Greg Currie, Matthew Kieran, Aaron Meskin, and Jon Robson (Eds)

Should philosophical approaches to aesthetics and art be informed by science? If they should, to what extent? These questions have preoccupied philosophers since Aristotle, and as is apparent in this thought-provoking volume, continue to be debated by contemporary philosophers. Most of the eleven contributions are in themselves excellent pieces of analytic philosophical reasoning, and I will not summarise them here (the reader will find chapter summaries in the introduction). Instead I discuss some limitations of the book as a whole, which perhaps reveal deeper problems in philosophical approaches to aesthetics and to art.

Opening a volume on aesthetics and the sciences of mind, the interdisciplinary reader may expect to find a series of contributions written by scholars from fields that represent a variety of methods and a range of positions. Instead, all of the contributors are philosophers, most employ traditional philosophical methods to answer the questions posed by the book, and none defends a radically empirical position. This is not to say that all the contributors are hostile towards empirical approaches; at least five of them hold what the editors call a ‘moderate’ view, in which empirical evidence is considered relevant to aesthetics, but is rather limited.

To illustrate, consider the contribution of Dominic McIver Lopes. Using a large body of research in social psychology, McIver Lopes shows that reasoning plays little role in art appreciation, and that the reasons we provide for our aesthetic preferences are at best post-hoc rationalizations. He concludes that ‘some problems are best addressed through a priori conceptual analysis; others require empirical investigation’ (p. 34). This can indeed be called a moderate position, and the next contribution, by Sherri Irvin, may help the reader to better understand what is meant by addressing a problem through conceptual analysis. Using the same social psychological research as McIver Lopes,
Irvin identifies no less than six cognitive biases in the aesthetic experience, but argues that these are not a threat to philosophical concepts that are ‘appropriately construed’ (p. 51). Irvin distinguishes among several types of aesthetic experience and appreciation. Since most of them do not require awareness of one’s own mental states, Irvin concludes that empirical findings showing that people are largely unaware of their mental states when judging a work of art cannot threaten the philosophical concept of aesthetic experience. This appears convincing, except all it demonstrates is that a philosophical concept can be broken down into more concepts to which the empirical evidence no longer relates.

There are other ways to hold a moderate position, and one of them is to limit empirical work to a confirmatory role. At least three contributions (by Christy Mag Uidhir and Cameron Bruckner, Bence Nanay, and Jesse Prinz) review empirical findings that appear to support their own, new philosophical propositions. It is possible that particular philosophical claims can be backed up by empirical work, but this teaches us little on how philosophical and empirical approaches should interact with each other, whether in some cases one may be more appropriate than the other, or how they could together help us to develop a better understanding of aesthetics and the art experience – all questions that the reader may hope to be addressed, if not answered, in a book on aesthetics and the sciences of mind.

Some contributors make a clear case against the relevance of empirical approaches to aesthetics. For example, using neurophysiological studies, David Davies argues that empirical approaches are based on a misunderstanding of the philosophical enterprise. For Davies, philosophers are less interested in how people actually perceive works of art than in how they should respond to them. As empirical approaches cannot answer normative questions, they can do ‘little more than provide a more precise quantitative measure of facts about artworks’ (p. 65). This is a fair point, but it also reveals a deeper problem with how philosophers conceive interdisciplinary collaboration. In his contribution, Davies repeats three times (pp. 65, 67, and 74) that empirical approaches have little relevance for answering philosophical questions about art. But saying this does not leave much room for collaboration. It would be just like saying that philosophical approaches have little relevance to neurophysiological questions. In other words, it does not occur to Davies that psychologists and interdisciplinary researchers do not want to answer questions about the philosophy of art; what they want is to answer questions about art.

Other contributors illustrate another problem that affects philosophical approaches to aesthetics, which is an elitist conception of art appreciation. At