

Folk Aesthetic Intersubjectivism

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Are people aesthetic intersubjectivists? That is, do they believe that two disagreeing aesthetic judgments cannot both be correct? According to Cova et al. (Cova and Pain 2012; Cova et al. 2019), aestheticians commonly assume that they do. To assess this assumption, Cova et al. have tested folk beliefs using experiments based on questionnaires. Since the vast majority of participants chose answers that are incompatible with intersubjectivism (Cova et al. 2019: 332), Cova et al. concluded that the traditional approach in aesthetics is “fundamentally misguided” (2019: 335).

Contesi et al. (2024) claim that Cova et al. have misunderstood the aesthetics literature: those experiments “confirm what aestheticians predicted all along” (2024: 246) instead of calling it into question. For, 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), that is, as something unconscious whose presence cannot be inferred from “explicit avowals” (2024: 243).¹

Contesi et al. support their understanding of the literature by citing passages from contemporary philosophers. I argue that these passages do not show that folk aesthetic intersubjectivism is regarded as implicit.²

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¹ For Contesi et al., the tension noticed by aestheticians, sometimes called *Problem of Taste* (“PoT”), is traditionally a matter of explicit subjectivism and implicit intersubjectivism (Contesi et al. 2024: 242–246). According to them, “Cova et al. conclude that the traditionally postulated PoT does not exist” (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. But this interpretation is not 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).

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 char-

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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. point out 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 Contesi et al. conclude that the belief “that aesthetic properties are objective” is implicit (2024: 242–3). (I shall hereafter neglect the possible difference between “objectivism” and “realism”. Nothing hangs on this.)

Such a conclusion, however, is not warranted. First, behaviours do not exclude, and can even entail, explicit beliefs. Asserting that *p*, for example, expresses the explicit belief that *p*. Second, maintaining that people behave as if they think objectivism is true does not prevent one from holding that people consciously believe that objectivism is true. In fact, one might think that people behave as if objectivism is true exactly because they consciously believe that objectivism is true.

Finally, even if Carroll actually held that people are objectivists only implicitly, it would still be far from obvious whether he would also take them to be *intersubjectivists* only implicitly. As both Cova et al. and Contesi et al. do (Cova 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, concluding that people are implicitly objectivists is compatible with assuming that they are explicitly intersubjectivists.

acterisations 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 — omitted by Contesi et al. —, the behaviour Carroll refers to seems to be solely linguistic, contrary to Contesi et al.’s contention that it is not.

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Contesi et al. 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.

Contesi et al. point out that Zangwill’s starting point is the “ordinary practice of making aesthetic judgements” and emphasise that the metaphysical commitment to realism is described as “tacit” and “presuppose[d]” (2024: 241–242).

From that, however, it does not follow that Zangwill considers folk realism to be implicit. First, a practice does not exclude, and can even entail, conscious realist convictions. Second, a commitment might be described as tacit, or presupposed, simply because it is not voiced in the relevant situation; one might nonetheless be conscious of it.

Finally, even if Zangwill actually believed that folk realism is implicit, it would still be far from clear whether he would think that folk *intersubjectivism* is implicit as well. As long as one distinguishes between intersubjectivism and realism, as I have said, thinking that people are implicitly realists is compatible with thinking that they are explicitly intersubjectivists.⁴

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

⁴Contesi 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”. But Zangwill is not claiming that Cova et al. are mistaken in their understanding of the aesthetics literature concerning the explicitness of folk intersubjectivism. Rather, he seems to be responding to Cova et al. by noting that, even if their studies show that people are not explicitly intersubjectivists, they might be so implicitly. Cova et al. are even aware of this possible response and acknowledge that ordinary people could, despite their experimental findings, be intersubjectivists at some deeper, implicit, level (2012: 254–258; 2019: 337).

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 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).⁵

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Contesi et al. also refer to Rabb et al. (2020: abstract), according to whom, it is commonly observed “that people generally behave like objectivists (arguing over judgments, making choices based on judgments of trusted critics, rejecting strong assertions of aesthetic equivalence)”.

But, 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).⁶

⁵ 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).

⁶ Mikalonytė, Doran, and Liao (2024) include Kivy (2015) among those authors that Contesi et al. take to claim that folk realism is implicit. If Contesi et al. read Kivy that way, then they would be mistaken. For Kivy considers the explicitness of folk realism a possibility (Kivy 2015: 151, 160).

I have argued that aestheticians' belief that people behave like realists does not warrant the conclusion that they also regard folk realism as implicit — let alone folk intersubjectivism. Acknowledging that ordinary behaviours seem to presuppose certain beliefs does not require one to maintain that such beliefs are unconsciously held. I conclude that future research should not take Contesi et al.'s understanding of the aesthetics literature for granted.

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