

Folk Aesthetic Intersubjectivism

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1

According to Cova et al. (Cova and Pain 2012; Cova et al. 2019), the aesthetic literature commonly assumes that ordinary people believe that aesthetic judgements are intersubjectively valid — i.e., that two disagreeing aesthetic judgements cannot be both correct (Cova and Pain 2012: 254 ff.; Cova et al. 2019: 336–338). This assumption would play a role in influential arguments in favour of realism (e.g., Carroll 1999; Zangwill 2005) and in shaping the questions that guide aesthetic research (Zangwill 2023; see Cova et al. 2019: 321). To test this idea, Cova et al. have probed people’s beliefs on aesthetic disagreements using experimental studies based on questionnaires. Since the vast majority of participants chose answers that are incompatible with intersubjectivism (Cova et al. 2019: 332), Cova et al. conclude that the traditional approach in aesthetics is “fundamentally misguided” (2019: 335).

Contesi et al. (2024) claim that Cova et al. entirely misunderstand the aesthetic literature: the experimental findings actually “confirm what aestheticians predicted all along” (2024: 246). According to Contesi et al., while aestheticians generally assume “that people explicitly endorse the claim of subjectivism” (2024: 243), folk intersubjectivism “is mainly seen as remaining implicit in patterns of behaviour” (2024: 242); its presence, therefore, cannot be inferred from people’s “explicit avowals” (2024: 243), contrary to what Cova et al. expect.¹

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¹For Contesi et al., the ordinary tension noticed by aestheticians, sometimes called *Problem of Taste* (“PoT”), is a matter of explicit subjectivism and implicit intersubjectivism. They state that “Cova et al. conclude that the traditionally postulated PoT does not exist” (Contesi et al. 2024: 240). This is likely to be a controversial characterisation of Cova et al.’s conclusion, as it suggests that Cova et al. take the tension between subjectivism and intersubjectivism to have been entirely resolved by their experimental findings. However, this interpretation would not be accurate. Cova et al. acknowledge that certain ordinary practices identified in the literature continue to be in apparent conflict with the common belief that aesthetic judgments are subjective, and they consider this seeming tension an interesting philosophical problem (Cova et al. 2019: 319, 336).

Contesi et al. support their understanding of the literature by citing passages from contemporary philosophers. I argue that these passages fail to demonstrate that folk aesthetic intersubjectivism is regarded as implicit.²

2

Contesi et al. refer to Carroll (1999), who states that:

[t]he supposition that aesthetic properties are objective also explains better how we talk about them than does the projection theory. For example, people involved in disputes about aesthetic properties act as though they think that they are disagreeing about the real properties of objects. They behave as though they think that there is a fact of the matter to be determined. They speak as if one side of disagreement is right and the other wrong. So, they, at least, must believe that aesthetic properties are objective. That is the way of understanding their behaviour that renders it most intelligible.

Contesi et al. claim that “[t]he important premiss of such an argument is that people engage in certain kinds of (not only linguistic but also non-linguistic) behaviour” and emphasise that, in Carroll’s words, people behave *as though*, or *as if*, objectivism is true (2024: 241).³ They conclude that the belief “that aesthetic properties are objective” is implicit (2024: 242–3).⁴ However, Contesi et al.’s premiss does not warrant such a conclusion. In general, behaviours do not entail the absence of explicit beliefs. In particular, thinking that people behave as if objectivism is true is compatible with concluding that people explicitly believe in objectivism. One might think that people behave as if objectivism is true exactly because they consciously believe that objectivism is true. Moreover, the fact that Carroll does not qualify the belief he is attributing to people makes it more plausible that he is taking it to be explicit rather than implicit.

Finally, even if Carroll believed that people are objectivists only implicitly, it would still be far from obvious whether he takes them to be intersubjectivists only implicitly. As both Cova et al. and Contesi et al. do (Cova

² While Contesi et al.’s main focus is on “contemporary aestheticians”, they also state that “[m]ost aestheticians understand Hume as focusing [...] on a contrast between implicit commitments to intersubjectivism and explicit beliefs in subjectivism [...] see e.g. Sartwell 2022 and Kivy 2015” (245). This last statement appears controversial. For characterisations of Hume’s problem, see Korsmeyer (1976: 203; 1995: 98); Kivy (1983: 283; 2015: 4); Carroll (1984: 181); Mothersill (1989); Gaiger (2000: 9); Levinson (2002: 227); Costelloe (2003: 173); Williams (2007: 157–158); Evers (2019: 151); Peacocke (2023).

³ Given the first sentence of the passage, the behaviour Carroll refers to seems to be solely linguistic, contrary to Contesi et al.’s contention that it is not.

⁴ In what follows, I neglect the possible difference between “objectivism” and “realism”. Nothing hangs on this.

et al. 2019: 322; Contesi et al. 2024: 241), many philosophers distinguish between objectivism and intersubjectivism — the former entailing the latter, but not vice versa (see Joyce 2022 for complications). As long as one draws such a distinction, believing that people are implicitly objectivists is compatible with believing that people are explicitly intersubjectivists (and one would not assume the conclusion in *assuming* that people are explicitly intersubjectivists and *concluding* that they are objectivists, either implicitly or explicitly. That is the way Cova et al. read Carroll (2019: 321–322); Cf. Contesi et al. 2024: 241).

3

Contesi et al. also refer to Zangwill (2005). Similarly to Carroll, Zangwill states:

when it comes to explaining the normativity of aesthetic judgements, the realist is ahead. [...] folk aesthetics is thus realist. Whether or not the tacit folk metaphysical commitment to aesthetic facts or states of affairs is justified is another matter, but our aesthetic judgements presuppose that metaphysics. [...] What is not an option is holding some non-realist view, [...] while thinking we can unproblematically retain our ordinary practice of making aesthetic judgements.

To demonstrate that Zangwill regards folk aesthetics as implicitly realist, Contesi et al. highlight that his starting point is the “ordinary practice of making aesthetic judgements” (2024: 241–242). However, again, such a starting point is not at odds with thinking that folk metaphysics is explicitly realist; a practice can involve conscious realist convictions.

Contesi et al. also emphasise that the metaphysical commitment to realism is described as “tacit” and “presuppose[d]”. However, it is not obvious whether Zangwill is employing the relevant notion of implicitness. A commitment, or belief, might be described as tacit, or presupposed, simply because it is not voiced in the relevant situation; one might nonetheless be conscious of it.

Moreover, even if Zangwill believed that folk realism is implicit, it would still be far from clear whether he thinks that folk intersubjectivism is implicit. As long as one distinguishes between intersubjectivism and realism, as I have said, thinking that people are implicitly realists is compatible with the thought that they are explicitly intersubjectivists.⁵

⁵Contesi et al. (fn: 7) also state that Zangwill (2023) “confirms [their] understanding of Zangwill 2005”, since he asserts that “answers to questionnaires about correctness in judgment do not reveal the deep nature of people’s thoughts”. However, Zangwill is not claiming that Cova et al. are mistaken in their understanding of the aesthetic literature

In fact, the conclusion that Zangwill considers folk intersubjectivism to be solely implicit appears to be not only unjustified, but also false. This is the way Zangwill describes the “normativity” he takes as a starting point in the passage above:

The most primitive expression of this normativity is this: some are correct, others incorrect. . . . where we judge confidently, we think of our judgment as being correct. And that means that we think that the opposite judgment would be incorrect. [. . .] If we deploy the notion of truth, we might express the normative idea by saying if a judgment is true then its opposite is false. Or we might say that the law of non-contradiction applies to aesthetic judgments: there are some aesthetic judgments such that they and their negations cannot both be true. This principle need not hold of all judgments of taste, so long as it holds of a significant proportion of them.

Zangwill (2000) similarly states that

[i]n a large range of cases, we think that an aesthetic judgment and its opposite cannot both be true or correct.

Zangwill, then, seems to assume that people are explicitly intersubjectivists and that they are so in circumstances which resemble the experimental settings of Cova et al. (2019)’s experiments — contexts in which people make a judgement and someone disagrees with them (see also Zangwill 1994: 3). Zangwill, moreover, considers “normativity” an especially important aspect of aesthetic judgements: how normativity and subjectivity can coexist is, according to him, the “Big Question in aesthetics” (Zangwill 2023; cf. Contesi et al. 2024: 339, who seem to mischaracterise Zangwill’s Big Question).⁶

4

Contesi et al. also put forward an excerpt from Rabb et al. (2020):

Two common observations about aesthetics are in tension: that people generally consider aesthetic judgments subjective, and

concerning the explicitness, or lack thereof, of folk intersubjectivism. Rather, Zangwill seems to be responding to Cova et al.’s studies by noting that, even if those studies show that people are not explicitly intersubjectivists, they might be so implicitly. Cova et al. are aware of the possibility of such a response and acknowledge that ordinary people could, despite their experimental findings, be intersubjectivists at some deeper, implicit, level (2012: 254–258; 2019: 337).

⁶ It is also worth noticing that Zangwill, like Cova et al., employs a notion of subjectivity which seems in principle compatible with intersubjectivity. Contesi et al., instead, use ‘subjective’ to negate ‘intersubjective’ (see 2024: 240).

that people generally behave like objectivists (arguing over judgments, making choices based on judgments of trusted critics, rejecting strong assertions of aesthetic equivalence).

Once again, believing that people behave like objectivists is compatible with believing that they are explicitly objectivists. And, even if we assumed that it is common to observe that people are objectivists only implicitly, as long as one distinguishes between intersubjectivism and objectivism, believing that people are implicitly objectivists is compatible with believing that people are explicitly intersubjectivists (see Moss and Bush 2021, according to whom, Rabb et al. presumably use ‘objectivism’ to mean a strong version of realism which is committed to mind-independence).

5

I have argued that the claim that aestheticians consider folk aesthetic intersubjectivism to be implicit does not follow from their belief that people “behave like realists” — in fact, this claim appears to be false in the case of Zangwill. Acknowledging that ordinary behaviours seem to presuppose certain beliefs does not require one to maintain that such beliefs are implicit. Additionally, contentions about realism should not be presumed to automatically transfer to intersubjectivism. I conclude that future research should not take Contesi et al.’s understanding of the aesthetic literature for granted.

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