

be used in a course. If an introductory level logic textbook has a good explanation of how to use the EXIST ELIM rule, what might an instructor add? Sometimes it is useful for an instructor to re-explain what's in the textbook. For this text, in cases where the author doesn't comment on the quality of the argument she has extracted from a philosophy text, an instructor could also do this. But a much more important thing is doing supervised student practice, just as in a logic course. As there often is with a typical symbolic logic textbook, there are exercises to be done in the classroom and for homework. Indeed, what the research evidence shows is that lots and lots of sequenced and supervised practice is central to learning the skill of argument analysis and improving critical thinking capacities.⁴ You won't learn how to juggle or play the harmonica just by having someone else do this or lecture to you about how to do it.

⁴ Claudia María Álvarez Ortiz, *Does Philosophy Improve Critical Thinking Skills?* (Unpublished M.A. thesis. The University of Melbourne, 2007).

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Aesthetics as Philosophy of Perception

BENCE NANAY

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In this monograph, Bence Nanay draws on his work in philosophy of perception and aesthetics to explore how the “conceptual repertoire” (2) of the former might usefully be applied to the latter. His stated aim is not to reduce aesthetics to philosophy of perception, although this is at odds with certain claims, e.g., that “it is a promising avenue of research to consider debates and problems about aesthetics *to be really about ...* philosophy of perception” (10, my emphasis). Moreover, the field that he views these debates as being ‘really’ about involves a limited, albeit currently popular, approach to perception—cognitive science and philosophy of mind based on empirical psychological research—and does not consider other approaches in philosophy of perception with historical ties to aesthetics.

In Chapter 1, Nanay outlines his aims and his understanding of key terms. For Nanay, ‘perception’ goes beyond sensation—i.e., the stimulation of sensory organs—though his inclusion of quasi-perceptual mental imagery (8) and his distinction between perceptual and non-perceptual phenomenologies (52–53) are based largely on which neural processes are active in which experiences, and it is not clear why these should not be included in sensation—i.e., why sensation does not involve more of the nervous system than peripheral sense organs. Also, while he distinguishes aesthetics from philosophy of art, he settles on a working definition of aesthetics as “the sum total of topics where we use the term ‘aesthetic’” (5), even though this would include what he differentiates as ‘philosophy of art,’ since ‘aesthetics’ is frequently used in this field. Furthermore, Nanay focuses on a subset of topics in which ‘aesthetic’ is used—not surprisingly, those involving perceptual or quasi-perceptual experience and distributed attention—and mostly considers experiences of, and attention to, *artworks*, rather than examples from environmental or everyday aesthetics, which seem better suited to show that aesthetics concerns perceptual or attentional experience *in general*.

In Chapter 2 (a version of Nanay 2015a), Nanay sketches a theory of ‘aesthetic experience’ in terms of aesthetic *attention*—viz., object-directed focused attention plus distributed attention to the object’s properties. Subsequent chapters each approach a different issue in aesthetics through the notions of focused and distributed attention: in Chapters 3 through 6, he focuses on issues of picture perception, aesthetic (or ‘aesthetically relevant’) properties, formalism, and the uniqueness of artworks and aesthetic objects; in Chapter 7 (a version of Nanay 2015b), he considers whether vision—or rather, given Nanay’s central concern, distributed attention—is historical; in Chapter 8, Nanay turns to consider questions that are not obviously ‘perceptual,’ and that involve non-distributed attention, e.g., how we identify with fictional characters and experience narratives.

Nanay aims his book to be accessible to readers without backgrounds in aesthetics or perception; while he succeeds through mostly non-technical writing, the tone is sometimes still too technical for non-(analytic)-philosophers, and at other times a bit too informal, giving the impression that the writing of some sections was rushed or transcribed from talks where a conversational tone would be more appropriate. This is not merely a stylistic preference; one result of this conversational tone is that certain concepts central to Nanay’s discussions—e.g., ‘perception,’ ‘aesthetics,’ ‘aesthetic experience’—get used loosely, implying that readers will understand what he means without him spelling it out, which risks obscuring a possible loss in conceptual precision by implying that it is there.

Two other worries are worth noting. First, while Nanay’s conclusions are often plausible—distributed attention *does* seem useful for explaining many experiences we call ‘aesthetic’—many of his arguments ultimately rest on intuitions, where this is often masked by references to empirical psychology which give the appearance of being ‘scientific’ and rigorous (despite the philosophical implications to be drawn from empirical studies not being uncontroversial). Second, the substance of his account is not as new as is its presentation in the vocabularies of cognitive science/psychology, with precursors in Monroe Beardsley and John Dewey, despite Nanay’s claim to offer an account “diametrically opposed” to the latter’s (9). Unless I’m missing something, it is not clear why Dewey’s or Beardsley’s accounts of aesthetic experience are not compatible with Nanay’s aesthetic attention, or why these accounts would not lead to similar conclusions if rephrased in the new vocabulary.

Despite its accessibility, the book will be of interest primarily to a philosophical audience; the issues it addresses may not interest artists or reflective and committed percipients of art, and, except for Chapter 7 on the historicity of vision and possibly Chapter 6 on uniqueness, the issues discussed are not going concerns in art history, cultural studies, or other disciplines where aesthetics has cross-over appeal. While those working on the problems in aesthetics or philosophy of art that Nanay discusses will find his solutions interesting and valuable, the book seems meant mainly to convince philosophers of perception or those from other areas of philosophy that aesthetic questions are not ‘fringe’ questions by showing their relevance for philosophy of perception, which Nanay notes is currently more respected in analytic philosophy than aesthetics (2). This may not be the best strategy to defend aesthetics, as it risks reinforcing the stigma that aesthetics is a ‘fringe’ discipline by implying that it needs to be redeemed by another discipline seen to be more at the ‘core’ of ‘serious’ philosophy.

This book will certainly appeal to those working on the issues Nanay discusses in Chapters 3 to 8, and to philosophers of perception sympathetic to cognitive science or empirical approaches and curious about the aforementioned issues, although readers

with a broader interest in aesthetics in general—e.g., in environmental or everyday aesthetics—or philosophers of art with a historical bent might prefer Nanay’s two papers on which Chapters 2 and 7 are based.

References

Nanay, Bence

2015a “Aesthetic Attention,” *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 22 (5-6): 96–118.

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2015b “The History of Vision,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 73 (3): 259–271.

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The Mystery of Evil: Benedict XVI and the End of Days

GIORGIO AGAMBEN, translated by Adam Kotsko

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What possible interest can contemporary philosophers like Alain Badiou, Massimo Cacciari, and Giorgio Agamben all have in an obscure passage from Saint Paul’s epistles (2 Thessalonians 2: 1-11), which describes the signs and wonders accompanying the exposure of “the mystery of evil” (the workings of Satan?) and “the man of lawlessness” (the Antichrist?) that will precede, the apostle says, “the coming of Our Lord Jesus Christ”? And what possible relevance can this scriptural passage have to the resignation of Pope Benedict XVI, in which Agamben finds, not a craven abdication before the exposure of scandal and corruption, but a courageous response to the crisis of legitimacy facing the Catholic Church, presaging the end of days?

Although Agamben’s answer to the first question risks becoming as obscure as Saint Paul’s epistle, the second can be simply answered. On April 22, 2009, four years before his abdication, Pope Benedict delivered a sermon, based upon the commentary on *Revelation* of the fourth century theologian, Tyconius, in which the Church was described as inextricably divided between two spiritual bodies, one dark (*fusca*), one bright (*decora*), which would finally be separated by a “‘great *discessio*’ ... between the Church as body of the Antichrist and the Church as body of Christ” (12). Agamben’s tract implies some connection between Benedict’s abdication and that great *discessio*, although the precise connection remains obscure. But if Benedict’s gesture was meant to precipitate an apocalyptic event, it would appear to have gone astray, since the revelation of the Antichrist, like the Second Coming, appears to have failed to arrive.

The failure of the Antichrist and of the Messiah to arrive is attributable, Agamben suggests, following Paul’s epistle, to a sinister metaphysical agency, called ‘the *katechon*’ (Greek: who or what withholds, restrains, brakes, etc.), which exerts some mysterious influence upon contemporary events, and either saves us from the Antichrist, or else prevents us from being saved by the Messiah. Or maybe both. And although Agamben