***Testimony; Aesthetic and Otherwise*, Workshop, University of Nottingham, 11/05/2012**

Jon Robson

Unfortunately, a late train meant there was little time for me to mingle at the start of the day as I arrived almost bang on time for the first talk – Jon Robson's "Norms of Belief and Norms of Assertion in Aesthetics".

Robson first outlined for us what is generally considered the starting point of inquiries into the realm of aesthetic testimony. The intuition seems to be that whilst in other areas there is the possibility of gaining knowledge solely on the basis of another's testimony, this does not appear to hold in the case of aesthetic knowledge. Aesthetic knowledge in this case is considered to be based upon a judgement of taste – e.g. I know object x is beautiful. Whilst A may know that x is beautiful, and A tells us x is beautiful, and we consider A to be a reliable and well-informed art critic, the intuition is that we cannot then know that x is beautiful based only on A's knowing x is beautiful and telling us. Whereas in 'mundane' cases this is an acceptable form of knowledge gathering. If A knows where the train station is, and A tells us where the train station is, and A is reliable, we then know where the train station is simply because A told us.

The pessimist, Robson explained, is one who accepts that we cannot gain aesthetic knowledge via testimony, and since we cannot rightfully assert what we do not know the conclusion is that we cannot make aesthetic assertions on the basis of testimony. In order to explain this and the intuition above, they generally hold that some of 'norm' holds. For example, they may adhere to something known as 'The Acquaintance Principle' (AP). AP holds that in order to have aesthetic knowledge, and thus make aesthetic assertions, we must have first had experience of the object of our assertion – we must be acquainted with it. Thus, no matter what testimony we may come across, from however reliable a speaker, we cannot gain aesthetic knowledge until the 'norm' is satisfied. The optimist however rejects this and maintains that we *can* get aesthetic knowledge of the basis of testimony and rejects the need for a 'norm' such as AP.

Robson went on to take issue with such 'norms' as AP through various thought-experiments and to suggest possible solutions to the optimism/pessimism debate (although he is a self-proclaimed optimist through and through). The thought experiments and ideas presented were fascinating, particularly his dissection of what he called his 'signalling account' of testimony. As a starting place for reading Robson's work, I would suggest his paper 'Aesthetic Testimony': http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1747-9991.2011.00455.x/pdf

Paul Harris

Paul Harris then followed up with a talk on "Testimony and Children's Moral Judgement". As an esteemed academic who has published extensively on early cognitive development, emotion, and imagination, I was looking forward to his take on this issue and how it might relate to my own studies.

After an introduction to the general area, which established the findings of earlier experiments concerning the ability of even pre-school children to discriminate between the 'wrongness' of social and moral transgressions, Harris presented to us the results of some recent experiments one of his ex-doctoral candidates, Karen Hussar, had conducted. The study was based around the moral assertions made by vegetarian children that came from meat-eating families in relation to those of vegetarian children from vegetarian families and meat-eating children from meat-eating families. Whilst these three groups gave different reasons when asked about why they might not eat certain meats, there seemed no evidence to support a hypothesis that suggested that the "independent vegetarians" had a different relationship with animals or were thinking in a different or deeper way about moral situations. Indeed, when asked to rate how wrong it was for another person to eat meat, none of the groups said it was bad. To almost all the children the decision to eat meat was a personal decision and did not have for them the objective moral quality they gave to, say, hitting or lying. It appeared, Harris said, as if these children were demonstrating an understanding of how personal commitments applied as a pre-condition for the ascription of praise or blame in certain areas.

When trying to find these independent vegetarians, Harris told us how, although difficult, there appeared to be something of a 'snow-ball' pattern: where you found one, they could point you to another, who could point you to another, and so on. Using this as circumstantial evidence, Harris drew conclusions about the way children were using the testimony of others as the source of their own knowledge and assertions concerning the suffering of animals.

The questions directed at Harris were mainly based upon wanting to know more about these children. Where did they say their testimony came from? Could they remember when they decided to be vegetarian? What role did their childhood literature, up-bringing, educational environment, and so on, play in this? The fact that Harris could not answer these questions as they were not considerations pushed in the interviews detracted from some of the talk's philosophical relevance, at least insofar as it could not show if its conclusions were supporting or rejecting the strict, epistemological definition of testimony being used (i.e. that testimony can provide knowledge simply upon the basis of the testimony itself). This was off-set, however, by the acknowledgement that there is a very 'artificial' feel in this area of philosophy. No one would claim that it is easy to find such strictly defined cases of testimony in the real world and it is only for the sake of epistemological examination that philosophy uses such a definition. Harris' findings and experiments are still extremely valuable when considering a child's engagement with morality, and the idea of children gaining knowledge from testimony (strictly defined or as a contributor to a child's overall justification of belief)

is especially pertinent to my own studies in child reaction and their interaction with others, literature, and the formation of morality. I look forward to reading his forthcoming book, *Trusting What You're Told: How Children Learn from Others*.

Elizabeth Fricker

Elizabeth Fricker then spoke to us on 'Unreliable Testimony'. Whilst basing her ideas on the strict philosophical definition of testimony, she also wanted to engage with some of the empirical research concerning how we assess the trustworthy nature of a speaker.

The issue appears to be that a condition for recipients of testimony to be able to acquire justified/warranted belief from that testimony is that they must be able to reliably monitor interlocutors for trustworthiness, competence, and deceit. However, what the studies some experimental philosophers have cited show is that the majority of subjects are not reliable in assessing or monitoring those they are having conversations with. Such studies involved cases of policemen and those they were questioning, a person worrying about a partner's infidelity, and so on.

Using various analogies, Fricker attempted to demonstrate how the conclusions drawn from these experiments failed to take into account what she called "environment-based reliability". Simply because we fail to detect liars or deceit in one situation (and she labelled those used in the experiments as the 'extreme' examples) does not mean we can draw conclusions about everyday interactions – particularly when it comes to testimony's apparently safe space of the 'mundane' (outlined above).

She then went on to consider the importance of doxastic responsibility and internalist accounts of responsibility and testimony, as well as reflect upon the role social epistemology might play in this debate. I cannot pretend that I managed to keep up with the intricacies of her musings here (and she admitted these were musings rather than finished ideas), but I look forward to reading her full paper when it is published and has taken into consideration the criticisms and responses given by all at the workshop.

Robert Hopkins

Robert Hopkins rounded off the day with a talk on "Norms of Use" – a topic already touched upon by Robson from an optimist's point of view, but one that Hopkins would approach as a pessimist. Hopkins opened by drawing a distinction between an 'unavailability' pessimist and an 'unusability' pessimist. The former holds that testimony does not make knowledge available at all. There is some epistemic consideration that bars it. The latter maintains that whilst testimony may be able to make knowledge available to use, there is some further 'norm of use' that renders us unable to believe purely on the basis of that testimony. The acquaintance principle discussed by Robson above was such an example.

Hopkins went on to attempt to show how norms of use not only apply in cases of testimony but in many areas of philosophy and life. For example, the evidence suggesting a friend has committed a crime may be compelling enough to make it permissible that we believe our friend committed it, yet what we might call the 'norm of use of friendship' imposes upon us that we give our friend the benefit of the doubt by believing him or at least withholding belief that he committed the crime. Hopkins also attempted to defend the coherence of his norms of use in the face of counter-examples concerned with situations where belief is compelled rather than merely permissible, and he tried to preserve this space in between permitted belief and compulsory belief where norms of use seem to operate. He also demonstrated a starting point for an argument that these norms of use allow unusability pessimism a flexibility denied to unavailability pessimism when dealing with either our intuitions concerning testimony or counter-arguments to pessimism in general.

His was a very interesting talk, but much too intricate to capture fully here. His paper 'How to be a Pessimist About Aesthetic Testimony' is a good way in however: http://www.secure.pdcnet.org/jphil/content/jphil_2011_0108_0003_0138_0157

Conclusion

The first and fourth talks (and some of the third) gave me a lot to think about in relation to the philosophical conception of testimony, and even if I cannot establish a direct relation to my thesis I am at least now aware of how the area is discussed in contemporary philosophy and its strict definitions. Being mindful of such things will undoubtedly allow me to avoid the pitfall of using such terms too loosely and without the academic rigour required in my PhD. The workshop has also made me consider how I must demonstrate the difference between my own discussions of 'artistic' knowledge, and what is meant in contemporary philosophy by 'aesthetic' knowledge.

I think what has importantly come from the second and third talks, and the subsequent questioning, is a demonstration of how eager many philosophers are now to engage with scientific experiment and empirical data, and to account for and attempt to advance it within their own studies. Indeed, this is something I must too take into account, whether it is in my PhD or further along in my professional career.