

Schellekens, Elisabeth and Goldie, Peter (Eds.). *The Aesthetic Mind: Philosophy and Psychology*. Oxford University Press, 2011, 455pp, b&w illus., [cloth, paper]. Stokes, Dustin. Department of Philosophy, University of Utah

Aestheticians have long been empirically minded at least with respect to acknowledging actual practices of making, appreciating, and criticizing art. Often, then, what philosophers mean when they self-describe as “empirically minded” is that their approach is somehow importantly rooted in the empirical *sciences* and, in this context, it’s the behavioral and brain sciences inclusive of psychology, neuroscience, sociology, and evolutionary theory. *The Aesthetic Mind* is a collection of this kind, with contributions by philosophers that are empirically minded in this sense, plus practitioners in the relevant empirical sciences, plus a few skeptics for good measure. This is a large collection, containing 25 newly commissioned entries. The collection, though, should be engaged and valued as a whole, as driving an important but simple polemic: philosophical aesthetics can gain from empirical scientific and correlative interdisciplinary work on the mind and our theories are impoverished to the degree that they fail to acknowledge this lesson. One might ask, who, in today’s academic world of interdisciplinary-everything, resists this claim? In fact, there remain quite a few detractors and even some of them authors for this very collection.

The co-editors for the volume, Elisabeth Schellekens and the late Peter Goldie, selected an exceptional cast of contributors. Many of the philosophers on board will be usual suspects (but no less excellent ones). The selection of empirical scientists is perhaps more daring, including psychologists and neuroscientists as one would expect, but also entries from researchers in primatology, anthropology, medicine, and computer science. This collection is no exception to the first-rate organizational acumen of Schellekens and Goldie who, both together and separately, have enabled strong cross-disciplinary research on conceptual art, emotion, and empathy. This was one of

Peter Goldie's most consistent contributions to the profession. He will be missed for this command and, more personally, for his charm and friendship.

There are a range of good papers from philosophers and scientists both, all of them clearly taking an empirical line on some philosophical problem: anthropology/evolutionary theory and the aesthetic (Currie; Rolls); emotion and aesthetic value (J. Prinz; R. Cowie); cognitivist accounts of imagination (Meskin and Weinberg) and its criticism (Stock); neuroscience and pictures (Rollins); psychology and pictures (Freeman; Matravers), among others. There are some familiar subject sections on empirically minded aesthetics, 'Emotion in Aesthetic Experience', 'Imagination and Make-Believe', and 'Fiction and Empathy', and some truly ground-breaking ones: 'The Psychology of the Aesthetic', 'Beauty and Universality', and 'Music, Dance, and Expressivity. What's most surprising--and this is a virtue of the editorship--are the more or less skeptical contributions to the volume and how they serve (probably in some unintended ways) the message of the volume (as it was characterized above). These contributions are often set side by side with an opposing empirical proponent, so the reader only need flip a handful of pages to consider the relevant contrast class. Stephen Davies provides compelling reasons for caution about the purported success of cross-cultural studies of musical expressiveness. Roman Frigg and Catherine Howard criticize the neuropsychological approach to artistic achievement. And Peter Lamarque argues that psychology offers no important insight into literary criticism. These last two entries are considered in turn.

In 'Fact and Fiction in the Neuropsychology of Art', Frigg and Howard challenge recent attempts at "neuroaesthetics", focusing primarily on the work of Dahlia Zaidel but also mentioning related work by V.S. Ramachandran and Semir Zeki. (Zaidel contributes a chapter that immediately precedes Frigg and Howard's.) Frigg and Howard claim that the choice of Art with a capital 'A' as explanandum is "a dead end for neuroaesthetics" (p. 65). What motivates this bold claim?

Frigg and Howard's central critiques are methodological. Zaidel's goal is to identify neural correlates for the mental processes of artists whose work has been received into the *Artworld*. Zaidel employs a version of the method of lesion studies central to cognitive neuropsychology: to infer what some neural structure does in cognitive, perceptual, and motor activity, study patients with neural damage and see what those patients *cannot* do. Thus one identifies proper function by identifying malfunction as traced back to a damaged physiological structure. The trouble arises in Zaidel's choice of patient: Zaidel focuses on eminent artists who have suffered substantial neural damage but who are also, most of them, dead. Accordingly, Zaidel's task is largely one of careful detective work, piecing together disparate patches of (often very outmoded) medical records and coupling these with recorded facts about changes in the artists' abilities, stylistic approach and method, and overall cognitive and motor capacity. From here, Zaidel draws inferences about neural correlates of Artistic ability (again, with a capital 'A'). Although a fascinating investigative attempt, it should be clear how this method will, at best, underdetermine any precise thesis about art or artists (let alone Art or Artists).

Frigg and Howard also question the *top-down approach* that is common to Zaidel's work and many others. This approach takes for granted that we have a firm understanding of the personal-level phenomenon (be it painting a still-life or visually perceiving a bowl of fruit), and we then collate and interpret data concerning low-level phenomena (patterns of neural activity, individual neural cell firings, sub-personal attentional response) to provide some model or explanation of the pre-conceived personal-level phenomenon. Thus the metaphor: the analysis works from the *top* and then *down*. The authors note that the choice of top-down approach for Zaidel is sensible given her focus on Art and Artists. But the worry, which partly generalizes from the first worry, is that this choice is misguided for any empirical approach to aesthetics. The methods employed by Zaidel and others

will, at the very most, deliver plausible hypotheses about capacities for fine motor control, color and shape perception, perspectival understanding, and the like, but nothing about what makes the minds of Artists relatively special. And this could be so for somewhat trivial reasons: by the lights of many, many contemporary theorists, Art is partially constituted by social structures and conventions. It is not a purely psychological phenomenon.

The fix? Frigg and Howard suggest that empirical researchers should abandon the focus on Art, consider a *bottom-up approach*, and employ the most updated neuroscientific technologies. Regarding the first prescription, the authors point is well taken but perhaps overstated. Zaidel's method is certainly questionable, but even if questions about Art are not answered just by empirical investigation (which seems right), it does not seem unreasonable to have Art as (part of) the ultimate explanandum, while meanwhile acknowledging more tractable explananda like those listed above: fine motor control for brushstrokes, cognition of perspective, and so on. Frigg and Howard might then retort with their second prescription: abandon assumptions about the top-level phenomenon-- Art--and instead work from the bottom up. The thought, it seems, is something like this: work out neural-level theories of various perceptual and motor capacities and only then begin to formulate a theory of art and artistic activity.

But here, to conclude with a comment about the final prescription, the authors are overly sanguine about the latest in neuroscientific understanding. They write, for example, "...the functioning of the visual cortex and the eye itself have been studied extensively, which can lead to studies that help us understand the physical (and emotional) response we feel when looking at certain colours, or certain shades, or certain oblique lines" (p. 66). Sounds like big promise; why should we believe it? Earlier the authors write "Current neuroscience has evolved to the point where we understand in great detail the structures of various regions of the brain and the interconnections between them. In fact,

we now have a very detailed map of the brain telling us even how individual columns...work and in which functions of the brain they are involved” (p. 58). On one interpretation, this is true. For example, neuroscience has identified neural regions that correlate to representation in distinct sense modalities and, for some modalities, fine details about processing in those structures (for example, visual processing in the ventral stream versus the dorsal stream). But on another interpretation, and in this dialectical context, this is a very odd statement from philosophers to neuroscientists, not least since it vastly overstates just how much current neuroscience takes as “fact” about neural-mental mappings. For example, the neurosciences have yet to achieve a clear understanding of how distal features of the environment are successfully picked up and bound into a cohesive perceptual experience. When one acknowledges the further confounding fact that we pick up information from distinct sense modalities--where cross-modal studies are in a relative stage of infancy--one realizes just how far neuroscience has to go. So while a nice promise, using a bottom-up approach to successfully build up a theory of art or artistic activity would require a mapping of neural structure and function far more robust than anything to date. In this light, Zaidel (who again, it is worth emphasizing, is a working neuroscientist) may have had good reason for *some* of her methodological choices.

Theoretical cross-talk notwithstanding, Frigg and Howard offer an important line of criticism of empirical (so-called neuroaesthetic) theories of the arts. And any overstatement in their analysis is minor compared to ones contained in ‘On Keeping Psychology Out of Literary Criticism’, by Peter Lamarque. The title should already give away the gag. But for clarity, here are a few articulations of Lamarque’s negative thesis: “Empirical facts about the psychological states of actual people and empirical theories about such states will not illuminate what is of value in individual works of literature” (p. 299). And later he states of cognitive scientific research, “I don’t think it has anything to contribute to literary criticism, to the analysis and appreciation of particular literary works. The

theories themselves are neutral as to literary value and apply equally to fictional narratives of all kinds” (p. 311). In fact, Lamarque’s stance is grounded in a critique of cognitivist theories of emotion and their alleged failure to answer normative questions about the arts, but as the above quotations (and chapter title) should suggest, he generalizes to the (non)import of psychology/cognitive science to studies of literature. Upon quick reflection, one might think of analogies that undermine Lamarque’s claim. For instance, theories of human physiology are neutral with respect to the values of fine food and wine. But surely we should be cautious about inferring from this neutrality that such theories have *nothing* to offer to our understanding of these pleasures. Perhaps psychology and literary value are different in this regard, but absent some reason further to the value-neutrality of science, the inference is too fast.

Lamarque’s chapter is an important and unexpected inclusion in this volume. In it there is both a lesson and an expression of a persistent, skeptical overreaction amongst philosophers. The lesson can be learned, and the skepticism averted, by making the following distinction.

(Weak) Empirical science is insufficient to answer all philosophical questions about literature and literary criticism.

(Strong) Empirical science offers no answers to or insight on questions about literature and literary criticism.

Lamarque successfully makes a case for the Weak thesis. And the caution that arises from observing this thesis is well-heeded, most especially when some of the very “neuroaestheticians” criticized by (or identical with) various authors in this volume are insufficiently sensitive to it (instead offering a “grand theory” of art or a “science of art” that fails to address the normative and metaphysical concerns of philosophers). But there is no clear step from the Weak to Strong thesis.

Counterexamples abound in this very volume. The Lamarque chapter is flanked by two apparent examples. In ‘Enacting the Other...’, David Miall surveys and interprets recent empirical research that suggests that embodiment and sensory imagery play important roles in linguistic

comprehension and, accordingly, responses to literary texts. In ‘Mirroring Fictional Others’, Clay and Iacoboni survey neuroscientific research on mirror neural activity and its contribution to explaining empathetic response to fictional narratives and characters. One can acknowledge the insights of these chapters and consistently maintain the Weak thesis. The move to the Strong thesis, by contrast, is alarmist.

Lamarque should not be unduly criticized here, since he is not the only aesthete sounding such alarms. In ‘Moving in Concert: Dance and Music’, Noël Carroll and Margaret Moore identify a more general alarmist culprit: George Dickie famously gave an emphatic ‘No’ in answer to the question posed by his ‘Is Psychology Relevant to Aesthetics?’ (Dickie, G., ‘Is psychology relevant to aesthetics?’ *Philosophical Review*. 1962. 71 (3): 285-302). Dickie’s arguments, Carroll and Moore argue, are insufficient to their task. As they note, one can see this by simply acknowledging that any aesthetic theory (at least any theory that is partly about mental phenomena), at the very least, must be constrained and informed by the best sciences of the mind. And one can go further to show how this is done for a particular artistic form. Arguably, chapters by Miall and Clay & Iacoboni do this for literature; Carroll & Moore, and D. Davies as well, do this for music and dance.

Generalizing one step further, there remain philosophers today who commit to a general version of the Strong thesis:

(Strong_{gen}) Empirical science offers no answers to or insight on philosophical questions.

When stated so baldly Strong_{gen} may have few explicit defenders. But one can still find today philosophical analysis that betrays this tacit commitment. And it is worth noting the philosophical history that may motivate it. Moritz Schlick and others argued that metaphysical questions are to be

exorcised from philosophical inquiry, and all remaining “genuine” questions handed over to science. Philosophers can hang around insofar as they are useful for conceptual mop-up work. And a few decades later, W.V.O. Quine argued that epistemological questions, at least those worth asking, will be answered by psychological science. Positivism and Naturalism like this gets philosophers’ backs up. But beyond that reasonable caution, the principled response is not to replace the positivist’s ‘All’ with a denialist ‘None’. Instead, the appropriate response is to maintain that philosophical questions--many of them normative--remain philosophical; and this is compatible with empirical constraints on answers to those questions. Hume, foundational to the positivist and naturalist both, claimed that an ‘ought’ cannot be derived from an ‘is’; but he also claimed that ‘ought’ implies ‘can’.

An exemplary feature of *The Aesthetic Mind* is that it provides numerous counterexamples to the alarmist Strong thesis: in the form of art-specific arguments and analyses, an over-arching polemic and, perhaps unwittingly, explicit sounders of the alarm. Given the strengths and variety of its contributors, the volume should contribute to the task of calming the nerves of aestheticians still unwilling to let empirical scientific data into philosophical aesthetics. And with any luck, taking art and artistic activity as a special case study, the volume will go one step further to calm the more general alarmism.