

Tests in Aesthetics

Florian Cova and Sébastien Réhault (eds), *Advances in Experimental Philosophy of Aesthetics*, Bloomsbury Academic

By Jacques Morizot

In order to understand the aesthetic experience, do we need to use the natural sciences as our model? Based on protocols and tests, experimental philosophy seeks to fill a gap between conceptualisation and empirical data. These methods are now entering the field of aesthetics.

The experimental philosophy analysed in this work is a current that emerged in the late 20th century, as a reaction against the supposedly dogmatic nature of conceptual analysis. It seeks to cast doubt on *a priori* concepts, in order to deconstruct “armchair” philosophy and to question its unexamined intuitions¹. Until this point, its audience had remained restricted in France, where for a majority of the cultured public, its name alone was a kind of oxymoron. However, a growing number of studies (for example on reasoning or the emotions) refer to it readily, particularly in sectors such as economics, where theoretical concerns meet behavioural considerations. Since its motivation is epistemological as well as practical (because it concerns the legitimation of empirically based knowledge), we can understand why its influence tends to spread to other domains, including fields like ethics and aesthetics that do not

¹ For an engaged presentation, see Joshua Knobe and Shaun Nichols, “An experimental philosophy manifesto”, in Joshua Knobe & Shaun Nichols (eds.), *Experimental Philosophy*. Oxford University Press. p. 3-14 (2007), as well as the collective work on this current, published by Vuibert in 2012.

traditionally involve a strong normative component (moral principles or rules of taste).

This timely book, edited by Florian Cova and Sébastien Réhault, offers some initial keys and a wealth of enlightening and useful insights, both thematic and methodological. The work is unsurprisingly published in English by a British publisher, as part of a collection dedicated to examining the main domains of philosophical practice, but the list of contributors is broader. Both open and balanced, it includes experienced researchers and promising talents. Although most of the researchers are Anglo-Saxon (Angelika Seidel, Jonathan Weinberg, Jesse Prinz, Richard Kamber and Aaron Meskin, among others), the Institut Nicod is also well represented (Jérôme Pelletier, Jérôme Dokic, Isidora Stojanovic, Alessandro Pignocci, etc.). There are also researchers from Geneva's Centre for Affective Sciences (Florian Cova, Constant Bonard, Steve Humbert-Droz) and other European institutions.

A new field of research

Like many other disciplines, aesthetics today is undergoing a deep interrogation of its identity and its claims. Its traditional certainties about the unconditional value of Beauty and the contemplative nature of the aesthetic experience, which it considered sacrosanct, have been shaken, although they still serve as major anchors. This situation does not only have internal roots, connected to the evolution of artistic forms and the opening of new aesthetic spaces. Above all, it stems from the emergence of paradigms that have had a decisive influence on philosophy as a whole: naturalisation places aesthetic phenomena in the long term of evolution and favours scientific information, while the cognitive turn sees judgement as the result of complex psychological processes, and the associated neurophysiological research is increasingly diverse. Experimental philosophy is part of this renewal of methods and studies, yet it also remains independent from them. It can even be seen as the belated fulfilment of Hume's objective "to introduce the experimental method into moral subjects" (the subtitle of his *Treatise*), even though the content and form of his analyses are very different to today's practices.

In its contemporary methodology, the use of experimental philosophy in aesthetics seeks to work on the most empirical level, based on direct experience and communication. The systematic use of tests aims to neutralise introspection, and to

step back from personal intuitions or speculative hypotheses. It allows the processing of results obtained using traditional statistical techniques. As stated by the editors of the book, it is not just a matter of considering established empirical facts; the aim is to devise experimental protocols that help to direct aesthetic research towards innovative and productive paths². Although the description of phenomena practised by the social sciences is still of great interest, the approach is guided by a theoretical ambition that is truly philosophical and open to other sub-disciplines.

The label that best fits the project is undoubtedly “impure aesthetics” (proposed by A. Seidel and J. Prinz): impure because its stance contrasts with that of aesthetics in the Western tradition, which emphasises desinterestedness. Instead, it highlights the multitude of factors that interact within any aesthetic situation, whether the subject is clearly aware of them or not. For example, objective data such as the scale of a work and how it is presented, its originality, information on its author, etc., play a too often neglected role that requires the use of broader explanatory schemas.

The book is valuable because, rather than proposing an anthology of already published texts, it contains original articles presenting current research. Although the content is technical and focused on specific subjects, it also provides more general analyses and some important historical background. It tackles the issue of aesthetic judgement (what gives it its substance and validity), the extension of the concept of art (from the perspective of the creator and the receiver), the role of emotions and the imagination, and the use of aesthetic predicates. Each chapter includes a critical appraisal of the procedures used (on a factual and conceptual level).

Expected benefits of experimental philosophy of aesthetics

Although these are very recent approaches, we can now get a sense of what we might gain from studies of this kind. Here are some of the contributions that are immediately apparent in the analyses presented:

- Refining the characterisation of exemplary aesthetic situations. An experience like that of the sublime can now be modelled through immersive

² See also Florian Cova, Amanda Garcia and Shen-yi Liao (2015), “Experimental Philosophy of Aesthetics”, *Philosophy Compass*, 10 (12) p. 927-939.

conditions that blur the distinction between the self and the world, particularly in music and virtual reality. In the case of the imaginative resistance experienced by individuals in the face of phenomena that challenge their sensibilities or their convictions, it is becoming possible to test the relevance of factors that may make the content of a judgement weird. What comes out of such analyses is not necessarily a challenging of theoretical conclusions, but rather an original way of understanding them. Thus, concerning the intense quasi-emotions that we feel towards fictional characters (despite knowing that they do not exist), Jérôme Pelletier shows how Mario Sperduti's research on forms of emotional regulation within fictional situations provides relevant arguments to put in perspective the type of psychological interaction posited purely speculatively by Kendall Walton.

- Critically evaluating the significance of assertions that are too often accepted at face value by the dominant aesthetic theories, when their empirical foundations have never been examined in depth. A good example is that of judgements of taste: according to the Kantian vulgate, they differ from the simple satisfaction we derive from something agreeable, because the latter has no intersubjective validity. However, Florian Cova verifies that most subjects in a test concerning the causal relationship between their experience and its source do not seem to attribute a clearly differentiated status to beauty. This should not be taken to mean a levelling of opinions. Rather, we must consider the context of communication. Another important sector concerns ontological questions: in issues surrounding the delimitation of art (at the border between creation, nature and technique) and the type of psychological investment it is meant to demand (the work as an extension of its creator).
- Better measuring the contribution of the extra-perceptive factors that are involved in aesthetic judgement and that explain why some audiences struggle to appreciate many contemporary works (such as readymades and facsimiles that are visually indistinguishable from ordinary objects). Already, institutional approaches have highlighted the difference between the characterisation of objects and the representation of subjects, but the experimental approach is more suited others to serious consideration of the conditions of perception.

- Re-establishing dialogue between ordinary aesthetics and philosophical conceptualisation. For several decades, aestheticians have recognised the interest to be found in ordinary and everyday things. It is now time to go a step further and envisage how we can better involve the general public in real aesthetic research. Aaron Meskin et Shen-yi Liao examine this subject in a “public philosophy” programme on impressions of flavour (identifying various coffee samples by tasting them and communicating the relevant information to others). The key point is that the public do not passively receive the results: they help to produce them, and above all, they become aware of the kinds of problems that transmission entails.

Resistance and criticism

However, there is no hiding the major tension between the experimental approach and aesthetic research conducted according to the traditional principles of aesthetics. It is apparent in the reservations expressed in most of the articles, often concerning the need for further investigations, while a final section bearing the sober title “metaphilosophy” summarises some of the more frequent criticisms.

J. Weinberg examines whether the use of intuitions and the study of unique cases (a method so dear to philosophers or historians of art) holds up in the face of the “restrictionist challenge” that partisans of experimentation present to their adversaries, who they see as blind to their own biases. In spite of appearances, aestheticians are far from powerless against the risk of epistemologically harmful effects. The distinctive nature of their domain (manipulating rich stimuli and vague theories) even gives them a welcome advantage over other philosophical sectors.

A more radical criticism concerns the threat of relativism that may arise from the confusion between beauty and the agreeable. While remaining faithful to traditional (Kantian) inspiration, Nick Zangwill questions the legitimacy of these blind examinations. In his eyes, the source of the problem lies in reducing aesthetic analysis to a form of standardised questionnaire, often no more than a simple vignette, stripped of any sense of nuance and above all any capacity to reflect on one’s own choices. The resulting conclusions lead to the production of a kind of artefact. Does reducing the idea of normativity to a statistical conformity not also abolish the very meaning of correctness and freedom to judge?

Nevertheless, this is a well-constructed, well-argued book, and it would be unfair to focus solely on the indications of a methodology that sometimes lacks maturity. The experimental paradigm is a reality and it will undoubtedly have a profound impact on all questions of aesthetics. Of course, it is too soon to judge whether these developments will be an appealing but marginal addition, or whether they will bring about a lasting renewal of key theories. In either case, one thing is certain: this kind of work will become increasingly difficult to disregard.

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