

How Art Works: A Conversation between Philosophy and Psychology¹

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EARLY PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO AESTHETICS

For centuries, aesthetics was effectively a branch of philosophy. The questions asked were philosophical ones that could be answered by reason and did not call for empirical evidence—questions such as: What is art? What is beauty? What makes a work of art great? However, some issues examined by philosophers of aesthetics were psychological in nature, and are thus open to empirical investigation—as for example Aristotle’s theory of the cathartic effect of tragic drama, or Kant’s ([1790] 2000) claim that aesthetic pleasure differs from other kinds of pleasure in being disinterested and not motivating us to act.

Turning to psychologists, Freud had much to say about aesthetics but his psychological claims were not readily testable. For example, Freud believed that pleasure from beauty derives from sexual pleasure: “There is to my mind no doubt that the concept of ‘beautiful’ has its roots in sexual excitation and that its original meaning was ‘sexually stimulating’” (1905, 156). He also believed that aesthetic pleasure derives from the release of tension resulting from the unconscious fulfillment of taboo wishes. Thus, we are drawn to works like *Oedipus Rex* because we resonate unconsciously to the theme of patricide: we identify with Oedipus and thereby unconsciously act out our own “oedipal” wishes. Freud’s claims are psychological ones but he did not try to test his views experimentally, and it is not clear whether his views could ever be tested in a way that would satisfy a scientist.

An entirely different approach to the psychology of aesthetics originated in Leipzig, Germany in the latter part of the 19th century with Gustav Theodor Fechner, one of the first experimental psychologists. As laid out in his book *Vorschule der Ästhetik* [Preschool of Aesthetics] ([1876] 1978), Fechner founded an inductive rather than deductive

1 Read 10 November 2018. Ellen Winner’s book *Invented Worlds* (1982) was an introduction to the psychology of art. Her most recent book is *How Art Works: A Psychological Exploration* (2018).

approach to psychological questions about aesthetics, bringing questions about aesthetic taste into the psychological laboratory. Rather than ponder the fundamental nature of the beautiful, he sought to determine which formal properties of artworks people find most pleasurable. In contrast to philosophers such as Kant, who speculated about the nature of the experience of beauty, Fechner and his colleagues and subsequent followers sought to determine what ordinary people deemed pleasurable. Fechner believed he was establishing an aesthetics from the ground up, based on the testing of taste in ordinary people, an approach which has been called “aesthetics from below.” His focus was on pleasantness (*Wohlgefälligkeit*)—something that in today’s art world we would certainly find banal.

Fechner’s methods were disarmingly simple. Participants were typically presented with two stimuli differing in but one respect (e.g., a light and a dark green of the same hue; a curved and a jagged line of the same length; two tones contrasting in volume; two rectangles of different proportions) and were asked which of the two they preferred. The properties of the stimuli garnering the most votes were concluded to be those that are most pleasant to perceive. In the spirit of carefully controlled experimental investigations (and in the tradition of German physicist Hermann von Helmholtz), simple, artificial stimuli were used in favor of actual works of art: a comparison between two paintings or two pieces of music would have been uninformative given that any two works of art differ in innumerable respects. And thus was born the field of experimental aesthetics.

Research in this tradition revealed that people generally prefer stimuli that are not too extreme. Many specific preferences were also reported: a preference for brighter over duller hues; for the green-blue area on the color spectrum, followed by the red end; for combinations of contrasting rather than similar colors; for rectangles of certain proportions; and for tones neither too loud nor too quiet (cf. Fechner and Höge 1997; Hargreaves and North 2010). The field of experimental aesthetics became more theoretical with the work of Daniel Berlyne (1971). This cognitively oriented psychologist focused not on which kinds of sensory properties people prefer but instead on how art acts on our arousal system to yield pleasure—either through a moderate elevation of arousal or by an arousal jag followed by pleasurable relief when arousal is reduced. But the method of using isolated components of works of art remained. Of course, this method assumes that isolated components of works of art can tell us about our responses to actual paintings, symphonies, etc. Many would dispute this claim.

By transforming the psychology of art into a field that used experimentation in addition to rational analysis, Fechner and colleagues and

successors made an important contribution. But there was a cost, and that was the focus on very narrow questions tested with simple, reduced stimuli. Philosopher Susanne Langer referred to these kinds of studies as “an essentially barren adventure” and “an aesthetic based on liking and disliking, a hunt for a sensationist definition of beauty, and a conception of art as the satisfaction of taste” (1948, 171). Psychologist Henry Murray had this to say about the overarching field of psychological theorizing and investigations: “Academic psychologists are looking critically at the wrong things. Psychoanalysts are looking with reeling brains at the right things” (Schneidman 1981, 343). This statement describes early psychological investigations of aesthetics: Fechner used rigorous methods to answer narrow questions; Freud proposed an overarching theory of the aesthetic response unhampered by empirical evidence.

COGNITIVE PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO AESTHETICS

Psychology’s study of the arts was reinvigorated by the “cognitive revolution” in the mid-20th century (Bruner 1990; Chomsky 1959; Miller, Galanter, and Pribram 1960). The cognitive revolution was a reaction to behaviorism, with its focus on sensation and stimulus-response theory and its refusal to posit mental representation. Thus, for behaviorists, language learning was a matter of forming stimulus and response connections (hear a sentence, imitate the sentence, gain approval), while for cognitivists like Noam Chomsky, language learning was a matter of acquiring (or coming prewired with) general mental rules and operating on these rules. The cognitive revolution took long-standing philosophical questions about the mind seriously (e.g., where does knowledge come from, how much are we born with, etc.), and proposed empirical methods of investigating such questions (Gardner 1987).

The cognitive revolution affected all major areas of psychology, including the psychology of aesthetics. Today the most interesting psychological studies of the arts are not those probing preferences for one perceptual stimulus over another. Instead, using accepted methods of the social sciences—observation, hypothesis testing, and experimentation—psychologists in recent decades have begun to address theoretical questions about the arts that can be considered offshoots of, or inspired by, questions originally posed by philosophers, critics, and other kinds of thinkers. Cognitive psychological studies of the arts blossomed, first in the area of the perception and neuroscience of music, followed by parallel kinds of work in the visual arts, with studies of the narrative arts taking hold more recently (Winner 2018).

The goal of this essay is to make the case for the relevance of empirical psychological evidence for certain kinds of philosophical questions about the arts—those philosophical questions that are inherently about the mind. The research I describe is deeply informed by my association (since 1973) with Harvard’s Project Zero, a research group founded by philosopher Nelson Goodman with the goal of investigating the cognitive psychology of the arts, and also by my lab at Boston College—the Arts and Mind Lab—where with my students I have carried out many empirical investigations of philosophical questions about the arts.

Table 1 lists philosophical questions about the arts on the left, and psychological offshoots of these questions on the right. In this essay, I have chosen to focus on three questions on the left—What is art? What makes art great? Do the arts make us more virtuous?—and examine their asterisked spin-offs on the right.

No empirical investigation can determine what art is, but we can investigate what kinds of intuitions people have about the nature of the category “art.” Whether lay intuitions are or are not consistent with any particular philosophical theory is a question that should, I maintain, be relevant for philosophers to consider.

The question of what makes art great is far too broad to be answerable with evidence. But suppose we narrow the question and ask, for example, whether original works are considered greater than their perfect copies and, if so, why? The factors that cause us to devalue perfect copies should be information relevant to philosophical thinking about what makes art great.

The question of whether the arts make us more virtuous is already framed as a psychological question open to empirical investigation. Evidence on this question is directly relevant to the philosophical question. Indeed, the question cries out for scientific investigation.

In my book *How Art Works* (2018), I examine how psychologists have investigated all of the questions on the right. Of course there are many other philosophically inspired questions about the arts that psychologists have investigated and for these, the reader is referred to Bullot and Reber (2013), Chatterjee (2014), Keen (2007), Menninghaus et al. (2017), Patel (2008), Peretz and Zatorre (2003), Starr (2013), Winner (1982), Zeki (1999), and Zunshine (2006), among others.

Philosophical Question	Empirically Testable Offshoots
What is art?	*What kind of a mental category is art? Does the category of art have psychological reality?
What makes art great?	*Why do we value originals over their perfect duplicates? Do we value works that took more effort over those that took less effort? Do we place greater value on works that look highly intentional? Do we value familiar works over unfamiliar ones? How do we judge skill in purely abstract art without realism as a guide?
How do the arts symbolize?	How does music (without lyrics) and abstract art express (or mean) anything at all?
Does art evoke emotion?	What kinds of emotional responses do we have to works of art, and do these responses differ from emotions that occur outside of the arts?
Do the arts make us more virtuous?	*Does our empathy for fictional characters spill over into empathy and compassion for those in our real lives?
Do the arts make us more intelligent?	Does engagement in the arts enhance IQ or other forms of academic performance? What kinds of broad habits of mind do various art forms help to develop?
Do the arts promote well-being?	Does engagement in the arts reduce stress and improve mood and if so how?

TABLE 1. Philosophical questions about the arts and their empirically testable offshoots.

WHAT IS ART?

Philosophers and critics have tried to define art in terms of one or more necessary and sufficient features, such as “significant form” (Bell 1913) or the expression of emotion (Collingwood 1938; Tolstoy 1930). Efforts to specify the elusive concept of art have yielded no consensus. The most frequently cited proposals from the last century hold that the concept is either open and unbounded (Weitz 1956) or delimited by the artworld (Danto 1964), or that the question “what is art?” should be replaced by “when is art?” because any object can function as art if we respond to it with a certain mindset (Goodman 1976).

When experimental philosophers have changed the question from “what is art?” to “what do people think is art?” (Kamber 2011; Pignocchi 2014; Winner 2018), results again reveal very little consensus.

For example, asked whether a dead tree or a cloud could be a work of art, even art experts often disagreed about what might seem to be such uncontroversial cases (Kamber 2011), with a healthy minority saying yes. These findings support Weitz's (1956) view of art as an open concept with no necessary or sufficient features. And this result is not surprising because since the 19th century artists have continually challenged our conceptions of what art is. Makers of non-art artifacts (tools, furniture, shoes) by contrast are hardly so intent on disrupting our tool, furniture, or shoe concepts. And of course, members of so-called natural kind concepts (like water and gold and dogs) do not and cannot intentionally try to disrupt these natural kind concepts (cf. Keil 1992; Kripke 1972; Putnam 1975; for discussions of kinds of concepts). The concept of art is continually being reshaped by its makers.

A study conducted in our Arts and Mind Lab has confirmed, using an implicit measure, that people have an open concept of art. Instead of asking people "is this or is this not art?" we asked people to judge how sensible various sentences about art and other kinds of concepts sounded (Rabb, Konys, and Winner 2019). Our sentences each began with a linguistic "hedge"—a modifier that qualifies the statement in some way. The task was to rate on a seven-point scale how sensible each sentence sounded (from not at all to very sensible). People heard the following three sentences, each time applied to a different kind of category:

Art (artifact)

Loosely speaking, that's art.
According to experts, that's art.
By definition, that's art.

Tool (non-art artifact)

Loosely speaking, that's a tool.
According to experts, that's a tool.
By definition, that's a tool.

Animal (natural kind)

Loosely speaking, that's an animal.
According to experts, that's an animal.
By definition, that's an animal.

Triangle (nominal kind)

Loosely speaking, that's a triangle.
According to experts, that's a triangle.
By definition, that's a triangle.

Our question was whether people treat the concept of art differently from all other kinds of concepts, including non-art artifact concepts. Our findings revealed that across all these kinds of categories, people believe it sounds better to say “loosely speaking” and “according to experts,” and worse to say “by definition,” when classifying something as art. So even though art is a kind of artifact like a tool, people do not treat art and tools the same way. “Loosely speaking” is better for art—because art has such loose boundaries. And “according to experts” is also better for art—since when something has loose boundaries we might need to appeal to experts. These findings tell us something about the *kind* of concept that art is. Namely, in comparison to other kinds of categories, art concepts have loose boundaries, are delimited by experts, and are not very definable. Most likely there are other concepts that are equally ill-bounded—such as wisdom, knowledge, science, professions, play, etc.

This study showed that using a measure of implicit beliefs about categories, we found a small but consistent effect indicating that the category “art” is considered more flexible and expert-designated than other categories, including non-art artifacts. Having loose boundaries and being determined largely by experts could merely reflect a category’s *lack* of fixed meaning, a concern for artifact categorization more generally (Malt and Sloman 2007). But a further test that we conducted supported a positive hypothesis: art categories (e.g., art, music) and formally similar non-art artifact categories (infographics, warning sounds) are both understood as communications, yet artworks alone are understood as not literally true and as meaning more than one thing—in other words, they are signals with multiple and indeterminate truth values (Rabb, Konys, and Winner 2019).

In a second kind of “implicit” task exploring our concept of art, we examined whether children distinguish art from non-art. The question of children’s conceptions of the arts was in fact the first question that I explored in my career (Gardner, Winner, and Kirschner 1975). Our early study posed explicit questions to children about the arts, revealing numerous misconceptions about the arts. Our question more recently was simply whether young children have an implicit category of art. Children certainly engage in art activities in preschool and kindergarten, and teachers use the term *art* around young children (“Time to make art!”). Has this allowed children to form an art category?

We showed children (ages three to eight) photographs of art and non-art artifacts and told them only that the depicted objects were made deliberately and with care. We then asked them a straightforward question: “What is this?” The non-art artifacts included familiar human-made functional objects like a ball, a book, a cup, and a

toothbrush. For example, while looking at a photograph of a hand-made toothbrush, children were told, "Lucas had some wood and plastic. He carefully sawed the wood and cut the plastic with some tools. Then he glued them together. This is what it looked like. What is it?" The art artifacts were photographs of abstract paintings and drawings. While looking at one of these, children were told, "Nora took some different colored paints and three jars of water. She mixed the paints with the water and then carefully applied the mixtures to a page with a brush. Here is how it looked at the end. What is it?" Some of the abstract images looked a little like something in the world, while others resembled nothing. We expected children to name the represented content whenever they could and so we were particularly interested in what they would say about purely abstract images.

Children had no trouble naming the hand-made toothbrush and other non-art artifacts correctly, as did an adult comparison group. But when it came to naming the artworks, even the oldest children rarely used the terms *art*, *painting*, or *drawing*. Instead, when they could imagine something representational in the image, they named the represented object ("It's a sun," "It's an onion with lines coming out"). When they could not see anything representational in the image, they often named the material ("It's paper and pencil," "It's lines, ink, a splatter of paint") or described the colors and shapes literally ("It's blue and pink spots"). The fact that they rarely used the terms art, painting, or drawing made us wonder whether this meant they lacked any art concept. To check, we persevered with a follow-up study using the same images and asking, "Why do you think he/she made it?" after each item. Children gave us appropriate utilitarian explanations for the non-art artifacts like a toothbrush ("To brush his teeth") but strikingly different kinds of reasons for the artworks. About half of the time children were able to come up with appropriate non-utilitarian reasons for why someone would make what we presented as an artwork, saying things like, "For it to look pretty," "He felt like drawing," "To look at it," or "To put on the wall."

The fact that children were reluctant to name a painting "art" or "a painting," but had no trouble naming a toothbrush "a toothbrush" shows that they have not yet acquired an explicit category, "art." But the fact that they gave utilitarian reasons for why someone would make a non-art artifact, and non-utilitarian reasons for why someone would make an art artifact, shows that they apparently recognize, at least implicitly, a distinction between these two kinds of artifacts. Moreover, many of the reasons they gave for making a picture are perfectly sensible: artists do make images just because they feel like it, because they want to display them, and because they want them to look

beautiful. These children were actually right on the mark! Though they do not name things as art, they understand at least some of the functions of art.

And so, while we may not be able to agree on whether certain boundary cases count as art, we make an implicit distinction between art and non-art artifacts, as shown in our study of linguistic hedges. And even young children make an implicit distinction between art and non-art artifacts, as shown by the non-utilitarian reasons they offered us for why someone would make a picture, as opposed to a toothbrush. These findings have implications for philosophy. We showed that lay beliefs about art are consistent with several well-known philosophical proposals (Danto 1964; Goodman 1968; Weitz 1956), and inconsistent with earlier philosophical positions that art can be defined by one or more necessary and sufficient features such as “significant form.” However, we also showed that the situation is not one of “anything goes.” People believe that artworks are communicative signals that—unlike other forms of information—are not literally true and mean more than one thing. And while people don’t agree on what counts as art, even young children hold a category of “art” in their minds that differentiates art and non-art artifacts in terms of function.

WHAT MAKES ART GREAT?

While philosophers and critics often make normative claims about the *right* way to evaluate art, the psychologist’s approach is to ask *how* people actually make evaluative aesthetic judgments. Toward this end, psychologists have investigated whether people judge artworks on the basis of their perceptual characteristics alone or also by their beliefs about the process by which they were made, the mind that made them, and the historical context in which they were made.

When people are confronted with works they are told took a great deal of time and effort to create (as opposed to having been made very quickly), they judge the effortful works as higher in quality (Kruger, Wirtz, and Van Boven 2004). When they are confronted with works they are told were made in a highly deliberate, intentional manner (as opposed to having been created accidentally), they judge the intentional works as more clearly instances of art (Jucker, Barrett, and Włodarski 2014). Thus beliefs about the process by which artworks are made significantly affect our aesthetic judgments.

The importance of beliefs about process are also revealed when we investigate the case of copies and forgeries. When people are told that works are originals vs. copies or forgeries, the originals always win out. Works labeled forgeries as well as the somewhat less value-laden term

“copies” are judged as lower on a host of dimensions: they are perceived as less good, less pleasurable, less extraordinary, and smaller, and their makers are judged as less talented (Seidel and Prinz 2018; Wolz and Carbon 2014). Note that this means that how works of art look at a given moment of time is not the whole story. Our judgments are strongly affected by *what we believe* about how they were made and who made them. This story is consistent with what we know happens when a beloved work is outed as a forgery. When a painting believed to have been by Vermeer was discovered to have been painted by Dutch forger Han van Meegeren, suddenly the painting was seen as sentimental and of inferior quality (Winner 2018). The work had not changed, but beliefs about the work had.

Philosophers have differed on the aesthetic value of forgeries. Denis Dutton (2009) claimed that a forgery is aesthetically inferior to an original because a work of art is not just an object—the end product of the artist’s work—but also the artist’s performance in making it. Thus, appreciation of a work must take into account not only the product but also the process of how it was made—that is, the kind of achievement it represents. A forgery represents a lesser kind achievement than an original. In 1935 Walter Benjamin published an essay called “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” in which he argued that our aesthetic response must take into account the object’s history, “its unique existence in a particular place” (Benjamin 2002). A forgery, he pointed out, has a different object history and thus lacks the “aura” of the original.

In contrast, other philosophers have insisted that we should not care, at least not aesthetically. Monroe Beardsley (1982) argued that we should form our aesthetic judgments only by attending to the perceptual properties of the picture before us and not by considering when and how the work was made or who made it. Alfred Lessing (1965) wrote that, “Considering a work of art aesthetically superior because it is genuine, or inferior because it is forged, has little or nothing to do with aesthetic judgment or criticism. It is rather a piece of snobbery.” Other philosophers, like Francis Sparshott (1983) and Sherry Irvin (2007), point to moral rather than aesthetic faults of forgery—forgery is deception, and thus distorts our understanding of art history. Thus, forgery would appear to be a problem for art history, but not for our aesthetic response.

But as mentioned, studies by psychologists show that just telling people a work is a forgery (or even the less negative term *copy*) causes them to rate that work lower on a host of aesthetic dimensions including quality and visual rightness. Clearly people don’t behave the way Beardsley and Lessing thought they should. And psychologists are

interested in how people do respond, not in developing a normative view of how they should respond. Individuals don't form their judgments only from the perceptual properties of a work of art since a painting does not lose its looks when it is outed as a forgery. So what is causing our appreciation to be diminished? One possibility is that our sense of forgery's moral evil unconsciously influences our aesthetic response. A second is that our knowledge of forgery's worthlessness on the art market has this same kind of unconscious effect. And a third is that we just always value an original over a copy because an original is by definition more creative. These are fairly obvious reasons for why we might devalue forgery. But if we could strip forgery of its connection with fraud and with worthlessness, would it then be valued equivalently to another kind of copy—one made by the hand of the artist who made the original? And if so, what would this reveal?

In the Arts and Mind Lab, we tried to answer this latter question by examining the case of forgeries that are perfect copies of preexisting works (rather than images created in the style of a famous artist, as in van Meegeren's case). We chose this kind of forgery in order to recreate as closely as possible the experience viewers have when their perception of the very same work shifts as their beliefs about that work change.

To be specific: We showed people two duplicate images of an unfamiliar artwork side by side, telling them that the painting on the left was the first in a planned series of 10 identical works by an artist (Rabb, Brownell, and Winner 2018). We told three different stories to our participants about the second work, on the right. Group 1 heard that the second image was by the artist; Group 2 that it was by the artist's assistant; Group 3 that it was by a forger. We specified that the assistant's copy had the artist's stamp on it and that having a team of assistants was typical artistic practice (hence not fraudulent). The auction price of \$53,000 was listed below all images (right and left) except for the forgery, which was listed as valued only at \$200. Thus, the assistant's copy was presented as no different from the artist's copy: worth the same on the market, equally moral and acceptable, and of course they were both copies, not originals.

We asked people in each group to rate the copy relative to the original on two kinds of dimensions: broadly evaluative (how beautiful, how good, how much do I like it) and historical-evaluative (creativity, originality, and influence—aspects related to the kind of achievement the work represented, and its likely impact). The critical comparison we then made was between ratings of the artist's copy (by Group 1) and ratings of the assistant's copy (by Group 2). No participant was asked to directly compare these two kinds of copies, as there would

have been a response demand to rate the one by the artist higher. Instead, each person rated a kind of copy relative to the original, and we then compared ratings of each kind of copy, asking whether they differed in how much they were devalued relative to the original.

We fully expected the forged copy to be the most devalued on both dimensions, and it was. But our key question was a comparison of how the assistant's vs. artist's copy were rated relative to the original. The assistant's copy was in effect a forgery without the deception and market value issues that accompany forgery. If deception, money, and the fact of being a duplicate are the only reasons we devalue forgeries, then the copy by the assistant should be devalued no less than the copy by the artist.

For the broadly evaluative dimensions of beauty, liking, and goodness, this is what we found. Participants behaved just as Beardsley and Lessing said they should, judging the work by its perceptual features, not its historical/contextual/process features. But on historical-evaluative ratings, the story was different. Even though people found the assistant's copy just as beautiful, good, and likeable as the artist's copy, they rated the assistant's copy as less creative, original, and influential than the artist's copy. The fact that the copy by the assistant is rated below the copy by the artist (despite their both being the same kind of achievement) tells us that we cannot fully account for our dislike of forgeries due to the three obvious factors listed above (that they are copies, that they are fraudulent, and that they are worthless).

What other factor might play a role? The essential factor appears to be quite simply *who* made the copy. Walter Benjamin's "aura" arises from our belief in essentialism—the view that certain special objects gain their identity from an underlying nature that cannot be directly observed (Gelman 2013). If I lose my wedding ring and replace it with a perfect replica, I am not fully satisfied because the ring has now lost its essence. In the case of works of art, we seem to hold the belief that artists imbue their works (even their copies of their originals) with an invisible essence at the moment of creation. We prefer the copy by the artist because it contains that essence. Just as an original by Picasso makes us feel like we are communing with Picasso and inferring something about his mind by looking at his brush strokes, a copy of a Picasso by Picasso can give us that same feeling. A copy by an assistant gives us a lesser mind to think about. We do not want to find out that we were actually communing with Picasso's assistant. And so our negative response to forgery cannot be fully explained by its being fraudulent, worth nothing on the market, and just a copy, but also to its lack of the artist's essence.

One might ask whether this finding is valid from a philosophical point of view. To that I would reply that our finding does not invalidate a normative philosophical position about how we *should* respond to a perfect fake—if the position is that we should attend only to the end product. The psychologist’s interest is not on how people should respond but on how they actually *do* respond.

DOES ART MAKE US MORE VIRTUOUS?

Colson Whitehead, author of *The Underground Railroad*, a powerful book about slavery, reported that a stranger told him, “Your book made me a more empathetic person.” And indeed the claim that the narrative arts make us more empathic seems highly plausible. We project ourselves into fictional characters and simulate what they are experiencing. Where better to step into the shoes of another than with works of literature, where we can meet a wide variety of people all so different from ourselves?

Philosopher Martha Nussbaum has written about the power of fiction to develop our powers of empathy: “It is impossible to care about the characters and their well-being in the way the text invites, without having some very definite political and moral interests awakened in oneself” (1997, 104). Philosopher Gregory Currie, however, disagrees with the idea that literature makes us better people. He proposes that when we expend empathy on fictional characters, our empathy for actual people is depleted (Currie 2016). Philosopher-turned-psychologist William James seems to have had the same suspicion. He asks us to imagine “the weeping of the Russian lady over the fictitious personages in the play, while her coachman is freezing to death on his seat outside” (James 1963, 143). After leaving the fictional world, have we paid our empathy dues?

Psychologists have found some evidence that fiction makes us more empathetic (see Winner 2018, chap. 13). After reading a story about an injustice committed against an Arab-Muslim women, participants were less likely to categorize angry, ambiguous-race faces as Arab (but whether this translated into behavior beyond the testing room we do not know; Johnson, Huffman, and Jasper 2014). After reading an excerpt from *Harry Potter* about stigma, children reported more positive attitudes about immigrant children at their school. But this change of heart only occurred for children who identified with Harry, and only after a discussion of the reading with their teacher—which might have been the deciding factor (Vezzali et al. 2015). And after reading a story about a character behaving prosocially, adults were more willing to

help the experimenter pick up accidentally dropped pens (Johnson 2012). But this is very low-cost helping, and we have no idea how long such an inclination to help lasts. One limitation of most of these studies is their reliance on contrived stories expressing a clear moral norm. As a rule, “real” literature does not provide moral lessons and does not tell us what to think and how to act. Perhaps we should not ask the narrative arts to make us better. Literary critic Suzanne Keen concludes her book *Empathy and the Novel* by saying, “A society that insists on receiving immediate ethical and political yields from the recreational reading of its citizens puts too great a burden on both empathy and the novel” (2007, 168).

We need more carefully crafted research on this question, based on intensive immersion over time with real fiction. The kind of reading that is most likely to enhance our powers of empathy will likely require discussion with others in order to connect the story with our own self and life. And we should most likely expect only quite specific links: reading Dickens might change our attitudes about the plight of the poor; reading *Les Misérables* might change attitudes about the plight of prisoners incarcerated for stealing to survive; and reading Colson Whitehead might change attitudes about racism. This kind of research—intensive reading of novels over time followed by with discussions with other readers, along with the search for specific kinds of links rather than a general empathy boost—remains to be carried out. A significant proportion of the population of Britain read Dickens’s novels and stories over several decades—they were immersed in Dickens. Perhaps this reading did indeed strengthen progressive forces in Britain. To find out, we need more and stronger studies of this kind of question.

CAN PSYCHOLOGY SPEAK TO PHILOSOPHY? SHOULD PHILOSOPHERS LISTEN?

Purists may stiffen at the idea of muddying philosophical questions with data and statistics. And of course, not all philosophical claims about art can be answered empirically. No experiment could answer ontological questions such as “what is art?” or “what is beauty?” Philosopher Alva Noe (2016) argues that we should think of art as a research practice, a way of understanding the world and ourselves. Such a claim is not something to test in the psychological laboratory, but perhaps is a way to help us respond to art.

However, philosophical questions about how art works on us and how we think about art are inherently psychological ones. I’m referring to questions such as whether art make us more virtuous, more

intelligent, happier, or on what basis we make value judgments about art. Empirical answers to these questions should have a direct bearing on their philosophical counterparts. Other philosophical questions are not directly psychological but they lead to psychological offshoots which can be tested empirically: thus, “what is art?” has as its offshoot, “what is our mental category of art?” As I have argued here, empirical studies have revealed that ordinary people have a fairly open concept of art, in line with philosopher Morris Weitz’s position. I have also tried to demonstrate that our disparagement of forgeries cannot be sufficiently explained by the combination of their status as non-originals, their fraudulence, and their lack of monetary value: over and above these factors, forgeries are devalued because they lack the essence of the artist. And finally, I have suggested that whether fiction makes us more empathic cannot yet be answered, and must await further empirical study. What we need is an ongoing conversation from which both philosophy and psychology benefit and that will be edifying to other scholars, to students, and perhaps even to artists.

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