

John Dewey and Friedrich Nietzsche: Aesthetics of Life

Gloria Luque Moya
University of Málaga

“Those who cannot feel the littleness of great things in themselves are apt to overlook the greatness of little things in other.”¹

Kakuzo Okakura, *Book of Tea*

Traditionally, Aesthetics has tended to focus on encounters with the Fine Arts, paying more attention to projects of defining art with capital letters, and characterizing aesthetic experience as disinterested and contemplative. Nevertheless, in the last few decades, there has been a movement away from the art-centered approach and toward a restoring of the continuity between experiences of fine art and experiences from other domains of life. This movement has brought about a new discipline in Aesthetics, called Aesthetics of Everyday Life. Theorists in the aesthetics of everyday claim that ordinary objects and activities have aesthetic properties and “can give rise to significant aesthetic experiences”². In this way, Friedrich Nietzsche and John Dewey could be include in this movement if we consider that: a) they criticize how Fine Arts has tended to glorify and set upon a far-off pedestal; b) and both emphasize how aesthetics has the same roots than ordinary activities, than pulsional life. However, due to criticisms and difficulties³, in these pages I focus on Aesthetics of Life, the celebration of life which both authors share and claim.

This point in common beginning a fruitful dialogue between them, in spite of their historical contexts, post-kantian and Hegelian European Philosophy and American Pragmatism resepctively, and different kind of thoughts. These authors never met and read each other, but both overcome modern aesthetics which considered art for art’s sake and stress the role of art because of its power to reevaluate human experience and their surroundings. In this sense, this paper explores two main points: the root of aesthetics and the creative and dynamic role of art. I begin drawing a comparison between deweyan naturalistic humanism and nietzschean physiology of art. Secondly, I

¹ Okakura, Kakuzo. *Book of Tea*. Berkeley: Stone Bridge Press, 2007, p. 6.

² Sherri Irvin, “Aesthetics of Everyday Life”, in Stephen Davies, Kathleen Higgins, Robert Hopkins, Robert Stecker and David Cooper (eds.), *A Companion to Aesthetics* (Blackwell Companions to Philosophy), 2nd edition, Wiley-Blackwell, 2009, p. 136.

³ Cf. Yuriko Saito’s criticism about Dewey’s aesthetic experience. *Everyday Aesthetics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, especially pages 44-48.

would like to address fundamental similarities between the creative role of artist and human beings through Dewey's notion of experience and Nietzsche's conception of will to power (*Wille zur Macht*). Thus, through this paper's presentation, I wish to show how, despite the divergences, these proposals provide an overview of art's creation which attempt to demonstrate the rich background of our lives from which we create art as a way of leading a meaningful life.

1. THE ROOTS OF AESTHETICS

The proposal of naturalistic or physiological background recovers the continuity of aesthetic experience or aesthetic process with normal processes of living. Western tradition has sharply distinguishes art from real life and remit it to a separate realm such as museums, galleries, theatres or concert halls; in contrast, this naturalism or physiology has been addressed from a different starting point. Both authors, Dewey and Nietzsche, root aesthetics in our biological nature and emphasize how this is crucial to develop aesthetic experiences. However, they present differences in their elaborations due to their different aims: Dewey's task was "to restore the continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events, doings and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience"⁴; whereas Nietzsche aim was to seek a way of thinking different from the logical terms and idealistic categories, and he found it in the physiology of art. For Nietzsche, aesthetics is applied physiology, "every art, every philosophy may be viewed as a remedy and an aid in the service of growing and struggling life; they always presuppose suffering and sufferers"⁵.

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 separated from both conditions of origin and operation in experience, "a wall is built around them that render almost opaque their general significance, with which aesthetic theory deals"³. Thus, in the first chapter, called "The Live Creature", Dewey gives the biological fundamentals to place aesthetics in life, a life that "goes on in an environment, not merely in it because of it, through interaction with it"⁴.

⁴ Dewey, John. *Art as experience. The Later Works, 1925-1953*, vol. X. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 1987, p. 9.

⁵ Nietzsche, Friedrich, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kauffman, New York: Vintage Books, 1974, §370, p. 328.

Similarly, Nietzsche proposes a physiology of art in 1886-1887 in his notes about his projected work *Will to Power*⁶, where show a new way of approaching to aesthetics. In this work, Nietzsche tries to root aesthetics in the physiology, body, impulses, to achieve an understanding of art without concepts⁷. Thus, Nietzsche present a physiologic perspective to seek a creative solution for problems of traditional aesthetics. This supposes a turn to the proper reality; a turn to becoming which constitutes our lives, and it sounds like Dewey's proposal. Therefore, despite the undoubted divergences in their thoughts, I begin drawing a comparison between deweyan naturalistic humanism and nietzschean physiology of art through different points, which shows their similarities:

(1) Firstly, both authors root aesthetics in the biological background, from which makes possible our most distinctively human accomplishments. For Dewey, aesthetics has its roots in organic needs and human activities: every moment human beings are exposed to conflicts, and every moment we try to restore harmony, to satisfy the conflict resolution and it is art in germ. "The biological commonplaces are something more than that; they reach to the roots of the aesthetics in experience"⁸. Similarly, Nietzsche claims the role of *physis*, putting it forward as an expression and transfiguration of force and power. Thus, *physis* can not be understood as mere nature, but as body; seeking drivings reactions and organic functions, that we share with animals, and from which we create art.

Art reminds us of states of animal vigor; it is on the one hand an excess and overflow of blooming physicality into the world of images and desires; on the other, an excitation of the animal functions through the images and desires of intensified life; - an enhancement of the feeling of life, a stimulant to it.⁹

(2) Secondly, the influence of Darwin's ideas and concepts is clear in both authors, as well as the development of natural sciences. Both thinkers develop this biological turn in the last stage of their philosophies, although they are interested in this organic explanations in all their lives and show a continuity in their thoughts. Nietzsche introduces physiological conditions as features of aesthetic experience since his early

⁶ To expand on information about Nietzsche's references to the term physiology of art cf. Santiago Guervós, Luis Enrique de, *Arte y poder*, Madrid: Trotta, 2004, p. 473, footnote 1.

⁷ Dewey, John (1978), *op. cit.*, p. 25.

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 20

⁹ Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kauffman and R.J. Hollindale, New York: Vintage Books, 1968, §802, p. 422.

work. However, it was in his later work where he developed more interest in natural sciences and biological explanations, presented an organic foundation of art. What is more, Nietzsche was not only influenced by Darwin, but also by other authors as Helmholtz, who explained that the spatial perception as an original need of human beings' physiological organization, or W. Roux, from which Nietzsche took the role of organics in the individual and proposed the relationship of organs as an example of the struggle of opposing forces.

Likewise, Dewey was deeply influenced by Darwin and natural sciences, as reflected in work *The Influence of Darwin in Philosophy*. For Dewey, although, prior to Darwin, natural sciences had a great influence in philosophy, *The Origin of Species* introduces the idea of change. "The influence of Darwin upon philosophy resides in his having conquered the phenomena of life for the principle of transition."¹⁰ Against traditional categories, such as mind-body, there is no perfect live or creature, but organism are continuously suffering changes, adapt new forms due simply to constant variation in the struggle for existence. Thus, for Dewey does not have sense to idealize universe, much less aesthetics. In order to understand aesthetic in its ultimate and approved forms, says Dewey, one must begin with it in the "raw", in "the ordinary forces and conditions of experience that we do not usually regard as aesthetic"¹¹.

(3) Finally, Dewey and Nietzsche share their particular vision of organism and body respectively. Through these notions both authors want to emphasize the dynamic transactions and struggles of forces between organism and environment. They were fascinated by this concept of organism or body in the evolutionary biology, in this becoming of multiple forces and tensions.

Nietzsche considers body wonderful (*Wunder der Wunder*)¹², the center or human beings, in which awareness is a secondary product. Wisdom is a corporal rationality, because is in the body where we can find our creative forces. Nonetheless, when Nietzsche introduces the term body does not want to put emphasis in a radical materialism perspective or a physical view, but in that complex and dynamic structure. For Nietzsche, spiritual and knowledgeable functions, aesthetic categories and judgments have their roots in organic functions. Thus, in the preface to *The Gay*

¹⁰ Dewey, John, *The Influence of Darwin in Philosophy*, New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1910, p. 8

¹¹ Dewey, John (1987), *op. Cit.*, p. 10

¹² Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Kritische Studienausgabe* : Nachgelassene Fragmente 1884-1885, 11, p. 577.

Science, which Nietzsche added in 1886 together with the fifth book of the same work, he asks himself whether, “on a grand scale, philosophy has been no more than an interpretation of the body and a *misunderstanding of the body*”¹³

That is, in order to survive and make the world understandable, habitable and comfortable, human beings had to create a permanent, identical and stable world. Nietzsche asserts that human via is the creation of the concepts of thing (such as substance, cause, effect), even though what truly exists is, because, according to Nietzsche’s conception of body, nothing exists apart from a permanent and endless flux of change, transformation. In his own words, in aphorism 121 of *The Gay Science*, “We have arranged for ourselves a world in which we are able to live – by positing bodies, lines, planes, causes and effects, motion and rest, form and content; without these articles of faith no one could endure living! But that does not prove them. Life is not an argument”¹⁴.

In the same way, for Dewey, our lives are developed in variable and disruptive situations and places that need a sense; hence human beings signify different phases of their lives at every moment. Dewey’s outlook of aesthetics is transactional, the organism is constantly involved in the process of acting on, adapting to, or assimilating to the world. For that reason, Dewey, similarly to Nietzsche, gives a great value to change, to flux, because, as Thomas Alexander said, «meaning is only possible in a world which can be disrupted, in which ambiguity, change, and destruction play a role»¹⁵.

Thus, for Dewey, organism, that is, an organization of energies, lives an ongoing process of interchanging of tensions and forces through which dynamically organises his environment. And this includes attention, and also pulses or stimulus. Likewise, Nietzsche defines organism as a physiological organization, the experience of the world is a product of the interacting between organism and his surroundings. Body or organism are understood as that creative organization which human beings develop in their lives.

Briefly, I contrast some of the main ideas which share Dewey’s theory of art and Nietzsche’s proposal of physiology. Obviously, this presentation does not accurately

¹³ Nietzsche, Friedrich (1974), *op. Cit.*, Preface 2.

¹⁴ Nietzsche, Friedrich (1974), *op. Cit.*, §121

¹⁵ Alexander, Thomas. *John Dewey’s. Theory of Art, Experience and Nature. The Horizons of Feelings*. New York: SUNY, 1987, p. 125.

reflect the deep of their thoughts, in fact this was not my intent, but it gives an approach to the common points which constitutes that biological background. In spite of the differences in their explanations, tasks, contexts and interests, both thinkers recognized the deep root of aesthetics, including works of art or fine art, on life; what is more, they consider life as a work of art.

2. THE CREATIVE AND DYNAMIC ROLE OF ART

Art has been typically defined emphasising different elements (such as disinterested contemplation, artists' creative process, works of art and so on) but these authors' proposals present art as the most authentic activity of doing and of what is done. Both present fundamental similarities between the creative role of artist and human beings through their notions of experience and will to power. These terms are key in the thought of these authors and we can find them through their works, but the point is that both thinkers proposes them at the end of their lives as the elements that give meaning and unify all their works. In this way, I consider these notions in the context of their later works, *Art as Experience* and *Will to Power*, paying special attention to the creative and dynamic role which these proposals presents in human lives.

Dewey's experience, as he explains in *Experience and Nature*, has a meaning totally different from empiricist tradition, which considers as passive perception¹⁶. In contrast, Dewey exposes experience as the interaction between organisms and their surroundings, which implies a creative reorganization of energies. That is, living creatures are continuously suffering rhythmic alternations between disunity and unity, between harmony and chaos in their lives and this is not simply a passive activity or perception, but a meaningful creative process similar to that of an artist. Like the organised flux of nature with decreasing and increasing movements, people give meaning to their lives with organised changes, restore the harmony in their environment. Thus, this struggle or lost of equilibrium in our lives implies to adopt a meaning, to fulfill the process of an experience (which has different parts: beginning, body, and a conclusion). With Dewey's words, "Experience is the fulfillment of an organism in its struggles and achievements in a world of things, and it is art in germ"¹⁷. Our lives are developed in

¹⁶ This supposes a great problem to understand Dewey's philosophy, because words like experience or nature have philosophical connotations, which have persisted during history of Philosophy. To read more about this point cf. Alexander, Thomas, 2013, *The Human Eros. Eco-ontology and the Aesthetics of Existence*. New York: Fordham University Press.

¹⁷ Dewey, John (1978), *op. cit.*, p. 25

variable and disruptive situations and places that need a sense; hence human beings creatively signify different phases of their lives at every moment.

However, Dewey show how many experiences in our lives do not suppose a meaningful creative process, but a dispersion or distraction. Thus, Dewey introduces the notion of aesthetic experience or “an experience”¹⁸. In contrast with disperse experiences, we have an experience when the material experienced runs its course to fulfillment. That is, experience has a unity that gives it its name, although it shows different phases, with different emphases. Dewey says “such an experience is a whole and carries with it its own individualizing quality and self-sufficiency. It is an experience”¹⁹, and this is not an unusual fact. 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.

Similarly, Nietzsche introduces a new term, a new meaning in philosophy, will to power (*Wille zur Macht*). This idea contains two perspectives: on the one hand, will is the plurality of instincts in an ongoing process to establish the supremacy of one of them; on the other hand, power is not the goal, it is not something that organisms want it or need it, but something that organisms have it and should perform it. Thus, will means an ongoing struggle of forces, which in a state of disequilibrium, that is power, tries to restore the harmony; and this is life. Nietzsche asserts that, originally, will to power was a chaos, a multiplicity of impulses (*Triebe*) and possibilities, and through activity human beings try to discharge those forces, those drives. In this way, it is important to focus that Nietzsche does not think that human beings can achieve an equilibrium, because this will suppose the end of life. That is, will to power presents life as an ongoing and endless process of struggles and it is showed in human lives but also in nature. For that reason, Vattimo exposes how if we understand the world as will to power, we are thinking it aesthetically, world as a work of art which is continuously making²⁰.

This led us to the aesthetic dimension of will to power. For Nietzsche, will to power is aesthetics because of its creative task through which we regulate our relations with the changing world. That is, will to power, as creative force, is art; and the essence of art is that creation of new configurations of will to power in ordinary lives. Art is the world of the eternally self-creating and the eternally self-destroying, “as a play of forces and

¹⁸ Cf. Dewey, John (1978), *op. cit.*, Chapter III “Having an Experience”.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 42.

²⁰ Vattimo, Gianni, *Nietzsche: An Introduction*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, p. 104.

waves of forces, at the same time one and many, increasing here and at the same time decreasing there; a sea of forces flowing and rushing together, eternally changing, eternally flooding back”²¹.

Hence, both authors locate art in the immediate present of being fully alive, and it opens a new way to examine how artists, but also human beings intensify the immediate living. In this sense, I conclude this section with three main similarities which both thinkers develop and which summarize the role of art:

- (1) Firstly, both propose art as the most authentic activity of human beings because of its creative force. This dynamic power makes possible all human activities, and it is our most distinctive feature. In this way, they consider their aesthetic proposals not only as a new theory of art, but as an attempt of a new interpretation about what is happening; as we can see in Zarathustra, which asserts at the beginning of his speech that will to power is the main force in all human activities.
- (2) Secondly, both reject the subordination of art to knowledge. Modern Philosophy had developed a metaphysics and theory of knowledge that reject life for concepts, static ideas, terms, which get it under control. In contrast, they try to overcome epistemological and metaphysical approach, restoring life as the center of philosophy and aesthetics. They claim that life supposes change, becoming, flux, and this is which makes it wonderful.
- (3) Finally, through Dewey’s notion of experience and Nietzsche’s term of Will to power, both authors unify their thoughts and merge a continuity in their works. Without this aesthetic approach we can not understand their philosophies, their new proposals for life, as Thomas Alexander says in reference to Dewey²².

3. CONCLUSION: ON THE “DUENDE”?

By weaving together the thought of Nietzsche and Dewey I have explored their common proposal for Aesthetics of Life, which can not be merely considered as theory of art, but a key aspect which provides continuity and unity in their thoughts and propose a Philosophy of Life. In this sense, the interest of these pages has been emphasized this connection between two thinkers who reinvigorate aesthetic dimension

²¹ Nietzsche, Friedrich (1968), *op. cit.*, §1067, p. 550.

²² Alexander, Thomas (1987), *op. Cit.*, p. 266

of our lives from their different philosophical projects. Therefore, despite the divergences, I have tried to show how these proposals provide an overview of art's creation as a way of leading a meaningful life. Dewey's notion of experience and Nietzsche term of Will to power is too complex to be explained briefly in these pages. For that reason, to conclude I would like to sum up this presentation giving an example of this creative force with an aesthetic notion from Spanish folklore, the *duende*, through Lorca words.

In 1933, Federico García Lorca presents a paper about "a buried spirit of saddened Spain" in the Friends of Art Society, in Buenos Aires. In this presentation, Lorca takes this notion from the Spanish folklore and flamenco and transforms it in aesthetics category. In this way, it is important to emphasize that the *duende* is not a question of skill, but a style that's truly alive. In contrast to intellectuals and scholars, Lorca proposes this spirit from the ordinary as that creative force or struggle in human lives. He asserts that we must arise the "*duende*", which lives in us, this mysterious force of immediate creation. We must abandon a humdrum existence and let the indescribable "*duende*" perform.

This 'mysterious force that everyone feels and no philosopher has explained' is, in sum, the spirit of the earth, the same *duende* that scorched Nietzsche's heart as he searched for its outer form on the Rialto Bridge and in Bizet's music, without finding it, and without seeing that the *duende* he pursued had leapt from the Greek mysteries to the dancers of Cadiz and the headless Dionysiac scream of Silverio's *siguiriyá*.²³

Thus, Lorca drops notions as muse (from German tradition) or angel (from Italian tradition) and focus on *duende* instead. However, similarly to Nietzsche and Dewey's proposals, it is not easy to define and find. As Lorca says, seeking the *duende*, there is neither map nor discipline²⁴. Each art has a distinct mode and form of *duende*, having their roots in that creative force or tensions which all human beings share and Nietzsche and Dewey, with their different perspectives, put forward. The *duende* always implies change, new forms, the sweet smell of new meanings, energetic responses in which body is the thread.

Lorca also rejects the role that has occupied Fine Arts and, through an ordinary notion, recovers the creative aspect of our lives. We can ask where is that "*duende*"? but, as Nietzsche and Dewey do, we only can find an answer through the manifestations that continuously become in our lives and, however, go unnoticed.

²³ García Lorca, Federico, *Theory and Play of the Duende*, translated by A.S. Kline, online version: <http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Spanish/LorcaDuende.htm>

²⁴ *Ibid.*

The *duende*....Where is the *duende*? Through the empty archway a wind of the spirit enters, blowing insistently over the heads of the dead, in search of new landscapes and unknown accents: a wind with the odour of a child's saliva, crushed grass, and medusa's veil, announcing the endless baptism of freshly created things²⁵.

²⁵ *Ibid.*