THE AESTHETIC DIMENSIONS OF MODERN PHILOSOPHY

a conversation with Andrew Bowie

This wide-ranging conversation between Andrew Bowie and Andrés Saenz de Sicilia took place shortly after the publication of Andrew's book, Aesthetic Dimensions of Modern Philosophy *(OUP, 2022). It focuses primarily on the intersection of philosophy and art, highlighting areas where the abstractions of analytic philosophy can distort many of the phenomena it tries to explain. The conversation also explores the status of objects, the subject-object divide, modern alienation, and what it may mean to find oneself at home in the world.*

Andrés Saenz de Sicilia (AS): I want to begin by asking you about the idea of aesthetic dimensions. This idea impacts on how philosophy is often understood to operate and what its priorities are. What are these aesthetic dimensions and how can we understand them?

Andrew Bowie (AB): The 20th century German philosopher Ernst Cassirer identifies an intrinsic connection between language and art: language is about revealing the world, about bringing things to light. So is art. In a related manner, language isn't something which is produced fully consciously. We don't invent it. And artistic creation isn't conscious in the sense of, "I'm going to do X"; rather, it's doing X because it *makes sense*. Cassirer links the two very closely. And once you start to do that, you realize that this way of looking at language doesn't play a big role in most of what goes on in a lot of philosophy courses or in the practice of philosophy as a mainstream subject. Philosophical texts generally aren't read taking aesthetic issues into account.

To highlight a couple of counter-examples: Wittgenstein's private language argument is the sort of exploration you could have in a novel, voices talking to each other without one central perspective on the truth about private language. You can derive an argument from it, but you might actually think we could carry on this dialogue and still leave the issue open. Or there can be greater pleasure and insight generated by reading Hegel in terms of the way that the text *moves* rather than in terms of what he's trying to tell us about the world (Adorno likens Hegel's texts to Beethoven's music – they are dynamic, based on tensions and resolutions, and so on).

Most fundamentally, the aesthetic dimensions involve rethinking how we consider meaning in philosophy

and how, if you think of meaning simply in semantic, verbal terms, you're missing out much of what goes on in language, and, more generally, in our understanding of and making sense in the world.

AS: I really enjoy the way you invoke this idea of polyphony that you take from Mikhail Bakhtin: that there are many different voices which don't necessarily add up to one single univocal assertion at the end, and that there is this tension within texts just as there is within music and different artworks. I think that's a really interesting way of looking at philosophy.

MEANING ISN'T SOMETHING WE DRAG OUT OF THINGS. IT'S THERE ALREADY. THE QUESTION IS WHICH KIND OF MEANINGS WE WANT TO PRIORITIZE TO MAKE SENSE OF WHAT WE'RE DOING

AB: So much philosophy is assumed to be about argument and winning arguments. That's why, especially in analytical conferences, it can become such a vicious subject. People often argue really nastily, each person assuming the other is completely wrong. But philosophy doesn't come up with theories that are accepted like well-confirmed scientific theories. And if that's the case, then surely we need to attend more to its being an open-ended subject. Analytic philosophers admittedly tend to assume what they're saying isn't definitive, but the manner in which it's said quite often seems to assume that it *is*! Interestingly, although everyone disagrees about art, there's also a huge amount of agreement necessary in art – agreement on ways of relating to the world and doing things – without which it doesn't make any sense. If you're playing music with people, there's so much you have to be already agreeing on for it to happen at all. Maybe this is a better model for philosophy? To make everything just about winning an argument isn't the best way to approach the world.

AS: So you are connecting philosophical views and perspectives with what you see as inherent to a lot of artistic practices, e.g., a kind of open-endedness and experimentation, exploration, and a revisability of those artistic forms, which are there in the different traditions of art.

AB: Exactly. And I have inherited this idea from the Early German Romantics – Schlegel, Novalis, Schleiermacher. They say that the crucial thing which connects art to the absolute is precisely that you can never *say* the absolute; there's always more to be said. And that's not a depressing or nihilistic thought; it's the opposite, in fact. As Schlegel notes, if we knew the final truth, *what would we do?* Where would the point of life be!? In artistic practice (in my case playing as a musician), you want to get it absolutely right and perfect. You know you can't, but that's the point. That point of orientation which is never achievable changes how you relate to what you're doing. It's how you don't lose motivation, as you know it can always get better.

Similarly, when interpreting a text there is always a way you could read it better than the previous reading. In this respect, Gadamer was right to argue that reading a text is a dialogue with the text that carries on through the text's history – and in this process what it means will change. The semantic views that are so popular in analytic philosophy of language don't have enough space for that, because they don't think about *texts*; they think about sentences and truth conditions, and so on. I've always found that this doesn't add up. It's not how much of language works.

AS: You write about how this very truth-focused way of doing philosophy is a response in many ways to certain anxieties that arise in modernity around the loss of foundations, the loss of a secure worldview, so on. It's interesting that you're able to turn that loss of finality and that loss of foundation into something which can actually be positive and productive, both for philosophy, and also in creative practice and in art as well.

AB: Instead of seeing the loss of foundations as being something we desperately need to shore up – be it through theology or some foundational philosophy – we can say that it's what opens horizons that would otherwise have been closed. The end of theology doesn't

have to be a disaster. But, of course, it does create this sense of anxiety because once you have got rid of theology as the grounding of meaning, meaning hasn't got a straightforward ground. As Heidegger shows us, however, we are always *in* meaning anyway. Meaning isn't something we drag out of things. It's there already. The question is which *kind* of meanings we want to prioritize to make sense of what we're doing. You don't need some theoretical underpinning such that something would only make sense because of a general theory. It doesn't work like that. It's more particular.

To take a philosophical example central to my recent book, modern epistemology, with its obsessive attempts to overcome scepticism, fails to take account of how we actually go about making sense. Doubts about knowledge and truth continue to play such a major role in philosophy, but how do these relate to valuing and making sense of human life? (John Dewey has vital things to say about this issue.) How do these doubts relate to the fact that we don't feel at home anymore in the modern world? How *do* we come to feel at home in world? As I get older, my experience is that music makes me feel more at home in the world than anything else, although, of course, it could be other forms of art, such as painting, or immersing yourself in Proust.

AS: You explore the question of sense-making in relation to much broader social and economic conditions under which both philosophy and art take place. How do you think art and the practices of creating and interpreting art change under conditions of industrialized modern capitalism?

AB: In modern philosophy we talk about relationships between subject and object, but those terms shift their meaning as the world changes. The emergence of capitalism, for example, changes the status of objects. Once objects become commodities, they're not the same thing. Even nature becomes an object of exploitation. This changes how we value everything. Schelling already says in the 1790s that there's a problem in looking at nature as just an object to be controlled. In this sense, he is one of the first people to think ecologically. He is also one of the first people to say that art is central to philosophy because it takes on the side of ourselves that relates to things in ways which are not just cognitive, but are about how we inhabit the world. Romanticism offered a view of nature in which it suddenly becomes a value in itself as opposed to something to be exploited. The rise of the landscape painting at that time seems to me philosophically very significant, even though philosophy can't fully explain why. The picture painted by philosophy in which knowledge is what counts most isn't a very good picture of how we make meaning in life and give account of our relationships to the world.

HOW DID WE CREATE A CIVILIZATION WHICH OBJECTIFIES TO SUCH AN EXTENT THAT INTER-HUMAN RELATIONS HAVE ENDED UP WHERE WE ARE AT THE MOMENT?

I also think that there are a lot of resources in Heidegger's ontology to help us think about our relationship to objects, and figure out how and why we should value them. People forget that their basic relationship to objects can be in using them – not in a sense of exploiting them, but as a kind of symbiosis. When I play the saxophone, it's not an object – it becomes part of me. I become something different. That may sound a bit pretentious, but it's true. My saxophone only becomes an *object* when something goes wrong – for example, when a keypad sticks – and then you start to look at it in a different way. Heidegger is giving us a picture of how we have got our relationship to objects wrong. He sees this in our attempts to control things, something that is reflected in the historical domination of the object by the subject in modern philosophy. Both Heidegger and I would agree that epistemology is a real problem in this regard. In its focus on how we know what we know, it just endlessly repeats various attempts to refute scepticism, or to classify and subsume everything under generalities.

AS: Given this troubled relationship between subjects and objects in philosophy, what kind of objectivity can or should philosophy aspire to?

AB: It is clear what scientific objectivity aspires to, which is good predictions and good control of what you're trying to explore. Dewey is excellent on this. However, it is unclear what kind of objectivity philosophy aspires to, even though it often claims to be trying to achieve similar outcomes to science. That's one of the reasons Cassirer is a crucial thinker for me. He argues that the very formation of modern notions of objectivity is a historical event relating to the decline of certain kinds of theology at a certain point in time. I'm interested in the story of how that version of objectivity became so dominant that everything has come to be seen in terms of science. Analytic philosophy pretends to be scientific quite a lot of the time; it aspires to say things that are objectively true. But it doesn't have the predictive capacity or community of accountability that gives well confirmed science its objectivity.

As I see it, philosophy should take a meta-view of subjectivity and objectivity and explore how these categories shift. Take the shifts in both subject and object that have occurred under capitalism. As we have already discussed, capitalism is about the objectification of the world. And when that happens, what we find is an increasing focus on the subject as a response to a world which is becoming increasingly objectified. The subject becomes central because we're asking questions about our relationship to the world, seeking value, going within, and so on. While the subject became central in Descartes for epistemological reasons, my interest is in how it becomes central for *aesthetic* reasons that relate to how subjects constitute value and meaning, and the extent to which they are free in doing so or are subject to objective pressures.

AS: This connects back to what you were saying before about the dominant forms of philosophy and this obsession with yielding results that have a sort of pseudo-objectivity modelled on scientific research. This idea that you are only making progress with philosophy if you can come to such results is very different to the other idea of a more iterative and open-ended practice of philosophy. There might still be some sense of objectivity, which would be more about the process itself and what the process generates. Hegel talks about the inseparability of product from process, and that seems to be very much missing in those dominant forms of philosophical research.

AB: I think that's right. This obsession with science seems strange to me. I'm the last person to query great science. I think it's wonderful. It's changed everything. I'm alive because of modern medicine. But why that should be the predominant focus of philosophy increasingly escapes me. I think it's a symptom of alienation. It's a symptom of what has gone wrong in how we relate to each other. It's ultimately a political issue. How did we create a civilization which objectifies to such an extent that inter-human relations have ended up where we are at the moment? And why does so much philosophy have so little to say about that? A lot of what has gone wrong has been a result of processes of objectification, domination by capital, and the failure of cultures to sustain alternative resources for meaning. The aesthetic dimensions I try to show are crucial to the development of modern philosophy still offer such resources.

Andrew Bowie is Professor Emeritus of Philosophy and German at Royal Holloway University of London. He has published very widely on philosophy, as well as musical and literary topics. He is also a jazz saxophonist. His books include German Philosophy: A Very Short Introduction *(2010),* Theodor W. Adorno: A Very Short Introduction *(2022), and* Aesthetic Dimensions of Modern Philosophy *(2022). Twitter:* @andrewsbowie *& Soundcloud:* soundcloud.com/andy-bowie

Andrés Saenz de Sicilia is a British-Mexican sound artist/performer, philosopher and researcher. He holds a PhD from the Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy, Kingston University London and teaches at Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts London. His works and performances have been featured in programs at the British Museum, Victoria & Albert Museum, Café OTO, Whitechapel Gallery, BBC Radio 3, Museo d'Arte Contemporanea di Roma, Villa Lontana, Flat Time House and ZKM Center for Art and Media, Karlsruhe. Website: andressaenzdesicilia.com *& Twitter:* @asaenzdesicilia