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01. AESTHETICS BETWEEN PHILOSOPHY AND THE HUMANITIES

THE ART OF LIVING: JOHN DEWEY AND THE MELIORISTIC CHARACTER OF AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

Abstract Today aesthetics is a fertile branch of research which tries to transcend the narrow art-oriented approach, widening the focus of attention to include objects, phenomena and activities of our contemporary world that had been traditionally neglected or forgotten. Challenges to the traditional scope, nowadays aestheticians recognize the continuity between fine arts and experiences from other domains of life. They discuss about the complex circumstances and coexistent ways of life and claim the aesthetic character of different aspects in our everyday life. Thus, aesthetics can not only be considered a subdiscipline of philosophical studies, but an essential study of humanities.

In this context, this presentation attempts to defend that John Dewey's insights into aesthetic experience and its melioristic nature seems to offer fresh insights into the field of current aesthetics. Dewey holds that there is a relation between theory and practice, employing a concept of experience which interprets aesthetics in terms of creativity. He develops a contextualist approach which begins in "the raw", i.e. in the events and objects that arise in everyday life. Therefore, aesthetic experience does not come about in a finished world, but in one where human beings continuously lose and reestablish harmony with their surroundings.

Following contemporary analysis of human creativity, the aim of this paper is to analyse the meliorism that runs through Dewey's aesthetics. On numerous occasions he expresses his firm belief that the human condition can be improved and that aesthetic experience has a vital role in attaining that goal. That is, he thinks that aesthetic experiences promote a harmonic way of life. Many scholars have regarded Dewey's emphasis on everyday life as one of the most powerful ideas in his thought. However, an exclusive focus on *Art as Experience* has presented a somewhat misleading picture and a gap in the literature on Deweyan meliorism. Through this presentation I try to fill this gap, firstly, exploring the main characteristics that make a common experience into "an aesthetic experience", a *modus vivendi* that gives license to creativity. Secondly, I deal with the question of imagination, emphasizing action and the infinite possibilities of our lives. This paper is accomplished by a final reflection on Deweyan notion of aesthetic experience today as a way of experiencing a meaningful life, as an art of living.

Index terms: *Aesthetic Experience; Creativity; Everyday Life; Imagination; Meliorism.* /

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays aesthetics presents new avenues of inquiry and has become a common concern for numerous scholars across the world due to the profound worldwide changes in contemporary culture and art. Aestheticians attempt to transcend the limited scope of aesthetics began during the latter half of the twentieth century with a renewed interest in daily's life. In this way, John Dewey's philosophy offers fresh insights into the field of aesthetics, which has been extended to include objects and experiences that have traditionally been ignored. His proposal, ahead of its time, tries to restore the continuity between art and life, laying the foundations for an everyday philosophy and defining the notion of aesthetic experience as a harmonic interaction between living creatures and their surroundings. Thus, Dewey conceives of aesthetic experience not as a special attitude or distinct encounter with works of art, but as a previous phase of knowledge; it is the kind of experience which merges in the immediacy of situations.

The vital core to Dewey's aesthetics is not an analysis of properties of art objects or aesthetic events, but instead concerns the interaction which constitutes our vital process. Our everyday lives entail different experiential qualities depending on our orientation toward the activity or event in question. This kind of orientation fits into the important term of meliorism. This pragmatist notion alludes to that particular interaction which attempts to improve our lived experience, and, as Scott Stroud has addressed¹, have an essential role in aesthetic experiences.

The aim of this paper is to show this melioristic character of aesthetic experience from a reflection which will explore two main points: what makes a common experience into "an aesthetic experience" and his notion of imagination. I begin defining the main characteristics of "an experience" and describing its vital role in improving our everyday life. Secondly, I would like to address fundamental aspects of imagination (the role in Dewey's aesthetics, its functions and the dynamic organization) for explaining how living creatures develop a cumulative progression toward fulfillment experiences. That is, they are not permanent constants, but variable and changed situations of creative process that constitutes our lives. Finally, I will emphasize how important it could be for people on the street to re-focus interest in Dewey's notion of meliorism because this can make the process of life aesthetically possible.

AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE AS A *MODUS VIVENDI*

Dewey starts *Art as Experience* criticizing the aesthetic theory which has separated the existence of the works of art as products that exist apart from human experience. Artistic objects have been isolated from both conditions of origin and operation in experience and have been set in a remote pedestal, "a wall is built around them that render almost opaque their general significance, with which

aesthetic theory deals”ⁱⁱⁱ. Nevertheless his notion of “aesthetic experience”, as I attempt to show, is a multifaceted and multilateral concept that alludes to a creative tension which human beings experience every day. For Dewey, the term “aesthetic” is no intruder in everyday experience, but a quality which makes reference to the intensified development of a normal experience; every experience is potentially an aesthetic experience. Therefore, what makes a common experience into “an aesthetic experience” is a variety of features that made it more unified, consummatory, and meaningful.

The first characteristic is its unity, in other words, every successive part flows freely, without seam or gap, into what ensuesⁱⁱⁱ. We have “an experience” when the material experienced runs its course to fulfillment^{iv}. That is, experience has a unity that gives it its name, although it shows different phases and emphases^v. Dewey says “such an experience is a whole and carries with it its own individualizing quality and self-sufficiency. It is an experience”^{vi}, and this is not an unusual fact. Aesthetic experience is a full act what happens in our lives when we are both most alive and most concentrated on the engagement with the environment. What distinguish aesthetic experience is the qualitative unity and a “closure in consummation, not a cessation”.

In “an experience”, the conclusion is not merely an ending, but the result of an organizing process, which reveals the meaning of the human encounter with the world. Therefore, such experiences may have pauses or silences, but not gaps or breaks. It is important to note that this is a pervasive quality, “the existence of this unity is constituted by a single quality that pervades the entire experience in spite of the variation of its constituent parts”^{vii}. However, this unity is not be constituted by the fact that the consummation is anticipated throughout the experience, as Sherri Irvin has suggested^{viii}. Through this pervasive quality, Dewey is indicating an organizing quality, the temporality of the event as a whole^{ix}.

Rhythm is the second main feature of aesthetic experience. For Dewey rhythm is a universal scheme of existence, underlying all order in change. Nonetheless, rhythm does not involve a fixed model, but a constant variation. Dewey characterizes it as a quality of life and nature. Human beings are affected and participate in nature’s rhythms, from sunrise and sunset to circadian rhythms^x. Thus, rhythm is not only a phase of artistic product; it is the harmonization which directs the interaction with our environment. In Dewey’s words rhythm is “as an ordered variation of manifestation of energy”^{xi}.

Life supposes energy and attention, but also pulses or stimulus; life is a process of interacting and interchanging through which man dynamically organises his environment. For that reason, Dewey gives the same value to change and order; in fact, if there is a greater change or variation, there will be a more interesting aesthetic response. Aesthetic perception is a full act of perceiving what happens in

our lives when we are both most alive and most concentrated on the engagement with the environment. At every single moment, every living creature experiences the world and organises the energies, involving past experiences and creating new meanings.

Hence, the notion of rhythm leads to the quality of form. For Dewey, form is the organization of energies; that is, a dynamic configuration which human beings develop in problematic situations. According to him, we experience tensions which require new responses. Therefore, form is not found exclusively in works of art, but in everyday aesthetic experience as well. That is, it is the operation of forces that carry the experience of an event, object, scene and situation to its own integral fulfilment^{xii}.

This configuration is the aesthetic cause of its creative feature, but also it, is vital and functional: it is whereby men develop their lives; and also it is a way whereby men could experience a fulfilled life. In other words, it is the way in which human beings can make our experience more unified and adaptively engaged with the situation in spite of all its obstacles and tension. And this process does not cease, being alive implies to create new relationships in different contexts with different consequences. Every phase, every conclusion, even every pause, are important parts of that configuration^{xiii}.

The last feature of aesthetic experience alludes to a conscious attitude toward the activity or interaction. In *Art as Experience* Dewey explains that we carry out aesthetic experience by “dealing consciously and expressly with the situation in which we find ourselves.^{xiv}”. He explicates this particular orientation using the notion of “mind”. According to Dewey:

Mind is primarily a verb, it denotes all the ways in which one deals consciously and expressly with the situations in which we find ourselves. Unfortunately, an influential manner of thinking has changed modes of action into an underlying substance that performs the activities in question^{xv}.

Therefore, according to Dewey, mind implies every mode of variety of interest in, and concern for, things: practical, intellectual and emotional. That is, it never supposes denotes anything self-contained, isolated from the world of persons and things, but is always used with respect to situations, events, objects, persons and groups^{xvi}. It alludes to the engaged interaction of human beings with their surroundings. In Dewey’s words: “mind denotes a whole system of meanings as they are embodied in the workings of organic life. Mind is a constant luminosity; consciousness is intermittent, a series of flashes of different intensities.^{xvii}”.

These characteristics show the melioristic quality of aesthetic experience. As I have attempted to expose, they present how meliorism entails a focus on the present situation and try to improve the experience through a creative and concentrated interaction. In this kind of interaction human attention moves in a unified direction instead of wandering, it is controlled by the pervading qualitative unity.

And, as Dewey asserts, not only must this quality be in all parts, but it can only be felt, that is, immediately experienced^{xviii}. Thus, aesthetic experience can be taken to be a process of cultivation, a *modus vivendi* which provides an artful approach to our everyday life.

THE CREATIVE FACULTY OF IMAGINATION

According to Dewey, nature, our surroundings, is not immutable and eternal, but a changing environment where problematic situations arise, contributing to a reconstruction of meanings. The faculty responsible for this reconstruction is the imagination. Dewey attributes an imaginative faculty to human beings, emphasizing action and the infinite possibilities of our everyday life. But, what is the imagination and how does it operate?

As Thomas Alexander has exposed^{xix}, Dewey's treatment of imagination is difficult to summarize. In *Experience and Nature* he defines imagination as an organ of nature; "it is the appropriate phase of indeterminate events moving toward eventualities that are now but possibilities"^{xx}. Imagination emerges when a habit is impeded or an action frustrated and human beings become aware of the intentional structure of the activity. In other words, it arises in consciousness as a crisis of the activity, and is pregnant of full aesthetic force. Imagination creates alternative possible meanings of situations and secures a restoration of activity's on-going unity.

Therefore, as Kalle Puolakka has defended^{xxi}, imagination is "the faculty that keeps the experience intact and structures the experience into an articulate, complex unity". That is, imagination guarantees the unity of the experience, seeking to understand the actual in light of the past experiences and the possible in an experimental way. In Dewey's words, it is "a way of seeing and feeling things as they compose an integral whole"^{xxii}.

This power that unifies all the constituent parts providing a new meaning, as a way of experiencing that offers new understandings of the situational nature of the world. Dewey describes as an aesthetic mode of understanding, a pervasive quality which permeates our everyday experience when we become conscious of the extended environment of a situation. In this sense, imagination has become a center faculty in pragmatist ethics, as Kalle Puolakka has pointed out, Dewey had already found imagination to be "the chief instrument of the good"^{xxiii}

However, in this paper I attempt to highlight its creative character. Imagination is the faculty which leads human beings to develop a melioristic interaction with their surroundings. Through our imaginative encounters with the world, people can live life as an artist, experiencing the problems, disruptions and tension as an opportunity to develop his creativity.

CONCLUSION

As Thomas Alexander has noted^{xxiv}, Rorty's interpretation of *Experience and Nature* and Dewey's later works has promoted a portrait of "two Deweys": the cultural critic and the metaphysician. This reading, which presents a "good Dewey" and a "bad Dewey," has a long history even on its own home ground. Whether scholars take a stance on the "two Deweys" issue or not, these views of Dewey often remain unrelated and opposed. Recently, Alexander has challenged this approach by going back to Dewey's primary concern: the philosophy of experience in terms of aesthetic experience. Following Alexander's inspiration, these pages present Deweyan philosophy in general and aesthetics in particular as a school of "the art of life." That is, he is not searching for some essential reality, but seeks to cultivate harmonious relationships with one's surroundings

As pointed out above, Dewey's notion of aesthetic experience can be understood as a *modus vivendi*, a creative and engaged interaction with our surroundings. This contextualist approach feeds into a philosophy of life that takes events and situations as its key factor, seeing them as dynamic presences. His aesthetic theory links aesthetic experience with everyday cultivation through his notion of imagination and promote a way of developing a meaningful life.

To conclude I would like to briefly highlight the importance of my proposal. Several authors have regarded Dewey's emphasis on cultivating our everyday life as one of the most powerful ideas in his thought. However, through this presentation I try to claim the human creativity which makes possible to experience an artful life and place aesthetics not only as a subdiscipline of philosophical studies, but an essential study of humanities.

BIOGRAPHY

Gloria Luque Moya graduated from the University of Málaga (Spain) with a B.A. in Philosophy (2009) and with a B.A. in Social and Cultural Anthropology (2011) from the National Distance Education University (Spain). She obtained her doctorate from the University of Málaga in 2017 with a dissertation on John Dewey's Aesthetics. She currently works as a postdoctoral researcher in the Department of Philosophy at the same university. She previously had a National Predoctoral Research Grant in the field of Aesthetics (2008-2009) and a National Doctoral Research Grant for training to be a Lecturer (2011-2015). She has published around twenty peer-reviewed articles in Spanish and international scientific journals and has participated in numerous international conferences such as 19th International Congress of Aesthetics, whose communication was awarded with a Young Scholar Award. Her primary research interests are Pragmatism and John Dewey's Philosophy, Transcultural Aesthetics and Everyday Aesthetics.

ⁱ Scott Stroud, *John Dewey and the Artful Life: Pragmatism, Aesthetics and Morality* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011).

ⁱⁱ John Dewey, *Art as Experience, The Later Works of John Dewey: 1925-1953*, vol. X (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press. Dewey, 1989), 9.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 43.

^{iv} *ibid.*, 42.

^v In Dewey's words: Because of continuous merging, there are no holes, mechanical junctions, and dead centers when we have an experience. There are pauses, places of rest, but they punctuate and define the quality of movement. They sum up what has been undergone and prevent its dissipation and idle evaporation. (*Ibid.*, 46).

^{vi} *Ibid.*, 42.

^{vii} *Ibid.*, 44.

^{viii} See Sherri Irvin, "The Pervasiveness of Aesthetic Experienced", *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 48, 1(2008), 33.

^{ix} Thomas M. Alexander, *John Dewey's Theory of Art, Experience, and Nature: The Horizons of Feeling*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 29.

^x Circadian rhythm is a biological process driven that displays an endogenous, entrainable oscillation of about 24 hours. These rhythms are driven by a circadian clock, and rhythms have been widely observed in all living beings. Endogenous means that rhythms are determined genetically and are generated by own organism. Although organisms have an on-going relationship with external cycles, adjusting their process to environmental process.

^{xi} John Dewey, *Art as Experience, cit.*, 169

^{xii} *Ibid.* 142.

^{xiii} *Ibid.*, 177.

^{xiv} *Ibid.*, 268.

^{xv} *Ibid.*

^{xvi} *Ibid.*, 267-268.

^{xvii} *Ibid.*, 276.

^{xviii} *Ibid.*, 196.

^{xix} Thomas M. Alexander, *The Human Eros: Eco-ontology and the Aesthetic of Existence* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 170.

^{xx} John Dewey, *Experience and Nature, The Later Works of John Dewey: 1925-1953*, vol. I (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press. Dewey, 1989), 57.

^{xxi} Kalle Puolakka, "Dewey and Everyday Aesthetics. A New Look". *Journal of Contemporary Aesthetics* 12 (2014), <http://www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=699>.

^{xxii} John Dewey, *Art as Experience, cit.*, 267

^{xxiii} Kalle Puolakka, “Dewey and Everyday Aesthetics”, *cit.*

^{xxiv} Thomas M. Alexander, *The Human Eros.* *cit.*, 3.