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Introducing the special issue on Empirical Aesthetics

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Abstract: What is the nature of aesthetic responses to art forms and are there any universal preferences for particular arrangements within the arts? Conceptual work in philosophical aesthetics suggests there are many more issues about art and aesthetic matters than these two. Moreover, such conceptual work helps make explicit what assumptions about art and aesthetics a researcher is working with. How to deal with the tension between empirical and philosophical aesthetics? Introducing a special issue on empirical aesthetics.

Arguably, the beginnings of *empirical aesthetics* took place in 1876, the year Gustav Theodor Fechner (1801-1887) published his *Vorschule der Ästhetik* (*Preschool of Aesthetics*). Fechner, also credited with founding psychophysics, examined aesthetic responses to (mostly) visual forms, and explored the so-called Golden Section hypothesis. This very roughly suggests the main interests of early empirical psychology in matters of aesthetics: the nature of aesthetic responses to art forms and whether there are any universal preferences for particular arrangements within visual art. To some extent, apart from the early commitment to the visual arts, these two interests still dominate scientific psychological investigations in aesthetics. However, there are problems associated with these foci. Conceptual work in philosophical aesthetics suggests there are many more issues about art and aesthetic matters than are represented here. Moreover, such conceptual work helps make explicit what assumptions about art and aesthetics a researcher is working with. To be sure, the focus on explaining the nature of judgements about art and aesthetic judgements is a perennial issue within philosophical aesthetics as

well as at the heart of empirical aesthetics. But many of the issues discussed in philosophical aesthetics or philosophy of art have to do with the nature of human reactions to a work of art and ways (if any) that it might be different from reactions to a non-art object or event, the nature and functions of the imagination, the role(s) of fiction in aesthetic judgements, whether one can learn from fictions, the nature and function of picture perception, the relationship(s) between descriptive and normative aesthetic judgements, and a good many more, only the first of which (the nature of aesthetic responses to art) has any obvious relations to the two main issues in empirical aesthetics.

The move to *experimental philosophy* (or, x-phi), beginning with a 2001 essay by Jonathan Weinberg, Shaun Nichols, and Steven Stitch, had no such drawbacks; for it paid close attention to conceptual distinctions and used them to help make the issues it discussed clear and well-focused. It also paid close attention to developments in philosophy. However, like much early x-phi, the 2001 essay focused primarily on arguing against the use of intuition-driven solutions to problems that had clear empirical dimensions. In fact, early x-phi was characterised by empirically testing broad claims at the root of issues in ethics, epistemology, metaphysics, and philosophy of mind wherein what looked like empirical claims were regarded as 'intuitions' that could be attributed to 'the folk' and seemed to be used as evidence for basic positions. (Often, however, actual empirical tests showed these intuitions were susceptible to variation both within and across cultures and, so, not actually what 'the folk' believe at all.) Moreover, while the x-phi movement in philosophy expanded from classical metaphysics and epistemology to include a number of branches of traditional philosophy, until recently philosophical aesthetics has not received the kind of attention these others branches of philosophy have. With the exception of Florian Cova, Shen-yi Liao, Aaron Meskin, Jonathan Weinberg (who all have essays in this collection), and a few others, most people who have worked in x-phi have had little to say about the connection between philosophical aesthetics and the cognitive sciences. But now, the trend seems to have blossomed. And this special issue on experimental aesthetics is one mark of that.

Two problems have been thought to attend to the trend towards experimental aesthetics (indeed all of x-phi): whether the studies being conducted have been focused correctly – for one reason or another – on the claims being addressed by the studies; and the competence of people trained in philosophy to conduct psychological studies of their own, when they do. And so, philosophers have two additional tasks: one is to show that the scientific studies actually do appropriately address their targets; and the other is to demonstrate competence in conducting or using the studies.

In their paper, 'The Vanity of Small Differences: Empirical Studies of Artistic Value and Extrinsic Factors', Shen-yi Liao and Aaron Meskin run tests that indicate, in agreement with results from previous studies, that the 'causal-historical factor of contagion' affects artistic evaluations. More in-

triguing was the discovery that, in sharp disagreement with other studies, the 'ontological factor of uniqueness' did not make much of a difference in artistic evaluations. In making the argument, they rely on empirical studies of reactions of 'the folk'. Another result that is of interest concerns certain differences between studies of aesthetic evaluations 'in the lab' and 'in situ' (in a museum, for example). And this is what they have in mind by discussing the 'context of an aesthetic judgement'. I might note that the authors address (albeit indirectly) the two kinds of difficulties that we mentioned in the previous paragraph. As a result, these authors show how empirical tests of empirical content are to be conducted and analysed.

In his entry, 'How Should Contextualist Matters Figure into Art Evaluations?', David Fenner argues that, within a generally subjectivist approach to evaluation, the trick is to determine which contextual matters are relevant to evaluation, and which are not. Of particular relevance to this determination are the questions of when an evaluation is made and of which properties of a work of art need to be considered. (Since the focus here is on 'how' contextual matters figure into an artistic evaluation, the goal is not to determine whether they are.) Note that in referring to 'contextual matters', Fenner does not mean the context of making an aesthetic judgement, as Liao and Meskin do; rather he is at pains to note that anything that is not a 'formal' and manifest property of a work of art belongs among the 'contextual' matters. In making his argument in favor of a subjectivist approach, rather than an objectivist approach to evaluation, Fenner fairly explicitly confines himself to traditional philosophical sources and arguments. I mention this here because, while otherwise this entry might seem a bit 'out of place' in a special issue on experimental aesthetics, the piece is directly concerned with the sorts of issues that await a possible experimental examination, if one is to be had. If we think the contextual matter in hand makes an empirical claim, should that not be tested empirically, as Liao and Meskin have done with the claim that some extrinsic factors – those which Fenner calls 'contextual' – are relevant to artistic evaluations? To be sure that is true, but first we need some argument to show how that contextual factor figures appropriately into art evaluations. And this is precisely the task that Fenner undertakes.

In their essay, 'Aesthetic Debunking and the Transcendental Argument of the Novel', Adam Gjesdal and Jonathan M. Weinberg take on a recent view that has gained some popularity in the profession of philosophy, tease out the empirical part of (the empirical content in) the claim, and then test it. It turns out that the transcendental argument of any novel, as popularised by Gerald Plumer, from which we are to derive an account of the cognitive value of novels, is complicated. Roughly it is the view that novels present us with situations that readers find 'believable' and thereby reveal psychological principles from everyday life. In large part, the teasing out of the empirical content of this claim has to do with the criteria Plumer employs for determining that a novel is 'believable' by a group of readers. The conclusions

Gjesdal and Weinberg reach are not that Plumer is wrong, but rather that the empirical content of his claim is thrown into doubt by alternative views that have equally strong, if not stronger, empirical support. These authors also proceed by addressing the aforementioned kinds of difficulties. They first conduct a significant analysis of the claim by Plumer, showing by careful argument which part of it is genuinely empirical. And then, similarly to Liao and Meskin, they show how empirical studies can be used as tests of what is clearly empirical content in a philosophical claim.

In their entry to the special issue, 'Lost in Intensity: Is there an empirical solution to the quasi-emotions debate?', Steve Humbert-Droz, Amanda Garcia, Vanessa Sennwald, Fabrice Teroni, Julien Deonna, David Sander, and Florian Cova argue that the 'jury', so to speak, is still out on whether there is an *empirical solution* to the quasi-emotions debate. As Gjesdal and Weinberg do, they devote considerable attention to the philosophical claims involved, explaining very carefully both what the quasi-emotions debate is about, why some philosophers have adopted this solution to the so-called 'paradox of fiction', and why some have not. But the main point of the essay is devoted to an assessment of early and late empirical studies addressing the question whether most people have 'real' emotive reactions to fictional characters and fictional events or only 'quasi-emotional' reactions. Their conclusions are that early empirical studies were flawed methodologically, and that later studies for conceptual reasons actually fail to address the philosophical debate. The problem with the later studies is that they actually test the 'intensity' of people's reactions, as a proxy in a test of whether the reactions are genuinely emotional or only quasi-emotional; but intensity is not a proxy for these, according to Cova and his colleagues, arguing on both empirical and conceptual grounds.

In the final entry to this special issue on empirical aesthetics, 'Aesthetic Disinteredness in Neuroaesthetics: A Phenomenological Critique', Fotini Vassiliou argues that some recent neuroaestheticians have illegitimately used a distinction between reactions to want-satisfaction and indications that a person has liked something to develop a novel distinction between 'disinterested' aesthetic reactions and reactions that are 'interested'. (In an important footnote, Vassiliou comments that she is not arguing in favour of a view that makes 'aesthetic disinterestedness' a component of any genuine aesthetic reaction. She is only arguing that the present literature in neuroaesthetics diagnoses this phenomenon incorrectly.) The argument in favour of drawing the distinction that is currently in vogue among neuroscientists is that the picture offered by the so-called 'first wave' of neuroscientific investigation into reactions to art was simply that access to whatever leads to knowledge or recognition of art was accompanied by pleasure. But that was too broad an idea; for it would not distinguish between satisfaction that was the result of an encounter with art and satisfaction that was the result of an encounter with psychoactive drugs. The discovery of the neurological sites of and the

distinction between wanting vs. liking reactions was thought to provide the way forward. But, the problems with the account of disinterestedness, according to Vassiliou, are that it misconstrues the relation between disinterestedness and the existence of the object of contemplation, that it fails to allow for a distinction between *not being able to want* and *not wanting* (and hence between *not being able to be interested* and *being disinterested*), and it renders disinterestedness onto a stochastic scale and does not offer a sharper distinction where it should do.

Neuroaesthetics is both a relatively new area of neurological investigation and yet harkens back to some early results in empirical aesthetics – specifically the problem of characterising and then investigating the valuation of aesthetic and artistic matters (see first paragraph of this introduction). So, while it is unclear what Vassiliou's argument has to do with experimental aesthetics (understood as a kind of x-phi), *per se*, it does go to the heart of conceptual matters and argues against empirical aesthetics insofar as it is committed to replicating or justifying a Kantian take on aesthetic pleasure. And, what is clear from all the essays in this special issue is that philosophical arguments about issues in aesthetics have made serious contact with developments in the psychological sciences, and *vice versa*. This is to be greeted as a welcome event in the on-going debates about attempts to 'naturalise' philosophy.

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