The Problem of Taste to the Experimental Test

Filippo Contesi (Barcelona), Enrico Terrone (Genoa), Marta Campdelacreu (Barcelona), Ramón García-Moya (Barcelona) & Genoveva Martí (ICREA & Barcelona)

A fundamental question in aesthetics is whether or not aesthetic judgments are subjective. Indeed, Nick Zangwill (2019) calls this "the Big Question in aesthetics". One of the major pieces of evidence to answer that question has traditionally been taken to be what the majority of people say and do concerning aesthetic matters. One major tension, sometimes called 'the paradox of taste',[1] has been noticed: taste seems proverbially described as something subjectively valid (*de gustibus non disputandum est*) but people seem to treat taste judgements as if they were not subjective; for instance, they engage in disputes, defer to experts or discard certain views as absurd. As Crispin Sartwell (2022) writes:

> Taste is proverbially subjective: *de gustibus non est disputandum* (about taste there is no disputing). On the other hand, we do frequently dispute about matters of taste, and some persons are held up as exemplars of good taste or of tastelessness. Some people's tastes appear vulgar or ostentatious, for example. Some people's taste is too exquisitely refined, while that of others is crude, naive, or non-existent. Taste, that is, appears to be both subjective and objective...

Aesthetics has so far debated at length what account to give of the tension. However, the existence of the tension itself has been acknowledged since Hume and Kant.

More recently, a series of papers reporting experimental results have questioned the existence of this tension: most notably, Cova et al. (2019), but also Cova & Pain (2012), Cova (2019), Goffin & Cova (2019) and Cova (forthcoming). Goodwin and Darley (2008), Rabb et al. (2020)

[1] Other names for the same tension exist. Sartwell (2022) for instance calls it "the antinomy of taste", following Kant's terminology.

and Andow (2022) also report similar results. All those studies show that a vast majority of people endorse claims that support aesthetic subjectivism.[2] According to Cova et al. (2019), this demonstrates that "the traditional way of approaching the debate over the nature of aesthetic judgement is fundamentally misguided" (p. 335) and that "philosophical inquiries about the nature of aesthetic judgments should no longer take the (explicit) belief in intersubjective validity (and how to explain it) as a starting point" (p. 337).

In this paper, we show that such claims are based on a misunderstanding of the nature of the tension, and that the empirical results in question are irrelevant to showing that the tension does not exist. We note, however, that the nature of the tension has not been properly clarified in the literature. To remedy this, we suggest six different axes under which the tension can be conceptualized. By taking those axes into account, we show that the aforementioned empirical results do not dissolve that tension.

1. Psychological Experiments and the Philosophical Tradition

Here we will focus primarily on the most comprehensive experimental study of the intersubjectivity of aesthetic taste to date, i.e. Cova et al. (2019). They set out to test 2,392 participants in nineteen countries across four continents. The participants were invited to describe something they find very beautiful and imagine someone disagreeing with them. Then, they were asked to choose one among the following three options, specifying how certain they were of their choice:

> 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. (2019, 324)

The results show that an underwhelming number of people (7%) chose option 1.[3] Those results are consistent across cultures. Indeed, they universalize similar results by Cova and Pain

[2] The latter three studies do not draw the same conclusions about the paradox of taste as the Cova et al. studies, though.

[3] Subsequent experiments reported in the same paper yielded increasing percentages of responses to answer 1, as a result of improvements in the experimental setting such as the replacement of the subjectivism-inclining phrasing of 'finding something beautiful'. Other potential framing flaws of the experimental settings employed would include their focus on participants' personal preferences for beautiful objects and their relative lack of specificity

(2012), in a study that was performed with a much smaller and non-multicultural sample. Since the endorsement of subjectivism about aesthetic judgments is very robust, Cova et al. conclude that the traditionally postulated paradox of taste does not exist.

Cova et al.'s experiments, like all other empirical studies of this question, use lay people's explicit statements. They ask participants to choose among competing explicit beliefs[4] about aesthetic judgments (i.e. whether two people who disagree in their aesthetic assessment can both be right, whether one of them has to be wrong or whether it makes no sense to adjudicate in these matters). The problem with that strategy is that, in large part, the aesthetics literature on the paradox of taste has not taken explicit beliefs in intersubjective validity as the main evidence for the existence of the paradox of taste. As we have seen with Sartwell's quote earlier, the problem that aestheticians consider most puzzling, instead, is that people declare to agree with a statement such as 'de gustibus non disputandum est', and then they go on to do and say things that are not in line with what they explicitly endorsed.

For instance, Cova et al. themselves quote Noël Carroll (1999) as saying:

> 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 the disagreement is right and the other wrong (p. 322; our emphases).

Carroll does not here take "the (explicit) belief in intersubjective validity'' as a starting point. He starts from the consideration that, in talking about aesthetic properties, people "act" in certain ways: e.g. they get involved in disputes. From this fact he draws the conclusion that they "must believe that aesthetic properties are objective". This, however, is the conclusion of an argument to the best explanation, rather than one of its premises. The important premise of such an argument is that people engage in certain kinds of (not only linguistic but also non-linguistic) behaviour.

Likewise, Zangwill (2005)—quoted by Cova et al. (2019) as well—says:

about the kinds of beautiful things participants are asked to imagine. Although unaddressed in Cova et al. (2019), other studies remedy some of those flaws.

[4] One can distinguish between explicit beliefs and avowals or statements of them, but for the sake of the argument, in what follows we will limit ourselves to speaking of explicit beliefs. We thus assume that avowals or statements express the contents of explicit beliefs.

> Both realism and non-realism are on a par as far as the experiential aspect of aesthetics is concerned. But when it comes to explaining the normativity of aesthetic judgements, the realist is ahead […] I conclude that folk aesthetics is thus realist. Whether or not the *tacit folk metaphysical commitment* to aesthetic facts or states of affair is justified is another matter, but our aesthetic judgments *presuppose* that metaphysics (pp. 321–22, our emphases).[5]

Here Zangwill is pointing out an advantage of realism, and hence intersubjectivism about aesthetic judgements.[6] His starting point is the folk's "ordinary practice of making aesthetic judgements" (322). This folk practice, he suggests, is committed to the existence of aesthetic facts, and hence is unproblematically in accord with realism. Moreover, as he clearly points out, such a folk commitment is "tacit". That, he claims, is the metaphysics that "our aesthetic judgements presuppose".[7]

Finally, Rabb et al. (2020, 1) also clearly state:

> Two common observations about aesthetics are in tension: that people generally consider aesthetic judgments subjective, and that people generally behave like objectivists (arguing over judgments, making choices based on judgments of trusted critics, rejecting strong assertions of aesthetic equivalence).

All these examples illustrate that, on the whole, aestheticians do not conceive the paradox of taste as a tension between *explicit* beliefs in subjectivism and *explicit* beliefs in intersubjectivism.

2. Three Distinct Axes

We have shown that the tension inherent in the paradox of taste is not one between explicit beliefs. But, perhaps because aestheticians have always agreed on the existence of the tension,

[5] Cova et al. attribute this quote to Zangwill (2001) but the quote is to be found in Zangwill (2005, 79).
[6] Realism implies intersubjectivism since the claim that aesthetic properties are real features of objects implies that they are the same for any subject. Given the nature of aesthetic properties, not everyone agrees with Zangwill that they are real in the sense of being objective, mind-independent features. To remain neutral on the issue, we mostly follow the experimental studies' focus on intersubjectivism.
[7] Indeed, Zangwill (2018) and (2019) criticize Cova and Pain (2012)'s results in a number of ways. In particular, Zangwill (2019) raises against such experiments the charge that the "answers to questionnaires about correctness in judgment do not reveal the deep nature of people's thoughts". Such a charge converges with our own criticisms and confirms our understanding of Zangwill (2005).

little effort has gone into analysing precisely what the tension is. So it is worth reflecting further on what the tension consists in.

The authors previously cited exemplify another recurrent feature in the traditional understanding of the paradox of taste, i.e. the alignment between *explicitness and beliefs*, on the one hand, and *implicitness and behaviours* on the other. In other words, the aesthetics tradition notices the subjectivist viewpoint mainly in explicit beliefs like that expressed by the dictum 'de gustibus non disputandum est'. By contrast, the intersubjectivist viewpoint is mainly seen as remaining implicit in patterns of behaviour.

The conceptualization of the paradox of taste as a belief/behaviour tension is distinct from its conceptualization as an explicit/implicit tension. But the belief/behaviour and implicit/explicit axes are clearly connected. For implicit beliefs are theoretically postulated in order to *explain* the way in which people behave, for instance what they say when they interact with others or when they disagree with others' aesthetic judgments. Thus, Carroll (1999, ibid.) concludes his (previously mentioned) description of folks' aesthetic behaviour as follows:

> So, they, at least, must believe that aesthetic properties are objective. That is the way of understanding their behaviour that renders it most intelligible".

Cova et al. ask participants to choose among competing explicit beliefs on aesthetic judgements. But, in general, one cannot infer someone's implicit beliefs from their explicit avowals, nor that she will behave according to the latter. For example, it is well established that many people endorse explicitly non-racist beliefs, and yet they behave as if they believed the opposite by, e.g., not taking into further consideration the CVs of candidates with 'black-sounding' names (such as 'Jamal' or 'Lakisha'), even when they have the same qualifications as candidates with 'white-sounding' names such as 'Emily' or 'Greg'.[8] If Cova et al. (2019)'s strategy were applied to this case, we would have to reach the odd conclusion that such people were obviously not racist.

Towards the end of their papers, both Cova and Pain (2012, 254-258) and Cova et al. (2019, 335-337) briefly mention the tension between explicit beliefs and implicit commitments as revealed by behaviour. What they do not acknowledge is that this tension *is*, in fact, the paradox

[8] See Bertrand & Mullainathan (2004) and Kelly & Roedder (2008). The paradox of taste is indeed likely to be characterizable as a similar case of "fragmented mind" (see Borgoni et al. 2021).

of taste itself as it is understood in aesthetics. More importantly, they certainly do not test that tension.

The problem, as we have argued, is that people declare to agree with a statement, and then they go on to do and say things that are not in line with what they explicitly endorsed. As a consequence, Cova et al.'s results cannot be taken, as they claim, to invalidate the aesthetics tradition. On the contrary, their experiments contribute to establishing it. In fact, their results confirm what aestheticians already knew: i.e. that people explicitly endorse the claim of subjectivism.

To sum up, if one conceptualizes the paradox of taste along the belief/behaviour axis, showing that the tension suggested by the paradox does not exist would require showing that the folk *behave* in a subjectivist way. However, Cova et al.'s experiments primarily test folks' beliefs rather than their behaviours. Likewise, if one conceptualizes the paradox along the explicit/implicit axis, dissolving the tension would require showing that the folk hold *implicit* subjectivist beliefs. But the experiments under discussion only test folks' explicit beliefs.

Besides these two main axes, there is at least a third way of conceptualizing the paradox of taste implicit in the aesthetics tradition. This is as a contrast between people's aesthetic judgements and people's judgments *about* aesthetic judgments. When thinking about disagreements between aesthetic judgements, people often wax subjectivist, endorsing the proverbial "de gustibus non disputandum est". Such judgments are *about* aesthetic judgments and *about* aesthetic disputes; they are, in an important sense, *meta-aesthetic* and sometimes their subjectivist tone may contrast with the things that people do and say when they engage in arguments as to, say, whether something is or is not beautiful. True, this may be the case even at the level of fully explicit beliefs (at which Cova et al.'s tests operate). Yet, even if we conceptualize the tension along the meta-aesthetic/aesthetic axis, dissolving the tension would require showing that the folk make *aesthetic* statements in a subjectivist fashion. By contrast, Cova et al.'s experiments primarily test folks' *meta-aesthetic* avowals.

No matter how we conceptualize the tension inherent in the paradox of taste, Cova et al. do not test it. Hence, they do not show that the tension does not exist. Neither do they show that there is anything radically wrong, in this respect, with the traditional aesthetics approach.

3. Three Additional Axes

Drawing on claims made by several contemporary aestheticians, we have identified three main axes on which the paradox of taste is usually conceptualized. Nonetheless, other, less common, conceptualizations of the paradox may be hypothesized, especially if one draws on Hume's and Kant's original and less straightforwardly interpretable formulations. In the attempt to be most charitable to Cova et al.'s challenge, we identify in this last section three additional axes of conceptualization.

The first additional axis conceptualizes the paradox of taste as a tension between explicitly subjectivist *general* meta-aesthetic beliefs (such as that expressed by the proverb 'de gustibus non disputandum est') and explicitly intersubjectivist meta-aesthetic beliefs about *particular* cases (such as those we express during a dispute concerning particular aesthetic judgements: e.g. 'Monet's *Impression, sunrise* is beautiful'). This axis draws a distinction between the general and the particular and, unlike the three previous axes, it postulates the tension completely at the level of meta-aesthetic explicit beliefs. As a consequence, understanding the paradox of taste along this fourth axis would lead to the conclusion that the experimental results discussed challenge the claim that the folk hold intersubjectivist beliefs about particular cases. On this understanding, an experimental participant who finds Monet's masterpiece very beautiful, and imagines someone else disagreeing, ought to conclude that the other person is wrong. By contrast, the experimental results show that most people do not reach that conclusion.

However, this does not vindicate Cova et al.'s conclusion that the aesthetic tradition is wrong to assume that the paradox of taste exists. Firstly, understanding the paradox along this general/particular axis is by no means common. None of the contemporary texts earlier discussed may be interpreted along that axis. The only possibility would be to draw on some of the eighteenth-century sources, e.g. Hume (1757/1777) when he contrasts beliefs valid about aesthetic taste generally ("the proverb has justly determined it to be fruitless to dispute concerning tastes") [9] and beliefs valid only about particular cases ("[w]hoever would assert an equality of genius and elegance between OGILBY and MILTON […] would be thought to

[9] Hume (1757/1777), Mil 229-30.

defend no less an extravagance, than if he had maintained a molehill to be as high as TENERIFFE").[10]

However, this interpretation of Hume would be uncommon. Most aestheticians understand Hume as focusing instead on a contrast between implicit commitments to intersubjectivism and explicit beliefs in subjectivism (i.e. conceptualizing the paradox along the first two axes).[11] Even if accurate as an interpretation of Hume, moreover, such an understanding of the paradox of taste would be misaligned from the more recent aesthetics tradition. As we have seen in Section 1, more recent aestheticians conceptualize the paradox in accordance with the more common interpretation of Hume. Indeed, Cova et al. themselves quote Hume (and also Kant) together with contemporary aestheticians such as Carroll and Zangwill, who definitely do not understand the paradox of taste according to this peculiar interpretation. As a consequence, challenging the paradox along the general/particular axis would not challenge the whole aesthetics tradition, as Cova et al. claim.

A fifth possible conceptualization of the paradox of taste revolves around the distinction between (presumed) taste experts and the folk. In other words, one could understand the paradox as a tension between more common laypeople's subjectivist leanings and the intersubjectivist viewpoint of a person who is (or considers themselves to be) of good taste. Such an understanding of the paradox is, again, uncommon in the aesthetics tradition as a whole. However, the other classic eighteenth-century source of the paradox, i.e. Kant (1790/2000), can be understood as (also) putting forward such an understanding. This may be seen in his apparent attribution of the subjectivist viewpoint to the layperson, whilst the intersubjectivist stance is proper to "any one who plume[s] himself on his taste".[12] However, Cova et al. never ask participants whether they consider themselves persons of taste, hence they cannot be taken to be testing the paradox along this axis either.[13]

A final axis, again one that draws on some features of Kant's text but has been uncommon in the aesthetics tradition since, revolves around his distinction between the agreeable and the

[10] Hume (1757/1777), Mil 230-1. Here Hume is likely talking about Teide, the major mountain on the island of Tenerife.
[11] See e.g. Sartwell 2022 and Kivy 2015.
[12] Kant (1790/2000), 56.
[13] Note that in this case the paradox would be conceptualized in terms of an *interpersonal* tension (i.e. a tension between two groups of people) rather than, as it is more usually understood, in terms of an *intrapersonal* tension (i.e. a tension within a single subject's mind). On the intrapersonal/interpersonal distinction in experimental philosophy, see Campdelacreu et al. (in press).

beautiful. Kant claims that subjectivist and intersubjectivist viewpoints align to the proper use of the qualifications 'agreeable' [*angenehm*] and 'beautiful' [*schön*], respectively.[14] Accordingly, the paradox of taste might be conceptualized as a tension between the subjectivist attitudes associated with the term 'agreeable' and the objectivist attitudes associated with 'beautiful'. However, the distinction between the agreeable and the beautiful is not obviously a pre-theoretical distinction that is readily available to the folk. Ordinary judgements about something being beautiful are often made to simply express the subject's pleasing experience. When someone says that their day was "beautiful", they are not appealing to any intersubjective standards of beauty but only expressing their own subjective sentiment that they enjoyed their day. If one wants to test if Kant was right that people have explicit intersubjectivist beliefs about the beautiful, the test should be devised in such a way that the participants should first be primed for the conceptual distinction between the agreeable and the beautiful, and then see whether that is a real distinction they normally rely on. To that purpose, the experimental tests under discussion are unhelpful, as they are designed in a way that overlooks any distinction between the agreeable and the beautiful. As consequence, they do not test the paradox along this sixth axis.

To sum up, experimental studies that question the existence of the paradox of taste do not challenge the existence of the paradox as it is commonly understood in the aesthetics tradition. Indeed, those studies confirm what aestheticians predicted all along: i.e. that people explicitly endorse subjectivist beliefs.[15] We can conclude that, for the time being, the paradox of taste is alive and well. It is just more complex that aestheticians and experimentalists alike have assumed.[16]

References

[14] See Zuckert (2002).

[15] We are not in principle against empirical testing of philosophical theses. But perhaps experimentalists (which the authors of this paper are not) should design different experiments if they want to test the intersubjectivist set of predictions associated with the paradox of taste. Such tests could focus on more implicit or behavioural outputs, such as those using eye-tracking (Fischer & Engelhardt 2019) or elicited production tasks (Devitt & Porot 2018), following among others' Martí (2009)'s criticisms. We take to have shown in this paper the importance of a dialectic between the so-called "armchair philosopher" and the experimentalist, each of them checking the other's work by using their respective sets of tools.

[16] [Acknowledgements]

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