

Experimental philosophy of aesthetics

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(forthcoming in Bauer, M. & Kornmesser, S. (eds.) Compact Compendium of Experimental Philosophy, De Gruyter, please cite the published version)

1. Introduction

Compared to other fields in experimental philosophy, experimental philosophy of aesthetics (including experimental philosophy of art) is quite a late comer (Cova, Garcia & Liao, 2017). This all the more surprising that there is a long standing tradition of empirical research in aesthetics, from Wundt and Fechner's first works on aesthetic appreciation to contemporary neuroaesthetics. Some might argue that it is because, at least at its beginnings, experimental philosophy tended to focus on intuitions about thought-experiments, while philosophical aesthetics do not generally rely on such methods (Arielli, 2018; see also Monseré, 2015a). This would mean that the rise of an experimental philosophy of aesthetics had to wait for a broader conception of experimental philosophy to be accepted, according to which experimental philosophy is not restricted to the study of folk intuitions. To some, this move away from intuitions and abstract thought-experiments even constitutes a strength that allows experimental philosophy of aesthetics to escape some of the traditional objections raised against experimental philosophy (Torregrossa, 2017; Weinberg, 2019). However, some people disagree with this idea and argue that intuitions play an important role in certain debates in philosophical aesthetics (Mikalonytė, in press). A more trivial explanation might simply be that the 'founding fathers' of experimental philosophy were not particularly aware of debates in philosophical aesthetics, or that aesthetics tend to be disregarded by philosophers outside the field (Turri, 2016).

One question concerns the distinction between experimental philosophy of aesthetics and other types of empirical approaches to aesthetic. One simple answer might be that experimental philosophy of aesthetics is driven by traditional philosophical questions that have eluded other forms of investigations. Another might be that other forms of empirical investigations have mainly focused on processes by which people come to appreciate aesthetic objects, while experimental philosophy of aesthetics is free to investigate people's aesthetic concepts and theories (Arielli, 2018).

Whatever the reasons for its late emergence and the best ways to set its boundaries, experimental philosophy of aesthetics is alive and thriving (Cova & Réhault, 2019). Though the number of papers in the domains in this area is low compared to other areas of experimental philosophy, the breadth of topics that have already been covered is staggering. I will first focus on the topic of folk meta-aesthetics, which have been at the heart of numerous debates, before highlighting the diversity of questions experimental philosophers have addressed in the field of aesthetics.

2. The debate about folk aesthetic objectivism

2.1. Aesthetic realism and folk objectivism about aesthetic judgments

Aesthetic realism is the claim that aesthetic properties (such as beauty) exist independently from our minds and perceptions: when we perceive an artwork as 'beautiful' or 'elegant', we

do not confer these properties to the artwork, but discover them, in the same way we discover its size and shape. To put it otherwise: aesthetic realism claims that beauty is *not* in the eye of the beholder, but in objects themselves.

One argument in favor of aesthetic realism is that it is supposed to be in line with the way we spontaneously think about aesthetic properties. For example, Carroll (1999) writes that “the supposition that aesthetic properties are objective also explains better how we talk about them than does the projection theory” (p. 243). But why think that common sense is realist about aesthetic properties?

Zangwill (2001) puts forward the following argument: supposing that common sense is realist about aesthetic properties is the best explanation for the *normativity* of aesthetic judgment. Indeed, since Hume (1985) and Kant (1928), it is generally accepted that aesthetic judgments differ from other judgments of taste (for example, from judgments about whether some food is tasty or not) to the extent that they claim some sort of *intersubjective validity* (Cova, 2019). The idea is the following: when I claim that the hamburger I am eating is tasty, I speak only for myself and don’t think that people who have a different opinion are wrong. However, when I say that something (such as an artwork) is beautiful, I claim that this judgment is valid for every other human being and that any human being who would disagree with me would simply be *wrong*. As Zangwill (2019a) puts it: “a feature that characterizes judgments of beauty, but not judgments of agreeableness, is their normative aspiration: they aspire to correctness” (p. 291).

That we treat aesthetic judgments differently from other judgments of taste is a commonplace assumption in philosophical aesthetics (see Zangwill, 2019b). But is this assumption justified? To find out, Cova and Pain (2012) presented participants with five kinds of disagreements: disagreements about non-evaluative facts, disagreements about the beauty of natural objects, disagreements about the beauty of artworks, disagreements about the beauty of human individuals and disagreements about question of taste (e.g. whether pasta with ketchup is good). For each of the disagreement, participants had to indicate which of the following options best described the situation:

- A. One of the interlocutors is right while the other is wrong.
- B. Both are right.
- C. Both are wrong.
- D. Neither is right or wrong. It makes no sense to speak in terms of correctness in this situation. Everyone is entitled to his own opinion.

Answer (A) can be called the *objectivist* answer¹: it is the one participants should select if they think that aesthetic judgments aspire to some sort of intersubjective correctness. However, very few participants actually chose this option, and most of them chose option (D) instead. This suggests that, *pace* Hume and Kant, common sense does not consider aesthetic judgments to demand intersubjective validity.

Cova and Pain (2012) conducted a second experiment in which they focused on disagreement about whether something was ugly (rather than beautiful). In a third study, they asked participants to think about an artwork they found beautiful and to imagine they disagreed with someone about this artwork’s beauty. However, both studies yielded similar results, with

¹ I actually don’t think that *objectivism* is the best label for this option. Cova and Pain (2012) calls it the *normativist* option instead, and I think this label is more accurate. However, most other authors have opted for *objectivism* and I decided to follow their decision in this chapter, for the sake of simplicity.

most participants answering that neither interlocutor was right or wrong. It was all a matter of personal taste.

2.2. Objectivism and aesthetic comparisons

One objection that can be leveraged against Cova and Pain's studies is that they presented participants with aesthetic judgments about single artworks rather than comparisons between artworks from very different qualities. However, Hume (1985) famously argued that our commitment to aesthetic normativism is more easily detected when we attempt such comparisons (see also Zangwill, 2019a). What if we presented people with the claim that "Shakespeare was a better writer than Dan Brown" or that "Miles Davis was a better musician than Britney Spears"? Would participants still think that such claims are neither right nor wrong? This is something Goodwin and Darley (2008) tested (though the main focus of their study was the objectivity of moral judgment). They found that most people considered such claims to be "a matter of opinion".

Similarly, Rabb and colleagues (2020) sought to determine to which extent participants' subjectivism about aesthetic properties was stable. Through three studies, they presented participants with comparative aesthetic judgments and asked them to rate whether they concerned "matters of opinion" or "matters of fact".² They also used factual judgments, moral judgments and judgments about colour preferences as comparison points. In their first study, they manipulated to which extent the artworks that were compared differed from each other: whether one of the artwork was older than the other, whether it was generally regarded as better, or both. In their second study, they presented statements with or without a photograph of the target artwork, to control for the role of acquaintance. In their third study, they had participants rate to which they liked each of the artwork before being presented with the comparative statements. This allowed experimenters to present them with comparisons between artworks they liked most and artworks they liked least. However, none of these manipulations had any impact on participants' judgments regarding the objectivity of aesthetic judgments. Through all three studies, aesthetic judgements were considered as much more subjective than factual statements, and on par with judgments about colour preferences.

2.3. Aesthetic normativism in a cross-cultural perspective

Another criticism that can be leveraged against Cova and Pain (2012)'s original study was the limitations of their sample: not only was the sample size quite small, but it was mostly composed of Parisian students, who can be hardly considered representative of common sense in general (Réhault, 2013). Fortunately, later studies investigated folk aesthetic objectivism in wider and more diverse samples.

Beebe and colleagues (2015) investigated moral objectivism in a cross-cultural perspective (comparing participants from China, Poland and Ecuador), while Beebe and Sackris (2016) investigated how intuitions about the objectivity of moral statements evolved across the lifespan. As comparison classes for moral statements, they used statements about non-evaluative facts and statements about taste. Statements about taste included, but were not limited to, aesthetic judgments such as "classical music is better than rock music".

² See Moss and Bush (2021) for a methodological criticism of this way of operationalizing aesthetic objectivism.

Participants had to rate to which extent they agreed with each statement and, for each of them, were asked the following question:

If someone disagrees with you about whether (one of the test statements is true), is it possible for both of you to be correct or must one of you be mistaken?

- It is possible for both of you to be correct.
- At least one of you must be mistaken.

The first answer was interpreted as a rejection of objectivism, while the second was interpreted as an endorsement. Overall, they observed that judgments about taste were consistently considered as less objective than moral judgments and non-evaluative judgments. Moreover, participants tended to be even less objectivists when they considered that there was a lot of disagreement about the quality of the target artworks.³ However, it should be kept in mind that their judgments about taste were not limited to aesthetic judgments but also included items about food.

As part of an international research project on the variability of philosophical intuitions, Cova and colleagues (2019) investigated folk aesthetic objectivism across 19 countries. They asked participants to name something they found very beautiful, and to imagine that someone disagreed with them by claiming that this same object was not beautiful at all. Then participants had to choose between the three following options:

1. One of you is correct while the other is not.
2. Both of you are correct.
3. Neither is correct. It makes no sense to talk about correctness in this situation.

There were cultural variations: some geographical areas (such as East Asia) favored answer (2), while others (such as South America) favored answer (3). But, across all areas, answer (1) was always the least selected (between 4.8% and 22%), suggesting that folk aesthetic subjectivism is a widespread phenomenon.

2.4. Methodological issues in the measure of folk aesthetic normativism

However, Zangwill (2019) raised methodological objections to this conclusion. According to him, the measures employed by experimental philosophers might not adequately capture aesthetic objectivism, and might measure something else instead. Zangwill is particularly worried about the fourth option in Cova and Pain (2012)'s studies. He claims that this option "does not separate correctness from the right to make a claim" and "confuses correctness and justification" (p.293). The idea, here, is that people might think that there is a correct answer to aesthetic debates but still answer that, in the case of Cova and Pain's imaginary disagreements, no one is right or wrong because both interlocutors lack reasons that would justify their claim. More precisely, if we think that "being right" involves not only making a true assertion but also having good epistemic reasons to make this assertion, it is possible that neither interlocutors are right because they both lack good reasons, even when one says something true while the other says something false.

³ Beebe and Sackris (2016) also observed that age negatively correlated with objectivism about taste ($r = -.07$).

There is some plausibility to Zangwill's criticism. For example, Beebe and colleagues (2015) introduced among their non-evaluative statements a statement about a fact "whose truth value was not only unknown but practically unknowable" (p. 393). The statement was "Confucius did not eat soup on his 21st birthday" and this statement received very low objectivity ratings (between 47% and 52% depending on the country). These puzzling results can be easily explained by Zangwill's objection, suggesting that the methods used by experimental philosophers might indeed confuse people's belief that there is no objective fact of the matter with their belief that no one can be right because both interlocutors lack justification.

As an alternative method, Zangwill advises to ask participants whether one aesthetic judgment can be better than another. He makes the following prediction:

Some judgments (of beauty) are better than their opposites; and this is not true of judgments about the agreeable. (Zangwill, 2019, p. 302)

Cova (2019) put this prediction to test. He asked participants to describe something they considered to be (i) beautiful, (ii) agreeable, or (iii) made of steel, depending on the condition they were assigned to. Then, they were asked to imagine that they met someone who claimed that this thing was *not* beautiful, agreeable or made of steel, and to choose among the following options the one that would best describe the two judgments made in this situation:

- One judgment is better than the other.
- Both judgments are equally good.
- Neither

In the 'beautiful' condition, 37.9% of participants chose the first, objectivist answer (against 71.4% in the 'steel' condition). Even if less than half of participants chose the objectivist answers, this was still a way higher rate of objectivist answers than in previous studies. Should we then consider that previous studies had underestimated the prevalence of aesthetic normativism? Not really since, contrary to Zangwill's expectations, 44.7% of participants chose the alleged objectivist answer in the 'pleasant' condition. On the basis of these results, Cova (2019) argued that, when participants claimed that one judgment was better than the other, they only did so to express their agreement with one of both judgments, and not to express their commitment to some aesthetic norm that would make one of these judgment more objectively correct than the other. Thus, it is likely that the method Zangwill advocated tends to overestimate the rate of objectivist answers, by conflating objectivism with mere agreement.⁴

However, it is not because the method suggested by Zangwill is inadequate that his methodological worries are not legitimate. To investigate to which extent previous results can be explained by a confusion between subjectivism and a lack of justification, I presented participants with six disagreements:

- A disagreement about a non-evaluative claim in which one of the interlocutors has good justification for his claim: "Mars is a smaller planet than Jupiter".
- A disagreement about a non-evaluative claim in which none of the interlocutors has good justification for their claim: "Cesar ate soup on his 21st birthday".

⁴ On the basis of similar results, Cova (2019) argues that the method consisting in asking participants whether one judgment is true and the other false falls prey to the same limitations.

- A disagreement about a judgment the truth value of which depends on the interlocutor: “It is hard to run two miles straight without taking a break”.
- A disagreement in which both participants’ claims capture part of the truth: one says that a certain building is ancient and the other says that this same building is not ancient, while the building actually is a mix of ancient and recent architecture.
- A disagreement about a question of taste: “This hamburger is tasty.”
- A disagreement about aesthetics: “The Leonardo da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa* is beautiful”.

For each disagreement, participants were asked to select which of the following options best described the situation:

- One is right and the other is wrong, since there is a single universal answer to their disagreement.
- Neither is right. There is a single universal answer to their disagreement, but, since they have no way of knowing which answer is the right one, the one who says the truth cannot be said to be right.
- They are both right because it depends on the person and/or the situation.
- They are both right because, even if none of them is completely right, they both capture some part of a more complex truth.
- Neither is right or wrong. It makes no sense to speak in terms of being right or wrong in this situation, since there is no fact of the matter.
- Other:

	A	B	C	D	E
<i>Planets</i>	97.2%	01.9%	00.9%	0%	0%
<i>Cesar</i>	15.0%	45.8%	02.8%	05.6%	30.8%
<i>Running</i>	04.7%	01.8%	70.1%	10.3%	13.1%
<i>Building</i>	18.7%	11.2%	09.3%	52.3%	07.5%
<i>Hamburger</i>	01.9%	00.9%	61.7%	08.4%	26.2%
<i>Art</i>	02.8%	02.8%	41.1%	11.2%	40.2%

Table 1. Percentage of participants who selected each answer (A to E) for each of the six types of disagreement.

Results are described in Table 1. Answer (B) was supposed to capture the intuition of participants who think that neither interlocutor is right, not because there is no objective fact, but because both interlocutors lack justification. As predicted, it was the most selected answer in the disagreement about whether Cesar ate soup on his 21st birthday. This vindicates Zangwill’s criticism according to which certain participants choose the “neither is right” option for reasons that have to do with lack of justification. But does lack of justification explain participants’ seemingly anti-normativist answers to aesthetic disagreements? Not likely, as answer (B) was rarely selected in the case of aesthetic disagreement. Thus, even if Zangwill’s

methodological criticism was sound, it does not explain away the results previous studies observed: participants seem to endorse strong anti-objectivist views about aesthetic judgment.

2.5. Are folks implicitly objectivists about aesthetic properties?

Another objection to this conclusion is that people might not be *aware* that they tacitly endorse some sort of objectivism about aesthetic properties (Zangwill, 2019a). Thus, even if they explicitly deny endorsing objectivism about aesthetic properties, their explicit stance might still run contrary to the tacit commitments that they express through behavior.

2.5.1. Guilty pleasures

One phenomenon that might reveal some sort of implicit endorsement of aesthetic objectivism are *guilty pleasures* - i.e. the fact of feeling bad for enjoying certain artworks. Indeed, an easy explanation for this phenomenon is that people feel bad because they consider these artworks to lack the aesthetic qualities that would justify their enjoyment (Frierson, 2014). But is it the right explanation? Goffin and Cova (2019) empirically investigated the nature of guilty pleasures. They found that a lot of people used the expression to refer to things they liked but did not hold in high aesthetic praise, but that they did not really feel bad about liking the things they did. They then focused on people who felt bad about enjoying certain artworks and explored the source of their discomfort. They found that these negative emotions (that were closer to shame than guilt) were not linked to considerations about the aesthetic worth of artworks, but to social and personal norms (“I feel bad about enjoying this work because the person I aspire to be would probably not enjoy this kind of work”, “I feel bad about enjoying this work because, if someone else learns that I enjoy this kind of work, this would reflect poorly on me.”).

2.5.2. Distinction between good and bad taste

Another reason to think that people implicitly endorse some sort of objectivism is that they seem to draw a distinction between “good” and “bad” aesthetic taste, which seems to indicate that they perceive some kind of normativity in the aesthetic realm. But what do people mean by “good” and “bad taste”? Humbert-Droz and colleagues (forthcoming) asked participants to define what they meant by “good” and “bad” taste (if they used these expressions) and how taste could be improved (if they thought it could be improved). Most participants answered that they indeed made a difference between good and bad taste, and that aesthetic taste *could* be improved. This seems to suggest that people might indeed endorse some kind of objectivism about aesthetic properties, even if a non-negligible proportion of participants defined people with “good taste” as people who shared their preferences or the majority’s preferences. However, in subsequent questions, participants also declared that it made sense to speak of good and bad taste for food, wine and, to a lesser extent, beer. Should we conclude that people are also implicitly objectivist about such things? If not, then the inference from talk of “good” and “bad” taste to implicit objectivism is compromised.

2.5.3. Aesthetic disputes

A third phenomenon that might reveal an implicit endorsement in laypeople is the existence of aesthetic disputes, in which people argue about the aesthetic merits of a given artwork. Carroll (1999) makes the following argument: “people involved in disputes about aesthetic properties act as though they think that they are disagreeing about the real properties of objects (...) So, they, at least, must believe that aesthetic properties are objective”.

One way to interpret this argument is the following: (i) people involved in aesthetic disputes think they disagree, (ii) but they must also think that disagreement involves that one side of the dispute is right while the other is wrong, therefore (iii) people involved in aesthetic disputes think (at least at an implicit level) that one of them is right while the other is wrong. However, it is not clear that premise (ii) holds. Murray (2020) investigated people's conception of disagreement. He asked participants to imagine that they heard an agent make a judgment about whether something was delicious (vs. disgusting) or beautiful (vs. ugly) and they disagreed. Participants then had to tell whether (i) they disagreed with this agent and (ii) whether the agent was incorrect. Results showed that most participants were happy to say that they 'disagreed' with the agent without deeming the agent's judgment 'incorrect'. Thus, the existence of disagreement does not seem to entail the presupposition that there is some objective fact of the matter.

Another way to interpret this argument is to see it as an inference to the best explanation: why would people argue about aesthetic matters if they did not think that there was an objective fact of the matter? To answer this question, further studies on the motivations behind aesthetic disputes are needed. One possibility would be that people argue to show that their judgment is not true, but reasonable, and that they would be motivated to do so by the fact that they consider aesthetic taste to be an important component of their personal identity (Fingerhut et al., 2021).

2.6. Folk aesthetic subjectivism and attitudes towards aesthetic testimony

One last argument for folk aesthetic objectivism might draw on our attitudes towards "aesthetic testimony". The expression "aesthetic testimony" refers to cases in which we are told by someone else about the aesthetic properties of an object (e.g. "this painting was beautiful", "this movie was great"). Traditionally, philosophers working on aesthetic testimony have argued that people tend to consider aesthetic testimony as epistemically inferior to other kinds of testimonies. Sure, we do read reviews before deciding whether we are going to watch a movie, but we don't usually claim to *know* that a movie is good or bad before watching it ourselves.

One possible explanation for the alleged inferiority of aesthetic testimony is simply aesthetic *relativism*: indeed, if aesthetic properties are response-dependent and vary depending on who is appreciating a certain work of art, it would make sense to conclude that not much can be learned from the aesthetic appreciation of others (unless we can be certain that others always react in the same way as we do). Of course, this is not the only possible explanation for the inferiority of aesthetic testimony, but the fact that this phenomenon is readily explained by aesthetic relativism provides one more reason to reject the idea that we are aesthetic realists at heart.

But is aesthetic testimony really considered epistemically inferior? Andow (2019) conducted a series of experiments on aesthetic testimony. In a first study, he asked participants whether it was *permissible* and *legitimate* to adopt a certain belief about a particular painting in the light of a certain evidence. The nature of evidence was manipulated across conditions: either it was first hand experience, an expert's testimony, or a friend's testimony. The nature of the property the belief was about was also manipulated: it was either an aesthetic property ("beautiful" or "ugly") or a non-aesthetic one ("large", "costing \$14 millions to create"). As a result, Andow observed that most participants considered that it was neither permissible nor legitimate to form beliefs about aesthetic properties on the basis of

testimony, even when an expert's testimony was involved. Thus, it seems that people do tend to consider aesthetic testimony as epistemically inferior.

But why do people consider aesthetic testimony as epistemically inferior? In a second study, Andow asked participants questions similar to the one used by Cova and Pain (2012) to assess their degree of aesthetic objectivism. Andow did not find any effect of normativism on people's judgments about aesthetic testimony, leading him to conclude that the difference people make between aesthetic and non-aesthetic testimony might not be the result of relativism. In a third and final study, Andow provided an alternate explanation for the apparent inferiority of aesthetic testimony. He asked participants about the amount of disagreement in people's aesthetic judgments (e.g. "People disagree about whether a particular painting is beautiful") and the frequency of deception in people's aesthetic claims (e.g. "People lie about liking art"). He found that, in participants who tended to think that there was little disagreement and deception on aesthetic judgments, the difference between aesthetic and non-aesthetic judgments tended to disappear.

However, the conclusion we can draw from these results should be qualified in light of the fact that Andow only tested whether participants' normativism about aesthetic properties predicted individual differences in the value they gave to aesthetic testimony. However, he did not test whether the difference between aesthetic and non-aesthetic testimony was due to the fact that participants were less normativist for aesthetic claims than for non-aesthetic claims, which was the proper test for the relativist explanation of the inferiority of aesthetic judgment.

In fact, in a later study dedicated to moral testimony but that also included both aesthetic and descriptive testimonies as comparison class, Andow (2020) measured participants' normativism about moral, aesthetic and descriptive claims and investigated to which extent normativism mediated the impact of testimony type (aesthetic vs. descriptive) on the epistemic value of testimony. He found that normativism was indeed a significant mediator of this effect, along with participants' perceptions of disagreement and deception. Thus, the fact that we tend to perceive aesthetic testimony as inferior might be one more reason to think that most people are not realists about aesthetic properties.

3. Further topics

3.1. Definitions of art

Unsurprisingly, one traditional question in aesthetics and philosophy of art is simply: "what is art?" Many different answers (i.e. philosophical definitions of art) have been offered to this question. In these debates, it is often assumed that a good definition of art is a definition that would accommodate most of which we consider as art, while leaving aside most of which we do *not* consider as art - which means that our intuitions about whether certain objects count as artworks constitute the evidence by which these definitions are to be judged. This is why Kamber (2011) went to explore people's intuitions about a large series of specific artifacts, from William Blake's poem *The Sick Rose* and Duchamp's *Fountain* to a grade school rhyme, a Bugatti and a painting made by a female elephant. For each artifact, participants were asked to check one of three responses: "It is art", "It is not art", and "I am not sure". Participants included both laypeople and art experts. Kamber's conclusion was that none of the main philosophical definitions of art could accommodate all his results. Kamber and Enoch (2019) conducted a similar survey on both laypeople and art experts but, in addition, asked participants to justify their answer. After classifying a certain item as art or non-art, participants were presented with a list of 14 possible justifications and asked to indicate for each of them

to which extent this consideration played a role in their answer. Justifications corresponded to different philosophical definitions of art. Across the survey, the most frequently selected justifications were “it was [not] made or selected by a conscious agent” and “it was [not] intended by its maker(s) or selector(s) to be an object of aesthetic interest or appreciation”. Though Kamber and Enoch conclude once again that none of the definitions they tested could successfully track the judgments and justifications of art experts, they argue that the most successful definition was Beardley’s “aesthetic definition of art” according to which art is something that has been created or selected to be an object of aesthetic appreciation (Beardsley, 1983).⁵

However, the apparent impossibility of finding a definition of art that would be able to account for all our intuitions might come from the fact that “art” is a dual-character concept. The expression “dual-character concept” has been introduced by Knobe, Prasada and Newman (2013) to refer to concepts for which it makes sense to say that something “can be X without being a true or real X”. For example, it makes sense to say that Didier “is a scientist” (because he works in lab and publishes a lot of papers in scientific journals) but that “he is not a true or real scientist” (because he does not care about the truth and about following the scientific method, only about becoming famous). Such concepts are dubbed “dual-character” because it seems that their application depends on two criteria: a *descriptive* one and an *evaluative* one (i.e. not whether a certain instance is good in any sense, but whether it embodies the precise values that are supposed to be characteristic of a true X). Though many instances will fulfill (or fail to fulfill) both criteria at the same time, some cases will fulfill one criterion without fulfilling the other, leading to disagreement (is Didier a scientist or not?).

Liao, Meskin and Knobe (2020) argue that the concept of “art” (and many other art-related concepts) are dual-character concepts in this sense. Thus, they asked participants whether it sounds natural to say something like this:

*There is a sense in which that is clearly **art**, but ultimately, when you think about what it really means to be **art**, you would have to say that it is not **art** at all.*

In this case, most participants answered that it was appropriate to say something like that, which, according to Liao, Meskin and Knobe, means that “art” is indeed a dual-character concept. They used the same procedure on a wide array of art-related concepts and observed that some were treated as dual-character concepts (“street art”, “literature”) while others tended to be treated as purely descriptive concepts (“comic”, “architecture”). They conclude that, since “art” is a dual-character concept, there might be robust disagreement about certain instances of art, even when people share the same concept of “art” (for example because different weights to the two corresponding criteria).

3.2. Ontology of musical works

When it comes to the ontology of art, musical works raise specific ontological puzzles that are not shared by simpler cases such as paintings and sculptures. Indeed, while paintings, sculptures or buildings have a determinate, concrete existence that can be easily delineated in space and time, this is not the same for works of music. Are musical works abstract objects that are instantiated by specific musical performances, or concrete objects such as a set of particular performances? Are musical works created or discovered? When do two slightly

⁵ For a theoretical and methodological criticism of Kamber’s work, see Monseré (2015b).

different performances count as the same (or different) musical works? These are only a few examples of the numerous ontological questions raised by the nature of ontological works. But how exactly are we to answer these questions? What is the criterion that allows us to decide between two competing philosophical accounts? Mikalonytė (in press) surveyed the philosophical literature on the ontology of musical works and compiled a list of almost one hundred hypotheses about common intuitions about musical works, suggesting that these debates heavily rely on people's intuitions and their everyday musical practices. However, as she points out, philosophers tend not to agree on what exactly is intuitive, which opens the door to philosophically relevant empirical investigations.

In line with this suggestion, Bartel (2018) investigated people's intuitions about the *repeatability* of musical works, in the context of pop songs. His results suggest that most people have the intuition that a song can be repeated, but that conditions for repetition are particularly stringent: modifications in the message or emotions conveyed by the song is enough to shift intuitions to the conclusion that one is dealing with two different songs. Similarly, Mikalonytė and Dranseika (2020) investigated people's intuitions about the individuation of musical works in the context of classical music. Using vignettes, they examined the role of six factors: the identity of the composer, the method used to compose the music, emotional and representational properties of the music, instrumentation (whether different instruments were used), timbral properties of the music, and score. Their results suggest that emotional and representational properties, timbral properties and instrumentation play little role in intuitions about individuation. Rather, much of the variation was explained by musical score, composer's identity and, less prominently, by the method used to create the music. In a later paper Mikalonytė and Dranseika (in press) also investigated the role played by teleological considerations in people's intuitions. They presented participants with cases of musical works being modified, while manipulating three variables: whether the purpose of the work was modified, whether the musical score was modified, and whether the composer was different. They found that all three factors had an impact on participants' intuitions, suggesting that teleological considerations do inform (albeit weakly) people's judgments about the identity of musical works.

3.3. *Aesthetic adjectives*

Experimental philosophers have also investigated the semantics of aesthetic adjectives. Since we can easily say that some things are *more* beautiful *than* others, it seems that aesthetic adjectives are gradable, i.e. that they accept certain degrees. However, linguists typically distinguish between *relative* gradable adjectives (the application of which requires a comparison class that depends on context, such as 'tall') and *absolute* gradable adjectives (such as 'flat'). So, are aesthetic adjectives *absolutely* or *relatively* gradable? Through a series of studies, Liao, McNally and Meskin (2016) found that aesthetic adjectives such as 'beautiful' and 'elegant' fit neither category: they behave as *absolute* adjectives on certain tests (e.g. it makes sense to ask "is this beautiful?" without specifying a comparison class), but as *relative* adjectives on others (i.e. saying that A is more beautiful than B does not imply that B is not beautiful). Similarly, Liao and Meskin (2017) submitted aesthetic adjectives to a test supposed to discriminate between absolute and relative gradable adjectives: the *presupposition assessment task*. For example, they presented two objects to participants and asked them to "select the beautiful one", a task that would not make sense to most participants in the case of absolute gradable adjectives. They observed that aesthetic adjectives (such as "beautiful", "ugly" or "elegant") behaved neither as absolute nor as relative gradable adjectives: some

participants refused to comply with the task but others did pick one of the two items. Thus, it seems that aesthetic adjectives differ in specific ways from other gradable adjectives.

3.4. *'Impure aesthetics' and the interaction between aesthetic and non-aesthetic domains*

In other works, experimental philosophers have investigated to what extent appreciation of works of art and attributions of aesthetic properties could be influenced by factors and considerations that seem (at least at first sight) to be irrelevant to aesthetic matters. For example, Seidel and Prinz (2018) report studies in which they influenced participants' aesthetic appreciation by manipulating the size and position of artworks. Liao, Meskin and Fletcher (2020) investigated to which extent participants' judgments of an artwork could be influenced by the artwork's uniqueness (whether there is one or several copies) and its relationship to the artist (whether it was directly made by the artist or produced according to the artists' instructions). They argued that certain of these effects (such as the importance of uniqueness) might depend on the context of appreciation (in a lab vs. a museum setting).

Such results might seem to cast a doubt about the reliability of aesthetic judgment. However, experimental philosophers have also defended aesthetic judgment against such skeptical doubts. Against the claim that our aesthetic preferences have nothing to do with the qualities of artworks but are mainly the produce of a 'mere exposure effect' (i.e. the fact of liking what we are familiar with), Meskin and colleagues (2013) argue, based on the results of an experiment, that the effect of 'mere exposure' depends on the qualities of artworks: while it increases liking for good art, it decreases liking for bad art. Thus, the effect of mere exposure does not exclude the possibility that artworks' aesthetic qualities play a major role in our preferences: mere exposure might only help to appreciate them.

Among the non-aesthetic factors explored by experimental philosophers, moral considerations have attracted particular attention. Liao (unpublished) investigated to which extent moral defects in an artwork (such as immoral content) contributed to lower its aesthetic value. He found that moral considerations had an impact, with immoral artworks being less appreciated. However, this impact was mitigated by the artworks' genre (for example, the presence of immoral themes had less impact on participants' appreciation of a music when the music was presented as hip hop rather than a ballad). Doran (2021) investigated the claim that there are such things as moral beauty and ugliness, and more particularly the claim that "if a person is morally good then, to this extent, they are beautiful; or, conversely, if a person is morally bad then, to this extent, they are ugly." To test this claim, he presented participants with faces of female models (that had been rated as more or less attractive in previous studies) and a vignette describing the model's alleged moral character (morally good or bad). Participants were then asked to indicate to which extent they agreed that the model was beautiful. As a result, participants tended to rate the model as more beautiful when she was supposed to have a good moral character.

3.5. *Paradox of fiction*

Fiction and people's engagement with fictions are the source of numerous puzzles in philosophy of art. The most famous is probably the so-called *paradox of fiction*, that can be summarized by a series of three statements that might appear plausible at first sight, but cannot be all true at the same time:

1. We feel emotions for fictional characters and their predicament.

2. To feel emotion for a person being in a certain situation, we must believe that this person exists and that this person is indeed in this situation.
3. We do not believe that fictional characters exist and/or that they actually are in the situation described by the fiction.

Premise (2), according to which one has to believe in the existence of an entity to feel emotions for it, is often considered to be the weakest premise, as there are strong empirical reasons to reject it (Tullmann & Buckwalter, 2014). Moreover, Cova and Teroni (2016) have found that, though participants tend to consider this premise to be intuitive, they also tend to reject it as false anyway. Does this mean that we can easily get rid of the paradox by rejecting premise (2)?

Cova and Teroni (2016) argue that this won't suffice, because it won't solve the initial problem that is hidden by the paradox. According to them, the paradox is grounded in a genuine psychological puzzle: how is it that, in everyday life, our emotions seem sensitive to the existence of their object, while they are not when we engage with fictions? After all, if we were shocked by learning of a gruesome murder then learned that this murder did not happen and the victim did not even exist, our emotional state would surely change. But knowing that the victims of a killer in a slasher movie do not really exist does not seem to have the same effect. One solution to this problem has been to argue that emotions we feel for emotional characters follow different rules because they are of a different kind: they are not genuine emotions but *quasi-emotions* (Currie, 1990; Walton, 1978).

Sperduti and colleagues (2016) tried to empirically assess the truth of the quasi-emotions thesis. They had participants watch a series of short (4 to 5 seconds) video-clips, the content of which they presented as either real (documentary or amateur video) or fictional (mockumentary, films depicting fictional events as real and shot in a documentary style). The emotional content of video clips could be positive, negative, or neutral. In the first phase of the experiment, participants were only presented with video clips, without being asked any question, but their electrodermal activity was measured. In the second phase, they were presented each video clip a second time (without any indication of whether they were real or fictional) and, after each clip, were asked to indicate the intensity of their emotional reaction, the valence of their emotional reaction, to which extent they associated a precise personal memory with the scene, and the nature of the scene (real or fictional).

When it came to electrodermal activity (a physiological measure of emotional arousal), Sperduti and colleagues found no difference between the real and fictional video clips. For self-reported emotional reactions, they found a significant difference for negative video clips: participants tended to report more intense emotional reactions for negative video clips presented as real, compared to video clips presented as neutral. However, this difference was not presented for positive video clips. From the lack of difference in physiological reactions, Sperduti and colleagues conclude that their data “ seem to suggest that the fiction-directed emotions are physically robust, as witnessed by a physiological arousal comparable to real material, and can be seen as genuine emotions.”⁶

However, another series of studies suggest that this conclusion might be premature. Indeed, Humbert-Droz and colleagues (2020) report the results of two other studies on the difference between 'real' and 'fictional' emotions, conducted by Sennwald and colleagues

⁶ Interestingly, one of the authors of this study seems to disagree and argues elsewhere (Pelletier, 2019) that these results actually support the conclusion that emotions directed towards fictional characters are indeed quasi-emotions, though in a very specific sense.

(2021). While Sperduti and colleagues only used short, silent video-clips, Sennwald and colleagues used lengthier stimuli: either 5-minutes long videos (video condition) or one-page long texts (text condition). Videos and texts were matched in content, as texts based on the content of videos. Video clips were taken from documentaries and were either neutral or sad in content.

In a first study, Sennwald and colleagues presented participants with a series of either videos or texts. Participants were told that some of the stimuli were real (documentaries and journal articles) while others were fictional (mockumentaries and fictions under the form of journal articles), but they were not told which stimuli were real or fictional. Participants went through all video clips or all texts (depending on the condition they were assigned to) and, for each of them, was asked to indicate to which extent they experienced negative feelings while watching or reading it, and to which extent they believed it was real or fictional. They were also asked to highlight the most emotional moments of the video or text, to prepare for the second study. Sennwald and colleagues observed that the more participants considered stimuli as real (as opposed to fictional), the more they experienced negative feelings. This suggests that perception of a story as real or fictional might influence participants' emotional reactions, though it could also be that emotions themselves influence to which extent participants perceive a stimulus as real or fictional (thus, Sperduti and colleagues also observed that neutral clips tended to be rated as more fictional than positive and negative ones).

Thus, to determine the causal direction of this relationship, Sennwald and colleagues conducted a second study in which they presented participants with videos or texts but, for each of them, told participants whether they were real or fictional. For each stimulus, they asked participants to indicate to which extent they experienced negative emotions. Also, focusing on the moments identified as the most emotional in their first study, they measured participants' physiological responses (heart rate and electrodermal activity) and motor expressions (corrugator activity). They found that, for negative stimuli, participants reported more negative emotions when stimuli were presented as real, both for videos and texts. They also found that participants' electrodermal activity was higher for videos presented as real, compared to videos presented as fictional. This suggests that appraising the same content as real rather than fictional can have an impact on emotional experience, beyond self-reported emotional experience.

Should we then oppose Sperduti and colleagues and conclude that empirical data support the claim that emotions elicited by fictions are not genuine emotions, or at least differ in nature from everyday emotions? Humbert-Droz and colleagues (2020) argue that such a conclusion would be premature. Indeed, they point to the fact that these studies investigate to which extent 'real' and 'fictional' emotions differ from each other from a phenomenological point of view (subjective experience and bodily response), and thus presuppose that phenomenology is a relevant criterion to adjudicate the debate. However, going through the literature, they argue that proponents of quasi-emotions have tended to consider phenomenology as irrelevant to the debate and, for some, have even claimed that quasi-emotions are phenomenologically indistinguishable from genuine emotions. Thus, they conclude that the results of these studies might not have important implications for the philosophical debate about quasi-emotions.

3.6. *Imaginative resistance*

Another puzzle raised by our interactions with fiction is the puzzle of *imaginative resistance*. The expression “imaginative resistance” refers to cases in which we find it hard or impossible to imagine certain things, even when a fiction asks us to (Gendler, 2000). Typical examples in the philosophical literature include fictional worlds in which moral norms or values are different from ours: though we have no trouble imagining worlds full of flying, fire-breathing dragons, certain philosophers argue that it is almost impossible (or at least very hard) to imagine a world in which it would be morally good to torture newborns for fun. However, other philosophers deny the existence of imaginative resistance, arguing that the alleged difficulty to imagine such worlds comes from the brevity and artificiality of examples produced by philosophers: according to them, it is possible to imagine such worlds in the context of a genuine, full-fledged fiction.

In the past years, philosophers have empirically investigated imaginative resistance, and the data they collected suggest that it is indeed a genuine phenomenon. Liao, Strohminger and Sripada (2014) gave their participants a vignette describing a questionable action performed in the context of Greek mythology. The more participants disapproved of said action, the more they had trouble imagining and accepting that this action was right *in the fictional world of the story*. Going beyond the simple method of vignette presentation, Black and Barnes (2020) asked participants to describe in writing morally deviant, dystopian, and fantastical worlds. After each writing task, participants were asked whether they had successfully completed the task, and if not, why not. They were also asked to report how easy it was for them to imagine the corresponding fictional world. Black and Barnes found that, even though participants produced more words in the morally deviant condition, they were more likely to believe they had failed to the task and found it harder to imagine the corresponding world than in the two other conditions. Thus, it seems that morally deviant worlds are indeed *harder to imagine*. Moreover, emotions seem to play a role in this phenomenon. Black and Barnes (2020) found that disgust sensitivity predicted higher difficulty to imagine dystopian and morally deviant worlds. And Campbell and colleagues (in press) found that imaginative resistance was greatest among participants who experienced more negative affect while reading the fictional vignettes and were lower in trait anxiety and trait psychopathy. However, Black and Barnes (2017) found no connection between imaginative resistance and empathic concern.⁷

However, imaginative resistance might depend on certain aesthetic properties of fictions. Liao, Strohminger and Sripada (2014) investigated the impact of literary genre on imaginative resistance. They gave their participants a story describing a mother giving her baby for sacrifice. The story came in two versions: either as a police procedural, or as an Aztec myth. Participants were more likely to agree with the claim that what the mother did was right *in the context of the fiction* in the case of the Aztec myth than in the case of the police procedural.⁸ This suggests that imaginative resistance is modulated by people’s expectations, as those differ across fictional genres.

But imaginative resistance is not limited to morally deviant worlds. Barnes and Black (2016) presented participants with brief scenarios that pictured either Morally Deviant, Factually Unlikely, or Conceptually Contradictory fictional worlds. Participants considered

⁷ Black and Barnes (2017) have developed and validated a scale supposed to measure participants’ tendency to oppose imaginative resistance (the ‘Imaginative Resistance Scale’). However, it is not clear whether this scale really captures what philosophers understand by imaginative resistance, rather than a desire to avoid fictions that convey messages incompatible with one’s moral norms.

⁸ Those results were replicated in the context of the XPhi Replicability Project (see Phelan, 2018; Cova et al., 2021).

morally deviant worlds (e.g. worlds in which committing murder is the right thing to do) as harder to imagine than Factually unlikely worlds (e.g. worlds in which wolves roamed the streets of England), but as easier to imagine than Conceptually contradictory worlds (e.g. a world in which $7+5$ is both equal and unequal to 12). Contrasting descriptively and evaluatively deviant fictions, Kim, Kneer and Stuart (2019) did not limit themselves to morally deviant fictions, but also introduced vignettes that explored aesthetically and humorously deviant fictions. Again, they found that evaluatively deviant worlds triggered more imaginative resistance than descriptively deviant ones. However, they also found that evaluatively deviant worlds were also judged 'weirder' than descriptively deviant ones. This led them to wonder whether the difference they observed between descriptively and evaluatively deviant worlds was really due to the type of fiction (descriptively vs. evaluatively deviant) rather than their content (to which extent they were weird). They thus assessed the impact of fiction type on imaginative resistance while controlling for the weirdness of fiction content (i.e. to which extent the fiction requested participants to imagine something unusual, surprising and different from the actual world). They found that, when imagine resistance was assessed by asking participants how difficult and possible it was to imagine a certain fiction world, controlling for the weirdness of content tended to make the impact of fiction type on imaginative resistance disappear. However, when imaginative resistance was assessed by asking participants whether they agreed that the target statement was true in the fictional world, the impact of fiction type on imaginative resistance remained even after controlling for the weirdness of content.

Thus, people's interactions with fictions open fascinating avenues of research to experimental philosophers. Some long standing philosophical debates about how we come to appreciate fiction, such as the 'paradox of tragedy' and the 'paradox of horror' are still open to investigation and are yet to receive attention from experimental philosophers. Of course, this might be because there already is relevant evidence from other academic fields (see for example Cova, Deonna & Sander, 2018 for the paradox of tragedy, Andersen et al., 2020 for the paradox of horror), but my intuition is that there is still plenty of work to do in these areas.

Supplementary materials

Materials and data for the new results reported in this chapter can be found at <https://osf.io/4z2qa/>

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