1. Introduction

1.1 Aesthetics and assertion

It is a noteworthy feature of our discourse concerning aesthetic value that certain kinds of assertion—unproblematic in most other domains—are typically ruled as impermissible. I can legitimately assert that post-boxes in Canada are red, Justin Bieber's sophomore album lasts a little over thirty-eight minutes, and arsenic is extremely poisonous, even though I have never seen, heard, or imbibed the relevant items. In contrast, utterances such as 'The Diving Bell and the Butterfly is an extremely moving film' (Lackey 2011: 257) and 'It's such a wonderful novel; insightful and moving, with the most beautiful and bewitching language' (Robson 2012: 4), appear extremely problematic in the mouth of someone who has not experienced the works in question for themselves.¹

This contrast may initially seem rather prosaic, but it has recently been employed in arguments intended to motivate a number of significant philosophical claims. These arguments typically begin by taking such examples as license for the general claim that it is illegitimate to make assertions concerning the aesthetic properties of an object in the absence of first-hand experience of the object itself. Thus Mary Mothersill claims that 'the judgment of taste (speech act) presupposes, through the avowal that it implicates, first-person knowledge of the object judged' (1994: 160). Simon Blackburn states that if 'I have no experience of X, I cannot without misrepresentation answer the question 'Is X beautiful/boring/fascinating...?'” (1998: 110), and others—such as Jennifer Lackey (2011: 157–8) and Keren Gorodeisky (2010: 53)—make comments in a similar vein. Once such claims are established to the author's satisfaction, they are then drafted into the service of arguments for a surprisingly broad range of views. Blackburn, for example, employs them as part of an argument for quasi-realism concerning normative judgements (1998) and Lackey uses them to argue against the claim that assertion is constitutively

¹ I will qualify this claim in some significant respects below.
governed by a knowledge norm (2011: 157-8). Most commonly, though, these claims concerning aesthetic assertion are mooted as part of an argument for a particular view of aesthetic judgement. The thought being that it is impermissible to assert a particular aesthetic judgement in the absence of first-hand experience because it is impermissible to form the judgement itself in the absence of such experience. A key aim in this paper will be to question the presumed link between the impermissibility of certain aesthetic assertions—such as those surveyed above—and the putative impermissibility of the corresponding judgements.

1.2 Testimony in aesthetics

In this paper I will offer a novel and, I hope, persuasive explanation for the problematic nature of such assertions, focusing primarily (for reasons I will outline below) on the impermissibility of aesthetic assertions based solely on testimony. The explanation I will offer is one which stands in stark contrast to the kind of explanation typically proposed, or presupposed, in earlier discussions of the phenomenon. According to this standard explanation, the impermissibility of the relevant assertions has its basis in a particular feature of the epistemology of aesthetic judgements which Meskin refers to as the ‘Neo-Kantian orthodoxy about aesthetic testimony’ (2004: 72). This

2. While I will not focus on such claims in this paper, it is important to note that if the arguments I will offer below are cogent then this will also undermine the arguments that Blackburn and Lackey offer for their conclusions. This is because the account of the phenomenon I will offer below is, contra Blackburn, compatible with aesthetic judgements being straightforwardly cognitive and, contra Lackey (2011: 265), does not explain the impropriety in terms of the ‘asserter’s epistemic relation to that which she asserted.’


4. For ease of exposition I will assume throughout this paper that aesthetic judgements are beliefs and that they are differentiated from other judgements by their content rather than by some special mode of judging. In my view there are good reasons to accept both these claims—for defences see Hopkins (2011: 140–41), Gorodeisky (2010: 55–58), Meskin (2004: 69), and Livingston (2003: 267–71) — but nothing in what follows depends on our doing so.

5. Unavailability pessimists such as Pettit (1983) and Hopkins (2000) argue that testimony is rarely (if ever) a source of knowledge in aesthetics. Unusability pessimists such as Goredeisky (2010) and Hopkins (2011) argue that there exist non-epistemic belief formation norms which render aesthetic beliefs formed on the basis of testimony improper even in those cases where they achieve the status of knowledge. There are, of course, important distinctions between these two views but I will, for ease of exposition only, talk almost exclusively in terms of knowledge rather than proper belief. Those who prefer the unusability view can easily recast my later discussions concerning knowledge in terms of proper belief.

6. Defences of optimism include Robson (2014 and forthcoming), Laetz (2008), and Meskin (2004).
do so with respect to claims concerning aesthetic value, and the only (or at least best) way to adequately explain this is to endorse pessimism.

1.3 Overview
Stated in such schematic terms arguments from assertion doubtless look rather unimpressive, so in §2 (after clarifying some issues relevant to the current debate), I outline in detail what I take to be the strongest instance of an argument from assertion. I then demonstrate that this argument presents a powerful challenge to the optimist’s view which, if left unanswered, would significantly undermine the plausibility of optimism. In subsequent sections I argue that the optimist is able to provide an explanation for the impermissibility of the relevant assertions, which is at least as good as—and in some respects better than—what is offered by their pessimistic opponents. §3 proposes an optimistic response to arguments from assertion in the form of a rival explanation which draws analogies with some recent work concerning the role of signalling in aesthetic creation. §4 argues that there are independent grounds for accepting the signalling account I propose as well as considering applications for this account in a number of areas beyond the debate concerning aesthetic testimony. §5 summarises the dialectic of the debate over assertion in aesthetics.

2. Arguments from assertion

2.1 Norms of assertion
There is at present an ongoing debate as to what constitutes, in some fundamental sense, a proper assertion. These debates are concerned with the truth of claims such as; ‘to be an assertion is to be improper if the speaker does not know what is asserted’ (Weiner 2007: 187), ‘someone who knowingly asserts a falsehood has thereby broken a rule of assertion, much as if he had broken a rule of a game; he has cheated’ (Williamson 1996: 489) and ‘assertion is that speech act that (normatively) requires knowledge of its content’ (Hindriks 2007: 393). I will refer to such fundamental norms as ‘constitutive norms of assertion.’ This paper will make no claims concerning the correct constitutive norm of assertion in aesthetics or elsewhere, but in what follows I will assume that some kind of knowledge norm is the correct constitutive norm in all cases. I take this to be a friendly assumption since, while the explanation I will offer below is neutral between the knowledge norm and its rivals, the pessimist’s explanation is clearly in tension with some leading rivals to the knowledge norm. Most obviously it does not fit well with a constitutive truth norm of assertion since the pessimist will not typically deny that some of the aesthetic assertions which fall into the problematic class are true.7

In addition to such constitutive norms of assertion, though there are other rules governing what it is—in some sense—appropriate to assert at various points in a conversation; for example, Gricean conversational maxims and social rules concerning ‘tact, prudence, and concern for the feelings of others’ (Hopkins 2011: 145). I will denote the totality of rules governing what it is appropriate to assert, incorporating both the correct constitutive norm of assertion and these supplementary rules, as simply ‘norms of assertion.’8

2.2 Finding the correct norm
So, what norm—or norms—explains the impermissibility of the aesthetic assertions discussed above? One obvious suggestion, and one which I take it most pessimists will accept, is that two norms are active in the relevant case. First, the constitutive knowledge norm of assertion (playing its typical topic neutral role) and second some norm of aesthetic belief which prevents such beliefs from qualifying as knowledge in certain circumstances. What are these circumstances though?

7. I will also assume, for ease of exposition only, that belief and assertion are both constitutively governed by norms rather than, say, aims or functions. As far as I can see, this assumption is entirely neutral between my explanation and the one offered by the pessimist, and all of the claims I make below could easily be rephrased in terms of aims or functions.
8. Of course many of these rules, such as the Gricean maxims, govern not only assertion but communication more broadly.
The examples I have surveyed thus far—along with much of the discussion in the literature on aesthetic belief—suggests the requisite additional condition that we have first-hand experience of the object in question.9 So, perhaps, the norm the pessimist requires is something like Wollheim’s famous Acquaintance Principle (AP) according to which judgements of aesthetic value, unlike judgements of moral knowledge, must be based on first-hand experience of their objects and are not, except within very narrow limits, transmissible from one person to another. (1980: 233)

I say ‘something like’ because, even setting aside such controversial issues as the epistemic standing of aesthetic testimony, there are clear counterexamples to the claim that aesthetic belief is illegitimate in the absence of first-hand experience; cases involving exact reproductions or photographs of the object, perceptual imagination, and so forth. 10 And I see no reason why such counterexamples could not be employed against parallel claims concerning assertion. Of course one might attempt to revise the experience condition for aesthetic knowledge in such a way as to accommodate these proposed counterexamples but there are, as I have argued at length elsewhere (Robson 2013), compelling reasons— independent of debates concerning aesthetic testimony—to be sceptical of the success of any such project. At the very least, I know of no extant attempt to capture the acquaintance intuition, which avoids immediate counterexamples without becoming either trivial or worryingly ad hoc. That said, I am well aware that my position here is by no means uncontroversial and that the acquaintance principle is still widely popular (in spirit, if not in letter). As such, I will leave the project of specifying the precise nature of the further norm(s) that the pessimist should take to govern aesthetic belief to the pessimist. Instead I will tentatively propose what I hope will be a relatively non-controversial—though consequently somewhat underspecified—additional norm on aesthetic assertion (one which, I will argue, should appeal to those who accept some norm of belief in the spirit of AP as well as to those who reject all such norms).

AF: In order to properly assert an aesthetic proposition P, an agent must possess sufficient warrant for legitimately believing P on the basis of the operation of her own aesthetic faculties.

In my view both sides of the aesthetic testimony debate should accept that AF—or some norm very like it—is operative with respect to aesthetic assertion (or rather, for reasons I will outline in §4 below, that it is operative by default). 11 AF should appeal to the pessimist since it appears to capture much of what motivates principles such as AP (and is even closer in spirit to the alternative pessimistic principle which Hopkins calls ‘the Requirement,’ according to which ‘having the right to an aesthetic belief requires one to grasp the aesthetic grounds for it’ [2011: 149]). Those who have discussed AP (and related principles) in a favourable light tend to highlight problems—concerning the absence of principles of taste and so forth—for our employing our own aesthetic faculties, or at least employing them to much effect, in the absence of first-hand experience (whereas the most uncontroversial counterexamples to the letter of AP focus on cases where our own aesthetic capacities can be usefully employed even in the absence of such experience). 12 And, of course, the pessimist will think that these restrictions on aesthetic belief carry over to aesthetic assertion. As such it seems likely that any suitably refined pessimistic principle regarding

10. For detailed discussions of some of these cases, see Hopkins (2006a: 93) and Livingston (2004: 262).
11. For the sake of brevity I will omit the ‘or some norm very like it’ qualification in what follows.
12. Hopkins (2006a) provides a useful overview of such issues.
assertion will include—perhaps among other restrictions—some norm at least broadly in the spirit of AF.

One might legitimately wonder, though, why an optimist should accept AF or anything like it. Wouldn’t my fellow optimists be inclined to claim that there are no additional norms on aesthetic assertion and, a fortiori, no norm of the kind I have suggested? After all, if there are no such norms then it looks like the optimist has no case to answer with respect to arguments from assertion; if it is not impermissible to assert, e.g. that The Diving Bell and the Butterfly is an extremely moving film’ on the basis of testimony, then it is not an advantage for pessimists (quite the reverse in fact) that their account of aesthetic belief—combined with any of a range of independently plausible constitutive norms of assertion—predicts the impermissibility of such assertions. However, I think there are a number of reasons why the optimist should be extremely reluctant to reject a norm such as AF. Most obviously that the assertions in question really do seem problematic; it is not just pessimists who regard the assertions in question as clearly illegitimate but also optimists (Robson 2012: 4, Meskin 2004: 76) as well as those with no obvious axe to grind in such debates (Lackey 2011: 257). Of course the optimist might ultimately resolve to reject appearances here and argue that the assertions in question are, in point of fact, unproblematic; but biting this bullet would be a significant cost and one which I will argue we are not compelled to accept. As to why the optimist should accept AF in particular, rather than some alternative further norm on aesthetic assertion, I hope the account I offer below will provide a convincing response to that challenge.

The price of maintaining some level of neutrality is that AF is deliberately underdeveloped in a number of respects. I have, for example, made no comment as to how aesthetic beliefs acquire warrant, nor explained precisely what it takes for an individual’s warrant to be based on the operation of her own aesthetic faculties. Further, I have not indicated whether AF will be satisfied in various problem cases — cases concerning inferences from principles of taste, less than perfect duplicates and the like. In addition to maintaining neutrality, this lack of specificity also reflects some worries I have concerning our ability, given the current state of the dialectic, to formulate precise overarching principles with respect to either belief or assertion in aesthetics. It is primarily for this reason that it is useful to focus on issues of testimony. It is, as I have indicated above (and argued at length in Robson [2013]), no easy matter to specify exactly which methods of belief formation the contemporary supporter of the spirit of AP (or the Requirement or some similar overarching norm of aesthetic belief) will countenance as legitimate and, correspondingly, the kinds of assertion they will take to be permissible. Yet, anyone broadly in sympathy with such principles will deny that I can acquire aesthetic knowledge on the basis of testimony alone. The testimony debate therefore serves as a clear core case of disagreement between those who accept the spirit of such a principle and those who reject it or, to put it another way, those who seek to explain the illegitimacy of assertions which violate AF by appeal to norms of aesthetic belief and those who claim we should look elsewhere for an explanation.

2.3 The argument from assertion
I am now in a position to present in detail what I take to be the strongest instance of an argument from assertion (which I will term simply ‘the argument from assertion’). I have claimed above that assertions of aesthetic value are illegitimate when made in violation of AF and, of course, the pessimist has a readily available explanation for this. An agent who does not possess sufficient warrant for legitimately believing an aesthetic proposition on the basis of the operation of her own aesthetic faculties will not possess sufficient warrant simpliciter (since the broader norms of belief which the pessimist endorses, such as AP and the Requirement, will render any other putative means of acquiring such warrant inadmissible). As such the agent will not...
know the proposition in question meaning that, given a constitutive knowledge norm of assertion, she cannot properly assert it.\textsuperscript{14}

Optimists on the other hand encounter significant difficulty in explaining the impropriety of violating AF. We are committed to the claim that we regularly come to possess aesthetic knowledge via testimony and, as such, we cannot avail ourselves of the convenient appeal to a constitutive knowledge norm. This might not appear especially problematic since—as already discussed above—we can clearly violate norms of assertion (in the wider sense) even when asserting that which we know. However, non-constitutive norms, at least of the kinds discussed above, also seem powerless to explain the impropriety. The four categories of conversational maxim which Grice identifies are manifestly incapable of accounting for the infelicity of the assertions in question; indeed bringing conversational considerations into play appears to make matters worse (1989: 26–9). Consider that certain qualified versions of the relevant aesthetic assertions seem perfectly permissible on the basis of testimony (Phil says the melody was graceful, ‘it must be very beautiful,’ ‘apparently it was a good play,’ etc.); if, however, I know the unqualified form of these propositions then by only asserting the qualified versions I would violate Gricean maxims by deliberately making my contributions less informative—and in many cases less relevant—than they could otherwise have been. Similarly, there is no—or at least no comprehensive—explanation available for the impropriety in considerations pertaining to ‘tact, prudence and concern for the feelings of others’ (Hopkins 2011: 145). Doubtless there will be certain cases in which I will be prevented from legitimately making second-hand aesthetic assertions by these considerations; I may know on the basis of reliable testimony that your children are ugly (I am sure they aren’t), but it would likely be extremely inappropriate for me to tell you this. However, such social conventions are clearly only able to account for the impermissibility of a small minority of the relevant assertions and, more importantly, there is no reason to think they would preserve the distinction between assertions which meet AF and those which fail to (my comments concerning your children would be no less offensive if they represented the deliverances of my own aesthetics faculties).

We have seen, then, that with regards to a certain problematic class of aesthetic assertion—those made in violation of AF—the pessimist has a simple and readily available explanation for their impropriety while the optimist, by contrast, appears unable to offer any satisfactory account. Failure to provide such an explanation, the proponent of the argument from assertion claims, would constitute a powerful (perhaps even decisive) strike against the optimist’s position. Since I agree with this claim I need to show that, appearances notwithstanding, the optimist can satisfactorily account for the impermissibility of the relevant assertions. The remainder of this paper will be dedicated to doing just that.

3. The Appreciative Signalling Account

3.1 The Creative Signalling Account

The explanation I propose begins with the claim that one important function of aesthetic assertion—and mutatis mutandis aesthetic discourse more generally—is to signal that the individual making these assertions possesses certain valuable attributes. To understand how this account will proceed, though, it will be useful to first draw an analogy with the kind of story which Gregory Currie (2011), Stephen Davies (2010), Dennis Dutton (2009), Geoffrey Miller (2010), and others have told concerning the creation of objects of aesthetic appreciation. The bare bones of such stories are, roughly, as follows:

\textsuperscript{14} It is worth noting that this explanation is only superficially dependent on my earlier decision to assume the existence of a constitutive knowledge norm. Variants of the argument could easily be produced to accommodate most proposed constitutive norms of assertion (for example, those which appeal to warranted belief or true warranted belief). There are, of course, exceptions here (most obviously constitutive truth norms of assertion) but I will assume for the sake of charity that the pessimist subscribes to a suitable norm.
**Creative Signalling Account (CSA):** The universal (or near universal) tendency among human cultures to produce objects of aesthetic appreciation is explained (at least in part) by the fact that in performing their activities in crafting such objects individuals signal their possession of certain desirable attributes.

This basic CSA story can be fleshed out in a variety of ways depending on how a particular theorist answers a range of questions. What exactly is being signalled: creativity, craftsmanship, protean intelligence? What purpose does the signalling serve: mate selection, social advancement? Is CSA meant to explain human artistic activity tout court or merely some particular aspect of it? For my purposes it is not necessary to take a stance as to how best to answer any of these questions but, in order to understand how such stories function, it will be useful to look in a little more detail at one influential CSA account.

According to this account our practice of aesthetic creation originated as an evolutionary adaption; specifically as the result of sexual selection. On this view, while the production of artworks does not itself typically contribute anything to an individual’s evolutionary fitness, producing artworks (or at least artworks of a certain kind) enables them to reliably signal to potential mates that they possess other qualities which are fitness enhancing. The artworks that we produce, then, are analogous to the peacock’s tail, the stag’s antlers, and the bowerbird’s construction of intricate bowers (along with the accompanying mating display). All of these signal to an individual’s conspecifics that the individual in question possesses certain evolutionarily valuable qualities and is thus *(ceteris paribus)* an attractive mating prospect; by creating attractive artworks we thereby demonstrate that we ourselves possess the attractive fitness enhancing characteristics required to produce such works. As Geoffrey Miller (2010: 168) puts it we ‘find attractive those things that could have been produced only by people with attractive, high-fitness qualities such as health, energy, endurance, hand-eye coordination, fine motor control, intelligence, creativity, access to rare materials, the ability to learn difficult skills, and lots of free time.’

While this account is useful for illustrating the kinds of claim which some proponents of CSA make, it is important to note that CSA itself does not commit one to any particular account (or, as some critics would have it, ‘just-so story’) of how the relevant signalling system arose nor of how it functions. In particular, it should be stressed that while many advocates of CSA claim that the relevant creative activities originated as evolutionary adaptations merely accepting CSA does not commit one to this. Firstly, because, as Davies (2010) argues, the claim that the relevant practices at present play a fitness indicating role is compatible with the claim that these practices originally arose as a result of other factors (perhaps as a spandrel or a random non-adaptive mutation) and only later acquired their role as signals of fitness. Secondly, because CSA itself is not committed to the claim that the relevant signalling systems are fully (or even partially) explained by biological rather than, say, sociological factors.

Having said all this, though, there will doubtless still be those who find all such accounts of the origins and/or functions of aesthetic creativity completely without merit. Such people are unlikely to find anything appealing in the explanation I will propose below and so from this point on I will address myself only to those who find CSA at least somewhat plausible.  

CSA is a story about the production of artworks (and perhaps other objects of aesthetic appreciation) but producing artworks is neither the only aesthetic activity nor the only one which requires the employment of the kind of desirable capacities signalled in CSA. Much of our ordinary aesthetic engagement will also necessitate their deployment. 

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15. Naturally this brief summary cannot do justice to the intricacies of such views. Probably the most influential and accessible sustained defense of the sexual selection view is found in Dutton (2009).

16. Technically, the signalling story I offer concerning aesthetic assertion below is compatible with the denial of CSA, but I do not anticipate anyone who flatly rejects CSA having much sympathy for my account.
To judge, via the application of one's own aesthetic faculties, that an object possesses certain aesthetic qualities—and even more so to understand why this is so—will often require a great deal of skill, and perhaps even creativity, on the part of the appreciator. This is especially true when the object in question is a complex artwork. To appreciate for oneself the value of works such as *Vertical Earth Kilometer*, *L.H.O.O.Q.*, or *Boundary Functions* will require knowledge of the artistic traditions within which such creations arose along with some intricate imaginative engagement. Nor is this confined to works of conceptual art. Fully appreciating a great work of literature, for example, may require extensive knowledge of literary genres as well as the ability to interpret various symbols and allegories, to follow complex plots and to draw plausible psychological inference as to the motivations of the work's various characters. Indeed, there is reason to think that a full appreciation of certain art forms requires one to have some familiarity with producing (and not merely appreciating) works of that kind.

3.2 Testimony and forgery
I propose, then, that one important reason why we engage in art appreciation, critical discourse, and related practices is to signal to our conspecifics that we possess various desirable skills and traits such as those enumerated above. According to this ‘Appreciative Signalling Account’ (ASA) by correctly identifying the intention behind a work of conceptual art, sifting the original from the merely novel or identifying the underlying themes in a complex symbolist tome we employ (albeit typically to a lesser degree) many of the same abilities which artists employ in their creative acts. Qualities which it has already been argued—in numerous variations of CSA—are seen as valuable by our conspecifics.

Reliance on such signalling becomes problematic, however, when we consider our ability to appeal to aesthetic judgements formed on the basis of testimony. Consider, for example, a case where I find myself with easy access to the views of a co-operative and well informed critic. In such a case I could use her testimony to perfectly track the beliefs of someone with excellent taste, and thus say all the right things, even if I were completely devoid of taste. To further illustrate this point, consider the following case of Matthew Kieran’s. Kieran reports observing an individual standing at the bar after an operatic performance and listening intently to a fellow opera goer as she describes in learned terms the ways in which the evening’s performance instantiated, or failed to instantiate, certain aesthetic properties. This individual then returned to his own table and repeated these profound pronouncements almost word for word. Kieran’s verdict with respect to this case—that the opera goer is acting improperly in making the assertions he does—strikes me as eminently plausible; the interesting task is to explain why this is so. We can, I think, safely stipulate that the opera goer actually believes the claims he makes and that he meets those conditions which would normally (i.e. in non-aesthetic cases) suffice for testimonial knowledge. Of course the pessimist will have their usual explanations for the impropriety; the opera goer’s beliefs are not formed in the right way—they are not based on the operation of his own aesthetic faculties and would clearly violate any suitably nuanced principle in the spirit of AP (or the Requirement)—and as such the corresponding assertions are improper. According to ASA, by contrast, the opera goer’s violation of AF is problematic not because he doesn’t know the propositions he asserts but rather because he is attempting to pass off this knowledge as the deliverances of his own aesthetic faculties and, in so doing, signalling that he possesses.

17. For descriptions and philosophical discussions of these works see Konigsberg (2012: 165), Shelley (2003: 364), and Lopes (2009: 26) respectively.
20. Kieran has presented this case in a number of recent talks concerning the influence of snobbery on aesthetic judgement.
21. It may be objected that since he has first-hand experience of the work, he would not violate a principle in the spirit of AP. However, AP-style principles typically require not only that the individual in question undergoes the relevant experiences but that his judgements are based on them.
some desirable features which, in point of fact, he does not. On this account, the problem with his pronouncements is closely analogous to the worries which Dutton (1983) highlights with respect to artistic forgeries—they both ‘misrepresent artistic performance’ (Ibid. 186). Indeed proponents of ASA may wish to classify the opera goer’s assertions as literally a kind of forgery; he misrepresents the results of a piece of aesthetic labour (a critical judgement) as his own when, in fact, it is the work of another.

3.3 Two initial objections
Or so the story goes, and it is a story which—in my view—has a great deal of prima facie plausibility. As presented, though, it doubtless strikes many as being extremely speculative. I will therefore have much more to say in defence of my account in § 4 below. Before proceeding, though, it is worth pausing to consider two initial objections to ASA. The first worry is that the ASA account offered above only succeeds if we take the opera goer’s asserting that, e.g. ‘[t]here were serious balance problems, too, with some of the singers struggling to project over even this instrumentation, and the gravitational centre of ensembles was awkwardly skewed’ to suggest that he has arrived at this judgement by employing his own aesthetic faculties. Surely, though, this would only be the case if AF, or some similar norm, were already in place to ensure that such assertions were not properly made on the basis of testimony. As such we need some independent account of the origins of AF before we can appeal to the ‘misrepresented artistic achievement’ explanation. In order to respond to this worry we need to look in depth at a second objection; the apparent absence of costliness in my proposed signals.

22. Of course neither the pessimist nor the optimist who embraces ASA is committed to the claim that the feature they highlight is all that is wrong with the opera goer’s behaviour.

23. Words which he could take from Opera Review’s review of Don Giovanni: The Opera (http://www.opera.co.uk/view-review.php?reviewID=112).

It is standardly assumed that for a signalling system to be reliable signals must be prohibitively expensive, to fake but it does not seem that any such costs are present with respect to ASA; quite the reverse in fact. For a genuine expert to be in a position to signal her laudable skills as an aesthetic appreciator she will frequently be required to expend significant effort in familiarising herself with the nature and history of the works she is discussing and—by direct acquaintance or otherwise—with the works themselves. By contrast, the faker needs only have access to a few impressive sounding pieces of testimony which she can repeat more or less verbatim. Given this, we need some explanation as to how such a signalling system would ever achieve (or even approximate) reliability. Fortunately, such an explanation can be offered, and this explanation will also help us to appreciate how a norm such as AF may have arisen. Crucially for my defence of ASA, there is a sense in which misleading signalling has the potential to be very costly indeed, but, in order to see how such costs arise, we need to take a brief detour and examine another instance of misleading signalling: straightforward lying.

As with the example discussed above, lying initially seems to carry few costs and offer many benefits. Perhaps there is some additional cost to the liar in signalling what is not the case—her lie may require her to construct and sustain a plausible narrative which is typically not an easy task—assuming a reasonable level of skill on the part of our liar, though, such costs will likely pale in comparison to the manifold benefits that she could obtain from deceiving her conspecifics. As such it would seem that lying will very frequently be in an individual’s best interests, which would create significant pressure towards making insincere assertions and (via a linguistic version of Gresham’s law) a complete disvaluing of normal assertion. There are, however, mechanisms in place which prevent this outcome. Those who lie—or rather those who lie and are detected—are subject to all manner of sanctions. Individuals known to be dishonest may be ostracized by

24. Though this assumption has been contested, see, e.g. Maynard (1994).
their group, be the subject of unflattering gossip, or even subject to legal penalties. And, more directly, the liar will lose the benefit of having their assertions regarded as plausible. Sanctions of this kind are widespread across time and culture; indeed they may not even be unique to our species.\textsuperscript{25}

A story parallel to that offered in the lying case can also be told concerning aesthetic assertions of the kind presented in Kieran’s opera example; were the opera goer’s tricks to be discovered by his fellows, then he would doubtless be subject to all manner of censure and mockery. Such sanctions, though, would be impossible (or at least wildly impractical) to enforce if we had no reliable way to distinguish between (i) statements of ordinary critical judgements based on evaluation of the work through the operation of one’s own aesthetic faculties, (ii) fraudulent imitations of such statements, and (iii) legitimate attempts to pass on aesthetic information acquired via testimony (distinctions which mirror those between genuine artworks, forgeries and legitimate reproductions).

3.4 A genealogy of norms
We can now begin to see how a norm such as AF might have arisen in aesthetics. One simple and effective strategy for marking the distinctions outlined above would be to apply a norm such as AF to unqualified aesthetic assertion. This would lead to the following taxonomy. When making unqualified aesthetic assertions we signal that we have arrived at a critical judgement based on the application of our own aesthetic faculties. If we have, in fact, done so then this signal is accurate, otherwise it is misleading and—assuming we are not ourselves mistaken concerning the source of our aesthetic judgments—qualifies as a fraudulent attempt to pass off the fruits of someone else’s aesthetic labour as our own.\textsuperscript{26} What of someone who wants to legitimately transmit an aesthetic belief formed on the basis of testimony? How should they transmit their belief that an object has an aesthetic property without illegitimately signalling that this judgement is the output of their own aesthetic faculties? Simple, they qualify their assertion in some way — such as adding an ‘everyone says that…’ or ‘it must be the case that…’ rider — which makes it clear that they are not presenting the deliverances of their own aesthetic faculties.\textsuperscript{27}

This strikes me — for reasons I will discuss in greater depth below — as a good strategy for differentiating the three relevant species of aesthetic assertion, but it is by no means the only one. It is important to stress that there are other conventions governing aesthetic assertion, which could be — and, if I am right, in some cases have been — successfully adopted to balance the relevant desiderata. The problem of establishing and policing a reliable signalling system concerning our abilities as aesthetic appreciators while also maintaining a reasonably efficient system of communication is one which, I maintain, arises across all (or virtually all) human cultures. The strategy of addressing this problem by adopting a further norm on aesthetic assertion, such as AF, by contrast, enjoys no such ubiquity. To put it another way, the norms of assertion I am proposing here are not intended to be constitutive norms delineating what it is to be an aesthetic assertion; other cultures or groups who adopt different conventions will still be literally making aesthetic assertions. An example of such a convention would be one in which speakers are always required to give some indication as to the source of their beliefs but which enables them to do so in ways which are not overly cumbersome (as e.g. a uniform system which required us to add ‘according to…’ to every assertion, aesthetic or otherwise, based on testimony would be). One instance of this is found in languages such as Wintu where flagging of the source of one’s judgments — inter alia, the content of the judgements e.g. that the painting is beautiful.

\textsuperscript{25} See Hauser (1992).

\textsuperscript{26} Of course the statement in question also signals, inter alia, the content of the judgements e.g. that the painting is beautiful.

\textsuperscript{27} Of course not all qualified instances of aesthetic assertion will carry this locutionary force. If I say ‘according to that well known liar Fred the painting is beautiful,’ then I am clearly not signaling any agreement with Fred’s claim. Exactly what force particular riders carry will be a complex matter influenced by both context and convention.
beliefs is accomplished automatically by grammatical means.\textsuperscript{28} A study of how attitudes to aesthetic belief and assertion operate in societies where such languages are spoken would be extremely useful evidence in addressing the argument from assertion (as well as the optimist/pessimist debate more broadly). Sadly, though, such evidence is not presently available and so I will focus on the conventions which, I maintain, are operative within my own linguistic community.

3.5 The aims of ASA
With these claims in place my outline of ASA is almost complete and I will turn in the next section to ask why we might be inclined to accept such an account. Before doing so, though, it is worth pausing to address one lingering worry. I have presented ASA as an explanation for a particular practice—our convention of not making aesthetic assertions in violation of AF—and the corresponding norm but ‘explanation’ is a notoriously promiscuous label and some might worry that my argument rests on an equivocation. ASA may offer an explanation for this practice in the sense of providing a causal explanation of how it has arisen, but my opponent maintains, as a merely causal account it will not—indeed cannot—explain the practice in the sense of providing any normative justification for it. As such it cannot furnish us with an answer to the normative question of why it is impermissible to make assertions in violation of AF.\textsuperscript{29}

The first aspect of this charge is a perfectly legitimate one. ASA is first and foremost an etiological account; it explains our unwillingness to make assertions in violation of AF by offering a causal account of how such a convention might arise.\textsuperscript{30} And such accounts, in themselves, carry no normative force. There would, as I have already discussed above, be nothing wrong with a society (actual or counterfactual) rejecting AF in favour of some alternative norm which met the relevant communicative desiderata. Nor would there be anything wrong—in any deep or fundamental sense—with a society that adopted no such norm. I have argued above that there would be various pragmatic problems with a refusal to adopt any such norm (as well as with adopting certain alternative norms) but isn’t my aim in this paper to explain the illegitimacy—rather than merely the inconvenience—of making aesthetic assertions in violation of AF? It is, and I will argue below that it is a mistake to think that just because my explanation is at heart a causal one—rather than a normative explanation or a rational reconstruction—it cannot contribute to explaining the impermissibility of assertions made in violation of AF.

So, where does the normativity enter into my account? Very late in the process, it turns out. If the explanation I have offered above is correct then it is easy to see how the convention of not making aesthetic assertions in violation of AF arose but, of course, a convention by itself carries no normative force. Given that we have accepted such a convention, however, it is easy to make the further step to acceptance of a corresponding norm. Recall that, given the existence of the relevant convention, assertions made in violation of AF have a very real potential to serve as misleading signals. The relevant assertions (those made in violation of AF) are problematic, then, for the remarkably prosaic reason that—given the conventions presently operative in our society—they are liable to mislead (and even deceive) our interlocutors in a variety of ways. As such there is no mystery as to why there is in fact a norm against making such assertions. If, however, we were to abandon our current convention of not making aesthetic assertions in violation of AF—something which, I have argued above, there are important albeit merely pragmatic reasons not to do—such assertions would no longer have the potential to mislead and so there would no longer be any norm rendering them impermissible.

\textsuperscript{28} For details see Schlichter (1986).

\textsuperscript{29} I thank two anonymous referees from the journal for pushing me to address this kind of worry.

\textsuperscript{30} Strictly speaking my account, as with CSA discussed above, is compatible with the claim that the practice itself initially arose for some other reason(s) but now functions to prevent the kind of misleading signalling I discuss. I will, however, ignore this complication in what follows.
This attempt to link the existence of a convention so closely to the existence of a corresponding norm may initially seem suspect but this phenomenon is actually relatively commonplace. Consider, for example, a case relating to CSA. There presently exist conventions according to which people standardly sign their names only to those artworks which they themselves have created and avoid signing the names of others to their own works. Such conventions—sometimes backed up with the force of law—clearly have a number of pragmatic advantages (most obviously in policing against forgeries). Further, given the existence of such conventions, it would clearly be (ceteris paribus) problematic for me to sign my name to your work or to sign your name to mine. Since such actions are liable to mislead with respect to the authorship of the relevant works. Such conventions are, however, fragile and contingent things and other conventions could easily have existed in their place; ones which allow someone to sign the name of an admired artist to their own work as a homage, or a master to sign his name as a seal of approval on his pupil’s work. Indeed, as Lenain discusses alternative conventions such as these have frequently been operative in other times and cultures (2011: 67, 214–5). And it would, I maintain, be not only presumptuous but straightforwardly mistaken to criticise those in societies who follow these alternative conventions for violating any norm.

Another example of this kind can be found in considering norm of assertion which arises out of the operation of Gricean maxims. If I were to assert that ‘my mother is in the house or at the market’ while knowing full well that she is at the market, then this would (absent very unusual circumstances) be problematically misleading by virtue of violating the Gricean requirement to be as informative as possible. It is not clear, though, that these requirements are operative in all societies. Keenan, for example, argues that individuals in Malagasy society do not have a convention of following such requirements and regularly provide less information than is required by their conversational partner, even though they have access to the necessary information. If A asks B, ‘Where is your mother?’ and B responds, ‘She is either in the house or at the market’, B’s utterance is not usually taken to imply that B is unable to provide more specific information needed by the hearer. (1976: 70)

Keenan’s interpretation of the Malagasy case is, of course, controversial.31 Regardless, though, there clearly could be societies where the convention of not asserting disjunctions when you know one of the disjuncts to be true does not exist and in such societies there would be nothing misleading in violating the relevant Gricean maxim. As such, no norm would be transgressed if someone in that society who knew their mother to be at the market were to assert that ‘my mother is in the house or at the market.’

Given the availability of these analogous cases I conclude that there is nothing suspect or mysterious about the kind of explanation I have offered for the existence of AF. Before proceeding, though, it is worth highlighting the significant contrast here with the kinds of explanation which the pessimist typically offers for their norms of aesthetic judgement and our putative adherence to them. Consider by far the most influential statement of the pessimistic view; Kant’s claim that if someone does not find an object beautiful ‘he will refuse to let even a hundred voices all praising it highly, prod him into approving of it inwardly [since] he realizes clearly that other people’s approval in no way provides him with a valid proof by which to judge beauty’ (1790, 2005: 94) Here it is clearly the doxastic normativity that is doing the explanatory work. The reason why the individual in Kant’s scenario refrains from making an aesthetic judgment (and presumably also the corresponding assertion) on the basis of testimony is the recognition that such a judgment would be improper. The challenge then—which various pessimists have taken up—is to give an account of the normative force of the prohibition on forming aesthetic judgement

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on the basis of testimony and to use this to explain our alleged unwillingness to form such beliefs.32 By contrast, in my explanation of the impermissibility of aesthetic assertions in violation of AF, it is the descriptive situation which takes explanatory precedence and it is the convention of not making such assertions which ultimately gives rise to the norm against doing so.

The pessimist might object that I am changing the subject here by not providing the kind of explanation which they were looking for; an explanation which starts from the recognition that a particular practice (with respect to either belief or assertion) is problematic and uses this to account for our unwillingness to engage in this practice. If the account I have offered is correct, though, then no explanation of this kind exists. As such, it cannot be to the detriment of my account that it fails to provide one. The availability of this kind of explanation is not a datum but rather a controversial theoretical commitment.

In this section I proposed a signalling account (ASA) aimed at explaining the application of AF to aesthetic assertion without appealing to pessimism concerning aesthetic testimony. In the next section, I put forward a number of arguments in support of this account. I do not intend to argue that ASA is correct (though I believe it is) but rather that it is (i) plausible, (ii) non-ad hoc, and (iii) a promising response to the argument from assertion.

4. Defending ASA

4.1 Non-aesthetic analogues
So, why think that my explanation for the existence of AF meets even these criteria? First, it is worth noting that while the kind of picture I am proposing is more prominent in aesthetic matters, it is not entirely unique to the aesthetic case. Assertions of other kinds can, given the right circumstances, serve similar signalling purposes. And in such circumstances it is not unusual to see norms at least somewhat parallel to AF being applied. Let’s look at a concrete example. I suspect that we’ve all experienced conversations reminiscent of the following:

A: He said I was ‘dyspeptic,’ what does that mean?
B: It means you are irritable or prone to indigestion.
A: You just looked that up!

A’s final comment is intended as a form of criticism and, given the right circumstances, is a potentially legitimate one but what is the charge? Certainly not that B illegitimately acquired her belief about the meaning of the word ‘dyspeptic’ through testimony; without our accepting testimony on such matters it is difficult to see how we could ever develop as competent language users. Yet it seems natural to judge that B is open to criticism there—provided, of course, that she deliberately retrieved the information in a surreptitious manner—why is this so? Again, a signalling explanation can be given. An ability to define a word which your co-conversationalists cannot is indicative of a larger than average vocabulary and a large vocabulary is an impressively accurate indicator of above average intelligence (among other desirable qualities).33 An ability to use a dictionary is not, however, indicative of anything of the kind.

Once we start thinking about such cases, further examples are not difficult to find.34 Imagine an individual who reads travel guides to learn three obscure facts about every European country in order to trot these out at dinner parties. Although she knows the facts in question and is not making the false claim that she has an impressive overall level of geographical knowledge there still seems to be some element of fakery here. It is clear that her assertions will be

32. I say ‘alleged’ here since I believe (for reasons outlined in Robson [2014]) that the pessimist is also mistaken with respect to this descriptive claims. I will not, however, pursue this issue here.

33. See Smith et al. (2005).
34. For example many of the problematic assertions discussed in Lackey (2011) strike me as being of this kind and, as such, do nothing to support Lackey’s arguments against a constitutive knowledge norm of assertion.
It could be objected, though, that such cases hurt rather than help the account I have offered above. I have argued that, given the right context, utterances in a number of domains can serve signalling roles similar to those standardly played by aesthetic discourse, yet these areas are not standardly governed by any norm analogous to AF (in most instances, it is perfectly legitimate to make assertions concerning the meanings or words or European geography on the basis of testimony). How can I explain this without undermining the account I have offered? The explanation lies, I maintain, in considering the functions which different kinds of discourse typically play. In most areas one of the primary reasons (often the primary reason) that we make assertions is to convey information to others. By contrast, the mere accumulation of aesthetic information is rarely of paramount importance in aesthetic discourse. In adopting an AF-style norm of assertion we are able to better maintain and police a policy against certain misleading signals but at the cost of some significant loss in our ability to convey information efficiently. Whether the gain outweighs the loss will vary from case to case, but I tentatively suggest that while it will do so frequently in aesthetics this will occur much more rarely in most other areas of discourse. A good strategy, then, would be to have a norm such as AF operate by default with respect to aesthetic assertion (where signalling of the relevant kind typically plays a more central role than the transmission of information), but for parallel norms in other areas (where the reverse is the case) to be inactive by default.

All of this depends, though, on my earlier claim that the mere transmission of aesthetic information is rarely of paramount importance, a claim which may strike some as rather implausible. Aren’t there large sections of the artworld concerned with transmitting just such information? Most obviously one might worry that art critics are often primarily concerned with transmitting information about the aesthetic value of the artworks they discuss. I think, however, that this worry is misplaced and that the position put forward by the hypothetical objector importantly misrepresents the role of the critic. Even leaving aside controversial claims concerning signalling in aesthetic discourse critics typically do much more than merely conveying information concerning the aesthetic properties of the artworks under review. They also seek—alongside a range of non-evaluative projects such as describing the work and its historical context—to provide us with reasons in favour of their evaluations and to assist us ‘in discovering the value to be had from the works under review’ (Carroll 2009: 14). Indeed as Hopkins highlights recent debates over the primary role of critical discourse have typically been between those who hold that it is a form of argument on the one hand and those who claim it is an aid to perception on the other (2006b: 137). The claim that such discourse is primarily a vehicle for the transmission of aesthetic information barely gets a look in.

Still, I accept that not everyone will be convinced by my claim that the mere transmission of aesthetic information is of little import in such practices. However, offering a full defence of this claim would require too great a departure from the central topic of this paper. It is fortunate, then, that given the current state of the dialectic such a defence is not needed. Recall that my aim here is not to convince you that ASA is true but merely that it provides an attractive alternative to the pessimist’s explanation of the impermissibility of assertions made in violation of AF. And since the pessimist qua pessimist is committed to the claim that we cannot (except perhaps in very exceptional circumstances) transmit aesthetic knowledge via testimony they must also accept—assuming they do not wish to be unduly revisionary with respect to our current aesthetic practice—that the primary purpose of critical discourse is not the mere transmission of aesthetic information.
If you are convinced that this claim misrepresents the role of the critic (or of others within the artworld), then this will give you reason to be suspicious of ASA but it will also, and to an even greater extent, be a reason to be suspicious of the pessimist’s explanation. As such, it cannot be used to argue that we should reject the former in favour of the latter.

From now on, then, I will take it as common ground in this debate that the mere transmission of aesthetic information is rarely of paramount importance in aesthetic discourse. To reiterate, though, this is on my view only the default position and I do not mean to deny that there are some cases where the mere transmission of aesthetic information is of central importance or that there are non-aesthetic cases where the transmission of information is of little or no import. On the contrary, I will turn now to look in detail at some circumstances in which these defaults do not hold and argue that these actually lend further support to ASA.

I have already discussed some non-aesthetic cases where the default conditions do not hold. To return to one of these examples it is easy to think of certain dinner parties (particularly those held in nineteenth century novels) as competitive displays where diners only broach a subject to demonstrate their superior insight into a topic or their sharper wit in discussing it. In such a context, passing on or acquiring knowledge about a particular subject is unlikely to be regarded as a particularly important consideration; at least not in comparison to social or romantic advancement. In such a context, then, it is easy to imagine that rules of assertion similar to AF will be in play, and this appears to be exactly the kind of convention that we do find developing on such occasions. (Of course the norms in question will not be strictly parallel and there is doubtless much to be learned in exploring some disanalogies between different cases, but I will not pursue these issues here.)

4.2 Exceptional aesthetic cases

In §2, I claimed that it should be uncontroversial that aesthetic assertions are governed by AF but, as I noted at the time, this is something of a simplification since I maintain that while AF is active by default with respect to aesthetic assertions, there can be cases of genuine aesthetic assertion where it is inoperative. Consider, for example, an interesting case originally highlighted by C.A.J. Coady (1992: 292) and later developed in some detail by Jenn Neilson (2011). A number of statutes in various jurisdictions that censor works of art on the basis of obscenity allow that a work’s possessing significant artistic merit is sufficient to defend it from such a charge (this defence was famously, and successfully, deployed in the obscenity trial following Penguin books’ 1960 publication of an unexpurgated edition of Lady Chatterley’s Lover). In such cases the primary concern trier of fact is (or at least should be) to determine the truth of the matter with respect to the literary value of the work—rather than to signal anything concerning their own capacities—and, as such, there would be nothing untoward in their making substantive comments with regards to the work’s merit without ever having read the novel. On the contrary it would be problematic if a judge or the members of a jury were to pronounce their verdict entirely on the basis of their own first-hand reading of the work rather than relying (as happened in the Lady Chatterley case mentioned above) on testimony from suitably chosen experts.

So, how does all of this help support ASA? Hopefully the examples I have adduced above lend some credence to the thought that there is an important connection between AF and the presence of potentially misleading signals. Further, I have indicated how accepting ASA can help us to understand—which the pessimist’s explanation cannot—why the normal rules of aesthetic assertion are not in place in certain instances (and why parallel norms seem to be in place in some of the non-aesthetic cases).
4.3 Aesthetic judgements of other kinds
My final argument in support of ASA requires us to consider a wider class of aesthetic assertions. I have—as is common in the literature—focused almost exclusively on cases concerning presently existing artworks. In such cases, it seems clear that some additional norm typically governs our assertions but this is far from obvious with respect to other kinds of aesthetic assertion. Consider the following: ‘Vaslav Nijinsky’ was a brilliant performer—graceful, dynamic—one of the greatest danseurs of Russian ballet’ (Laetz 2008: 355) and ‘the Colossus of Rhodes was breath-takingly stunning.’ In such cases, it seems clear that AF is not operative and, given the truth of ASA, it is not difficult to see why. Flagging such assertions with relevant qualifiers (‘according to those at the time’ etc.) would be redundant since it will be clear to everyone in the conversation—provided they are suitably informed in the relevant historical respects—that the speaker does not know these things on the basis of applying her own aesthetic faculties. Asserting these claims, sans qualification, then would therefore no longer serve as a potentially misleading signal.35

Of course a number of pessimists have already accepted that they should make exceptions to their standard norms of aesthetic belief—and by extension their norms of assertion—for cases involving lost works. Hopkins, for example, states that the additional norms of belief he proposes in aesthetics do not hold ‘come what may’ and suggests testimony concerning lost works as instances where it is likely that his norms lapse (2011: 153). More work needs to be done, though, in order to demonstrate that a pessimistic theory can treat such cases as exceptions for reasons which are neither arbitrary nor ad hoc. So, for the time being at least, ASA appears to have an advantage with respect to such cases.

What about other cases though? Many of our aesthetic judgements do not concern artworks (lost or otherwise). There are also judgements of natural beauty, of the aesthetic properties of mathematical and scientific theories, and of various other kinds. It has already been argued elsewhere (in e.g. Meskin [2004: 88–90] and Robson [2012: 5]) that such cases pose a problem for the pessimist’s norms of aesthetic belief but what can they tell us about the debate concerning aesthetic assertion? This question is not an easy one to answer and I do not have a precise account of the stance we should take with respect to the legitimacy of AF-violating assertions in these areas.

The mathematical case is, perhaps, the easiest to deal. While it may sometimes convey misleading signals to assert that one mathematical conjecture is, say, more elegant than another on the basis of testimony, I suspect that—given the context in which such claims would typically be made—the misleading signals here will be primarily mathematical rather than aesthetic. Someone who makes such an assertion (sans qualification) is most likely trying to pass themselves off as a mathematician rather than an aesthetician.36 Other cases are more difficult. I am, for example, not sure what to make of statements such as ‘the sunset last night was beautiful’ and ‘the northern lights are sublime’ in the mouth of someone who has only learned these things from testimony. They strike me as a little strange but not as problematic as parallel assertions with respect to presently existing artworks. One possible explanation for this ambivalence is that although assertions do not typically signal anything especially valuable (it hardly takes a skilled appreciator to recognise the beauty of a sunset) —and, as such, there is no particular pressure to adopt a norm such as AF to weed out fakers—our tendency to apply AF in closely parallel cases concerning artworks exerts some psychological pressure to apply it in these cases.

35. Again there are non-aesthetic parallels here. Consider that a number of the problematic assertions which Lackey (2011) highlights would be perfectly legitimate in cases where it was common knowledge that the assertions could not possibly have been based on the speaker’s own determinations.

36. This is, perhaps, what has led some, e.g. Williams (1970), to question the value of testimony in mathematics.
also.\textsuperscript{37} Such an explanation is, however, highly speculative and I do not wish to commit myself to the truth of this account.

Fortunately, even in the absence of such an account, there are still reasons to treat cases like these as good news for ASA. The very fact that such complicated and difficult to classify cases exist offers some support for an account broadly in the spirit of the one I have offered. On my account AF is non-constitutive, meaning that something can literally be an aesthetic assertion without being governed by (or even tending to be governed by) such a norm. The fact that our aesthetic assertions concerning presently existing artworks are typically governed by AF is the result of many fragile and contingent factors. By contrast, the norms of belief appealed to by pessimistic accounts are typically taken to be constitutive norms (see, \textit{e.g.} Goldman [2006: 333] and Hopkins [2011: 139]). The pessimist claims that for something to be an aesthetic judgement it must be governed by (or at least tend to be governed by) their norms of belief. As such, if the pessimist’s account were correct, we would have good reason to expect there to be a clear dichotomy between cases where the relevant beliefs, and the corresponding assertions, are problematic and those in which they are not. The situation we actually find ourselves in is, however, far more complicated than that admitting—as I have shown above—a number of complex and difficult to classify cases. Exactly the sort of situation one would expect to arise given that, as ASA claims, it is a highly contingent matter whether (and with what force) AF applies in a given case.

5. The State of the dialectic

I have argued above that the argument from assertion provides a powerful challenge to optimism. Thankfully, for optimists like myself, I have also shown that the argument can be successfully rebutted since the optimist can produce a non-ad hoc independently plausible explanation for the existence of a norm such as AF.

An obvious worry at this point is that the pessimist’s explanation should still be preferred since it avoids reliance on any such complex and controversial story to account for AF. On the pessimist’s account, AF is merely a straightforward consequence of a constitutive knowledge norm of assertion that applies across the board. I have argued that the optimist’s postulation of a separate (non-constitutive) norm of assertion can be made to seem attractive in a number of respects but the pessimist might still maintain that their view has the advantage since they can eschew such additional commitments altogether. This claim would, however, importantly misrepresent the state of the dialectic. The pessimist maintains—as part of their explanation for AF—that we cannot achieve aesthetic knowledge on the basis of testimony and this claim is supported by appeal to further norms which govern belief in aesthetics but not elsewhere. As such, both parties in the debate are committed to postulating domain-specific norms in aesthetics and owe us some explanation for their existence. The advantage, if any, belongs to whichever side can give the most convincing explanation for the additional commitments they postulate.

My own view is, of course, that the optimist has the advantage here. I have outlined a number of considerations in favour of ASA above and have argued at length elsewhere (Robson 2012, 2013, forthcoming) that the pessimist encounters significant obstacles in motivating their additional norm(s). My aim in this paper is not, however, to argue for the truth of optimism but merely to rebut the pessimist’s argument from assertion. I have shown above that the optimist can provide a plausible and independently motivated account of the impermissibility of aesthetic assertions made in violation of AF. Whether we should ultimately accept this account will depend on the resolution of a number of wider debates in aesthetic epistemology.\textsuperscript{38}

\textsuperscript{37} Especially since, in contrast to the lost works case above, there is genuine potential for our conversational partners to arrive at mistaken views concerning the source of the relevant beliefs.

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