper will argue that such views can plausibly be rejected. There is a plausible package of views that fit very nicely with the claim that acquaintance is required for appreciative moral knowledge.

5 What We Can Be Acquainted With

Let's start with a very flat-footed version of the Lack of Objects objection. This version of the objection maintains that the key difference between aesthetics and morality is that when we think about aesthetics we engage with physical art objects. It is acquaintance with these objects that is important. Morality, on the other hand, lacks such objects. Thus, this version concludes, it is a mistake to think acquaintance is required in the moral case in the same way it is required in the aesthetic case.

This version of the objection maintains that thinking about aesthetics crucially involves engagement with objects whereas thinking about morality does not. I think that both of these claims are false. First, as we saw in §2.3, it is not plausible that in the aesthetic case we are required to be acquainted with objects. Rather, we are required to be acquainted with properties. It is undoubtedly true that there are properties that are morally relevant that we can be acquainted with. George, for example, is acquainted with several properties of the prisoner that (at the very least) reveal the rational capacities of the prisoner. These properties are of great moral importance in George's context. Thus, this version of the objection crucially relies on an implausible view about the aesthetics case, one that insists that acquaintance with objects is what is important. Once we correct for this view, the supposed disanalogy falls away.

The objection also is wrong to think that engagement with the physical is unimportant for moral thinking. Physical objects and their properties play an important moral role. Indeed, as Kate Manne has recently argued (?), there is a case to be made that bodily states play a fundamental moral role. Even if you disagree with Manne about the relative fundamentality of bodily states, it is very plausible that states of pain, pleasure, joy, fear, longing etc. are morally important. We can plausibly be acquainted with such states and their properties. Again, George is acquainted with several of these states through his interaction with the prisoner (think of the states the prisoner makes manifest when chanting 'Ram, Ram, Ram'). Thus, it looks as if this version of the objection crucially relies on an implausible view about the moral role of physical objects and their properties.

This flat-footed version of the objection thus gets both cases wrong. There is a less flat-footed way to understand the objection, though. According to this version of the objection, there is a difference in kind between the bearers of aesthetically relevant properties and the bearers of morally relevant properties. (Alternatively, one might think that there is a difference in kind between the aesthetically relevant properties and the morally relevant properties.) The aesthetically relevant properties are all things we have to learn about via empirical ways of thinking, whereas the morally relevant properties are not like this.

While this version of the objection purports to be about the objects of acquaintance, I think it is really just the Lack of Access objection. This is because the asymmetry it is pushing is about what methods of thinking yield access to the relevant properties. One might push back on this and insist that it is about the objects of acquaintance because the aesthetic properties are all sensuous—i.e., accessible via the sense modalities.

This rebuttal rests on a mistaken view about the aesthetically relevant properties. There

are many aesthetically relevant properties that are not sensuous. One important class of such properties are properties of conceptual works. Take Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning Drawing*, which is, as the name suggests, a piece of paper that used to contain a drawing by de Kooning that Rauschenberg erased. Some of the aesthetically relevant properties of this work are not sensuous. They are historical, metaphorical, abstract. Conceptual art provides many more examples like this.

Now, of course, there is an interesting question about whether we can be acquainted with such properties. Indeed, there is a healthy literature about this.³⁰ This question, however, is best answered by discussing the lack of access objection, to which I now turn.³¹

6 What We Can Access

As we've just seen, it is natural for the Lack of Objects objection to bleed into the Lack of Access objection. This is because once we broaden our view about what acquaintance is required with, it is natural to start wondering how we can be *acquainted* with such a broad array of things. This leads us directly into the twofold of the Lack of Access objection. The first part of the objection, recall, is that the difference between thinking about aesthetics and thinking about morality is that we have perceptual access to the relevant properties in the aesthetic case but not in the moral case. This is the Lack of Perceptual Access objection.

The second part of the Lack of Access objection goes the other way. It maintains we have a kind of access to the morally relevant properties that we lack when it comes to the aesthetically relevant properties. This is armchair access. This is the Lack of Armchair Access objection. I will take each objection in turn.

Before we begin, I start with a confession-cum-warning. My discussion of the Lack of Perceptual Access objections will lead us to strange, controversial places. My goal is not the impossible task of defending all of the views I will rely upon. The goal is rather to see whether there are respectable views available that avoid the objections and allow for a generalization of the aesthetic case to the moral case. I think that there are, but being respectable in philosophy is a far cry from being common-sensical and even further cry from being uncontroversial.

6.1 The Lack of Perceptual Access Objection

The first order of business is to resolve an ambiguity in the way I have been discussing the properties we are required to be acquainted with (surely many readers have noticed this; it's likely some of you have been annoyed by it). I have consistently said that we are required to be acquainted with are the aesthetically and morally *relevant* properties. This might mean that we are required to be acquainted with the aesthetic or moral properties themselves. It might also

³⁰See [Konigsberg \(2012\)](#), [Robson \(2013\)](#), [Hanson \(2015\)](#), [Lord \(MSb\)](#).

³¹Due to space I won't fully answer this question about the properties of *Erased de Kooning*. What I say about morality will be telling about this. For a fuller discussion of the aesthetic case see [Lord \(MSb\)](#).

mean something weaker; viz., that one be acquainted with the non-aesthetic and non-moral properties that the aesthetic and moral properties *depend upon*.

The resolution of this ambiguity makes a major difference to how we tackle the Lack of Perceptual Access objection. Given that my main aim is to see if my theory of the aesthetic case can be generalized to the moral case, a natural starting place is to see how the ambiguity is resolved in aesthetics. As natural as this is, it will not help much. This is because most participants in the aesthetics literature don't take a clear stand on the issue. This is unsurprising upon reflection on what we already know about the debate. Given the prevalence of the Objects View, it is unsurprising that extant theorists haven't taken a clear stand about whether one needs to be acquainted with the aesthetic properties; after all, those theorists think that acquaintance with the objects are what is important.

Rather than take a definitive stand on the issue, I will instead argue that it is plausible that we can be acquainted with both sorts of properties. We will start with the easier case of acquaintance with the non-moral properties that the moral ones depend upon.

Before we get to that, though, it is also time to start talking about what acquaintance is supposed to be. Above I characterized it simply as a kind of direct access to an object, property, or fact. This follows the precedent set by many using the notion—see, e.g., Johnston (2001, 2004), McGrath (2011b), Chudnoff (2013a). I will continue to use this broad understanding of acquaintance. Indeed, depending on your views about the metaphysics of perception, I will assume an even broader view by holding that if you see that p , then you are acquainted with (the constituents of) p .³² On some views of seeing that p , it is a stretch to think that seeing that p amounts to acquaintance with p . This is because many views of perception hold that one only has a kind of indirect access to p . This is a source of many objections that so-called direct realists level at these accounts.³³ There is much to be said for the thought that seeing does make us directly aware of stuff in the world. This thought is at the heart of direct realism. Since I am myself attracted to this picture, I will assume that seeing is roughly how the direct realist conceives of it. On this view it is natural to think that seeing involves acquaintance.³⁴

Now it should be noted that there is a tradition in epistemology that does not understand acquaintance in this way. According to this tradition, acquaintance is a kind of direct access, but it is non-conceptual and basic.³⁵ Further, this tradition is strongly internalist and insists

³²Some care needs to be taken here given my purposes. The key question for me is what it takes to be acquainted with a property—the painting's property of being a specific shade of yellow, say. I think there is a tight connection between being acquainted with the yellow-ness and seeing that it is that shade of yellow. When you see that the painting is that shade of yellow, you are acquainted with the property of being that shade of yellow. Thus, I think we can use seeing to get at what I am most interested in.

³³See, for example, Johnston (2004), Brewer (2011).

³⁴Even if this view turns out to be wrong, I take it as a constraint on any successful theory to explain how seeing gives us an importantly direct kind of access to the facts. This is a constraint given the role that seeing needs to play in epistemology (I am thus assuming that some sort of foundationalism is true). My more cautious view, then, is that seeing will involve acquaintance on any view that meets this constraint. Many direct realists—and I think I am one of them—thinks only direct realism can meet this constraint.

³⁵See ? and the citations therein.

that the only things we can be acquainted with are our own internal states (with pain being a paradigm). I am *not* thinking of acquaintance in this way. I think it's clear enough that this notion will not help much in the epistemologies of aesthetics and morality. Fortunately, there is the broader notion connected to seeing. This is the notion I will work with.

The Lack of Non-Moral Perceptual Access

The Lack of Non-Moral Perceptual Access objection maintains that the key difference between the moral case and the aesthetic case is that in the aesthetic case we have perceptual access to the non-aesthetic facts that the aesthetic facts depend on whereas in the moral case we do not. This version of the objection is not particularly forceful. Most of the non-moral properties that the moral properties depend upon are properties of agents. In Orwell's account of George, it seems as if the prisoner's capacities are what strike George. George can see that the prisoner is constantly using his capacities when he sees the prisoner swerve to miss the puddle—the prisoner 'reasoned even about puddles.' This strikes George as morally salient and it leads him to form the belief that it is wrong to kill the prisoner.

George's situation is not abnormal. We are often in situations that make us aware of the non-moral facts that the moral facts depend upon. This is why it is natural to say that we are often in a position to see that particular people are in pain, are joyful, are stressed, are impaired, are fully functioning, are hungry, are ashamed, are angry etc. Now, of course, it is controversial whether we see these things the same way we see colors, shapes, and spatial relations. Much of the recent work in the philosophy of perception is about this.³⁶ There are two important things to say about this. First, no matter how that debate turns out, it is plausible that our access to the relevant facts is importantly different than the access we have to those facts via indirect methods of thinking—e.g., inference and testimony. This needs to be accounted for, and when it is, I conjecture it will be plausible to think that we have a kind of direct access to these facts in the relevant cases. That should be enough for my purposes.

The second thing to say is that there will be analogous questions to ask about the aesthetic case. Although many of the properties of art we are acquainted with are low-level features like colors and shapes, many of them are not low-level features. For example, it's plausible that we can see that a work belongs to a certain tradition and thus come to be acquainted with the property of being in that tradition. Given that this issue arises for both cases, one cannot use it to argue for a disanalogy between the two cases.

The upshot of this is that it is plausible that we often are acquainted with the non-moral properties that the moral properties depend upon. Thus, if this is the sort of acquaintance that is required for appreciative knowledge, it is plausible that there is nothing about the moral domain that prevents us from having such acquaintance.

³⁶See [Silins \(2016\)](#) for a nice overview.

The Lack of Moral Perceptual Access

The Lack of Moral Perceptual Access objection maintains that the difference between the aesthetics case and the moral case is that in the aesthetics case we have perceptual acquaintance with the aesthetic properties themselves, whereas in the moral case we do not. It is a common trope in metaethics that we lack perceptual access to the moral facts.³⁷ Such skepticism has not played a prominent role in aesthetics.³⁸ It is common for aestheticians to assume that we perceive aesthetic properties—we see the painting's beauty, hear the symphony's grace, taste the dish's delectability.

There are two lines of defense to this objection. While these are sometimes seen as competitors (e.g., in Milona (FC)), I see them as complementary. The first line of defense insists that we can access the moral facts via the traditional five senses. This view has been defended with increasing sophistication in the last decade.³⁹ As it turns out, the argumentative strategies designed to show that we see some non-normative higher-level properties—e.g., kind membership, mental states etc—can be applied to show that we see normative properties as well.⁴⁰ These argumentative strategies rely on the hypothesis that there is *cognitive penetration* of perception. This means, roughly, that one's background attitudes can affect which properties one perceives. When things go well (they don't always), one's background attitudes can put one in a position to perceive the actual moral properties.

While I am sympathetic to this form of normative perceptualism, it faces two important problems. The first problem casts doubt on the foundationalist bona fides of the view.⁴¹ The problem is that if the content of one's perceptions are influenced by one's background attitudes, it looks like the rational power of those perceptions will be held hostage to the rational status of those background attitudes. So, if George sees that the hanging is wrong because of his more general compassion, it seems as if the rational power of that particular perception is partially generated by his compassion. Similarly, if one perceives black faces as dangerous because one's irrational background belief (or alief) that African-Americans are more dangerous than the average citizen, it seems as if the perception lacks full rational power.

This is a problem if one wants normative perceptual beliefs to be one's foundations in a foundationalist normative epistemology. After all, foundational beliefs are foundational in virtue of the fact that their rational status does not depend on the rational status of any of the subjects other attitudes. It's plausible that this is not so for cognitively penetrated perceptions of normative facts.

The second problem is particularly severe in our context. It looks like we need more than

³⁷See, e.g., Harman (1986)'s classic discussion of the burning cat.

³⁸See Stokes (2014) for relevant discussion. Stokes ends up defending the view that we see higher-level aesthetic properties.

³⁹See, e.g., Greco (2000), Audi (2013), Werner (2016).

⁴⁰See, e.g., Werner (2016) on the moral case and Stokes (2014) on the aesthetic case.

⁴¹This problem has been very widely discussed. See Silins (2016), Väyrynen (ming), Milona (FC), Siegel (2012).

normative seeing to account for the full range of cases involving acquaintance.⁴² To see this, recall that it's plausible that we can gain appreciative aesthetic knowledge via the imagination. The imaginative processes involved in this do not involve actual visual (or auditory) perception. So it doesn't look like normative visual perceptions can do all of the work we need done.

For these reasons, it would be good if there was a different kind of perceptual access that rationalizes the relevant normative beliefs. Fortunately, certain affective or conative states seem to fit the bill. According to the view I like best, we have certain attraction and repulsion states that present particulars as desirable or repulsive.⁴³ These states are perceptions of the normative. So, for example, George has a basic repulsion to the concrete scene before him. This state presents the hanging as wrong. It provides George with basic knowledge that the hanging is wrong.

This sort of sentimentalist perceptualism holds some promise when it comes to the objections to the normative seeing view. There is reason to think that they fail to fall prey to the rational encroachment objection leveled above. This is because, roughly, the function of the relevant affective states is to track attractiveness and aversiveness in the same way that the function of visual perception is to track low-level properties.⁴⁴

Further, we can have these reactions in response to imagined works or scenarios. When we do, we have a kind of perceptual access to the properties of those imagined works or scenarios. These experiences can provide us with basic knowledge of the moral features of those scenarios.

The upshot of this section is that there are interesting resources for arguing that we are acquainted with the moral facts. First, it's plausible that we have direct access to the moral facts through our traditional sense modalities. While this is helpful for me, it doesn't do everything one might want. Fortunately, it is also plausible that we have a sort of perceptual access to the moral facts through our affective states. This sort of access looks like it can deliver the epistemic goods that I am after.

6.2 The Lack of Armchair Access Objection

The Lack of Perceptual Access objections contend that we have a kind of access—perceptual access—to the aesthetic facts that we lack when it comes to the moral facts. The Lack of Armchair Access objection goes the other way. It contends that we have a kind of access to the moral facts—armchair access—that we lack when it comes to the aesthetic facts. Just like the previous objections, this objection is a natural one to make if you hold textbook accounts of moral and aesthetic epistemology. Aestheticians have been very suspicious of any kind of

⁴²This sort of problem is raised in [Milona \(FC\)](#).

⁴³See [Johnston \(2001\)](#), [Schafer \(2013\)](#) for defense of this particular kind of sentimentalist perceptualism. See [Milona \(FC\)](#), [Milona \(MSb\)](#), [Oddie \(2005\)](#), [Döring \(2007\)](#) for defenses of other sorts of sentimentalist perceptualism.

⁴⁴See [Milona \(MSa\)](#) for a defense of this sort of line.

armchair aesthetic knowledge.⁴⁵ On the other hand, many metaethicists see armchair moral knowledge as paradigmatic.⁴⁶ This on its own doesn't really challenge my picture. It does once we add the claim that armchair moral knowledge doesn't involve acquaintance. This looks plausible for at least some purported armchair knowledge.

Before we get going, it's helpful to point out the fact that these thoughts on their don't put much pressure on anything said in the previous subsection.⁴⁷ It might be that we have a *posteriori* knowledge of moral facts even though they are armchair knowable. Their armchair knowability is what is truistic. But, of course, armchair knowability doesn't *rule out* a *posteriori* knowability. The truths of mathematics are both armchair knowable and a *posteriori* knowable. In fact, most mathematical knowledge of laypeople is gained through a *posteriori* ways of thinking (e.g., testimony).

Nevertheless, if we can gain appreciative knowledge through armchair thinking in a way that precludes acquaintance, then we cannot generalize my story about the demerits of aesthetic testimony to a story about the demerits of moral testimony. Further, one way to put pressure on the sort of perceptualist views sketched in the previous section is to argue that armchair thinking is both central to the acquisition of moral knowledge and radically different from the sort of thinking the perceptualist appeals to.

One way to frame the challenge is by thinking about the modal status of the truths learned.⁴⁸ Some moral facts are necessarily true—e.g., the (purported) fact that murder is wrong. Some seem to only be contingently true—e.g., the fact that hanging the Burmese prisoner is wrong.⁴⁹ Aestheticians are not very interested in necessary aesthetic truths. Indeed, many are extremely skeptical that there are any such truths. On the other hand, nearly everyone is interested in at least some contingent aesthetic truths.

Things are different in ethics. The project of investigating necessary moral truths has always been a part of ethical theorizing. Indeed, it has monopolized most theoretical discussions. The pursuit of contingent ethical truths is not a particularly popular pursuit amongst moral philosophers (even, I'd say, amongst applied ethicists).

Our theoretical priorities, then, suggest that in ethics the necessary truths take precedence. How we learn about them is a matter of great controversy. It is not popular, however, to think that we learn about them via acquaintance.⁵⁰ If this is right, then it's easy to see how armchair knowledge can threaten my project.

⁴⁵ cites

⁴⁶ See, e.g., [Smith \(2000\)](#), [Shafer-Landau \(2003\)](#), [Sayre-McCord \(1996\)](#).

⁴⁷ [McGrath \(2011a\)](#) talks as if experience playing a role in the acquisition of token moral knowledge is in tension with thinking it is armchair knowable. I think this is a canard (although I also think her paper does address what is of real importance).

⁴⁸ This way of thinking about things is greatly indebted to [Milona \(MSa\)](#).

⁴⁹ One needn't be a whole hog consequentialist to think that it wouldn't be wrong to hang the prisoner if the lives of 100,000 children were on the line.

⁵⁰ One important exception to this is [Elijah Chudnoff](#), who does think that veridical intuitions are generated by awareness of abstracta. See [Chudnoff \(2013b\)](#). I lack space to fully discuss Chudnoff's view, but I am sympathetic to it as a further generalization of my picture.

The rub, though, is that our theoretical priorities give a misleading picture of how most moral learning works. It is simply not plausible to think that knowledge of necessary moral truths plays a prominent role in the average person's acquisition of new moral knowledge. I doubt this is true even of moral philosophers. I myself do not flat-out believe many necessary moral claims. A large part of the theoretical interest in such claims is that they are hard to learn! For this reason, I don't think we should allow moral philosophers' theoretical priorities to shape how we think of moral epistemology.⁵¹

Still, though, a challenge remains. This is because it's plausible that we acquire much of our moral knowledge of contingent moral truths through armchair ways of thinking. We often acquire new moral knowledge by thinking about what to do in the future or what to do were the world to turn out a certain way. Much of the time we gain appreciative knowledge through these armchair ways of thinking. Thus, it is still on me to explain how it is that acquaintance plays a prominent role in these ways of thinking.

Fortunately, the outline of the story has already been given. The most common way we acquire armchair knowledge of contingent truths is by thinking about *cases*. When we do this, we imagine the cases in at least some detail.⁵² The circumstances that we imagine have certain morally relevant properties. We can become acquainted with these properties via these imaginative experiences. Indeed, I think it's plausible that we often have affective perceptual experiences of these properties. Thus, I think that ultimately the way we acquire knowledge of contingent truths via thinking about cases is very similar to the way we acquire knowledge of contingent truths by encountering concrete situations in the actual world.⁵³

It's important to stress that, once again, a similar story is needed in aesthetics. As we saw above, one of the main missing objects objection to the Acquaintance Principle is anchored in imaginative thinking.⁵⁴ It is undeniable that some gain appreciative knowledge by imagining certain works. An obvious example is someone—a composer, say—imagining what a certain string of notes sounds like. Like appreciative knowledge gained by engaging with copies, such appreciative knowledge causes trouble for the Object View.

These cases do not pose a grave threat to the Properties View. This is because we can become acquainted with the properties of works by imagining them—the composer is acquainted with *the way it sounds*. Thus, the Properties View can account for this missing objects problem too.

The upshot is that once again there is a plausible story to tell about how acquaintance en-

⁵¹For a similar point, see Milona (MSa) Milona (MSb).

⁵²This cuts against some of the literature. For example, McGrath (2011b), taking inspiration from Kagan (2001), claims we evaluate cases just by thinking about the descriptions of the cases we are given. This is of course possible, but I conjecture that most of us instead have imaginative representations of the cases that are described to us.

⁵³There are, of course, details to be worked out. One important detail is how we gain access to the relevant properties of the imagined circumstances via the imagination. For a nice story about this, see Milona (MSa). For a different sort of story that perhaps fits better with my direct realist leanings, see Johnston (2001, 2004).

⁵⁴See Hopkins (2006), Robson (2013). See Lord (MSb) for a more fleshed out version of what follows.

ables appreciative armchair knowledge of contingent truths. Further, this story is structurally identical to the most plausible story about how the imagination yields appreciative aesthetic knowledge. While more work needs to be done, it's far from clear that armchair knowledge is going to drive a wedge between the moral case and the aesthetic case.

7 Conclusion

The main goal of this paper was to make a preliminary case for a general picture of two methods of acquiring moral and aesthetic knowledge. At the heart of this picture is the thought that acquaintance plays an important role in the acquisition of an important kind of normative knowledge. This is what I call appreciative knowledge. This knowledge is the sort of knowledge that enables appreciation of the aesthetic and moral facts. Such appreciation is plausibly central to being a good moral and aesthetic agent.

This view of appreciative knowledge paves the way for a view about what is defective about normative deference. Deference is defective insofar as it doesn't put one in a position to be acquainted with normative properties. This in turn means that deferring does not put one in a position to gain appreciative knowledge. This is a shortcoming of deference. Nevertheless, I argued above that this does not mean that we shouldn't defer—the defect of deference, in other words, does not ground an obligation not to defer. This left us with a moderately optimistic view about the rational power of normative deference.

To end let me return to the nature of the puzzle. As the literature has grown so has the number of interpretations of what the puzzle is and what kind of view can explain it. I have focused on one way of thinking that there is a deep asymmetry between normative deference and non-normative deference. This is the view that there is a (fairly) general obligation not to defer about aesthetic and moral matters. I don't think there are strong reasons to think that this is so.

It's important to be clear eyed about what this conclusion shows. Many in the literature are not focused on pessimism and optimism as I understand them. Some have much mushier conceptions of the asymmetry. So, for example, one might think that the mere fact that there is something generally defective with normative deference is enough to show that there is an important asymmetry between normative deference and non-normative deference. Since I do think there is something generally defective with normative deference, my view actually vindicates this asymmetry. I am happy with this result. A truth lingering in many pessimistic views is that our normative views play a central role in shaping our conceptions of the world. This is in contrast to our views about the tax code, the rise in temperatures, and molecular bonding (at least for those of us who aren't accountants, climate scientists, and chemists). This asymmetry should be accounted for. My view accounts for this asymmetry while maintaining a role for deference. This, like baby bear's porridge, seems just right.

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