

Making the Difference: John Dewey and the Naturalization of Aesthetics

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Despite appearances, the project of naturalizing aesthetics has preceded the emergence of cognitive sciences and computational models. In philosophy, empiricism opened the way for the first time, and Darwinism helped us to go further, as Dewey showed it in *Art as Experience*. Nevertheless this type of naturalization has little to do with the naturalization of mind as it is conceived in the main trends of cognitive sciences. I do not intend to play one theory against another, and so to continue the same kind of debate. It is probably better to analyse what is at stake in such discussions, and perhaps to take another path, in order to see if we might preserve what is worth expecting from aesthetic experience, without to be afraid by the idea of an « aesthetic mind » (Schellekens, Goldie [2011]; Desideri [2011]).

1. *Naturalisms*

«Aesthetic Mind» is a nice slogan, but what does it mean exactly? If it amounts to assume the idea of a brain encapsulating along with its usual functions and potentialities, the type of qualities involved in what we consider as specific in aesthetic actions and reactions, then the « aesthetic mind » shall appear as an extension — and may be an enrichment — of the inspiration running through philosophy of mind and cognitive sciences since about half a century. But does not it mean also that aesthetic experience finds in brain its causal determinations, and therefore belongs to the various ways of acting and reacting characteristic of our mental hardware or structure, its laws and potentialities? Such an assertion can be interpreted in different ways, depending on what it aims more precisely. Is it a question of highlighting and explaining the human brain's resources on the basis of its laws and organic potentialities or to conceive it as

connected to a computational model coming from the developments of artificial intelligence (Dennett [2005])?

The naturalization of aesthetics finds in such models some of its main motives, contrasting with the philosophical concerns aiming to subtract aesthetics from the models coming from natural sciences and their way of proceeding¹. Of course, there is not only one way of naturalization. Without questioning specifically the evolutionist theories or the naturalization of intentionality, we must observe that there are at least two versions which can be taken as significant for our concern : one is based on a model of mind involving a lot of capacities explaining special behaviours characteristic of human beings (taken as universal), while the other (on a more relativistic way) ascribes much more importance to culture and social interactions in a similar way Dewey suggested when he wrote: «the way whose philosophy relate to physics and biology is not a direct one; it depends on social sciences». It does not mean that special behaviours or reactions like aesthetic ones do not depend at all on physical or material processes, but it assumes that what they mean (for us) is not understandable independently of what is rooted and develops in society.

These two conceptions are both consistent with a naturalized approach. The second (Deweyian) is based on a Darwinian *continuity* leading to other paths than the traditional ways used in philosophy, and able to escape the main misunderstandings connected with aesthetics. It concentrates into two lines of thought (explained at length in *Experience and Nature* and in *Art as Experience*²: 1) It tends to clear away the mystery that surrounds art by relating it to conditions and presuppositions inherited from history and depending on its place in various historical and cultural contexts; 2) It tries to restore and to better understand the continuity of art with other fields of the human experience. The main outcomes of this story are both critical and theoretical. It opens on aesthetic investigations taking rid of the main misunderstandings incorporated in it, and it gives opportunity for evaluating what these new approaches in cognition have to

¹ This trend is deeply entrenched in the history of aesthetics, from Kant to phenomenology. It is linked to the main dualisms involved in it.

² Dewey (1934; 1925). These two books are complementary. *Art as Experience* contains important remarks on the concept of experience and its consequences in social and individual life. *Experience and Nature* shows what relates art to practical activities.

pay to such misunderstandings. It advocates for a position that refers back to back what we could call the «recalcitrant» theories, and the «conquering» cognitivism³.

2. «Partager le sensible»

There is a common denominator between the different versions of an «aesthetic mind»: it is the reduction - or the conversion - of aesthetic experience into mental processes, states or episodes giving the opportunity of empirical investigations and allowing scientific explanations in the light of neurosciences⁴.

The debates connected with these investigations are based on different kinds of investigations, but they deal with *the same object*, because the only opportunity for such investigations depends - in both cases - on the possibility to conceive and to give a particular existence to some specific experiences with a special status. Either there is a kind of phenomenon specific enough for requiring special investigations able to discover the specific laws on which they depend; or else the same phenomenon — although they do exist and we are convinced of their existence — is related to processes and laws belonging to the field of investigation of empirical sciences, without finding in them any ultimate and exclusive explanation. These two assumptions are equally compatible with empirical researches, but the first (even if we oft confuse them) contrasts directly with the idea of the *irreducibility* of aesthetic experience. The second is rather trivial: aesthetic behaviours or reactions do not belong to any dimension of being beyond matter and body; they have their counterpart in physical and neurological processes that nobody could deny without to be ridiculous. The theories and experimentations which

³ I develop this opposition in *Existe-t-il un problème de l'esthétique*, in "Intellectica", dec., 2013. Dewey's work can be considered as an attempt to change the subject in philosophy, and to extend to philosophical problems the ways of investigation to which natural sciences usually appeal to. As Dewey explains in his book: *The influence of Darwin on philosophy* (Dewey [1910]), this project is directly influenced by Darwin. It assumes the *continuity* of human and animal forms of life, and inscribes social and cultural interactions inside the more inclusive context of interactions occurring between the organisms and their natural environment. A consequence of such a principle is its criticism of the dualistic devices that philosophy of mind stages in its ways or reasoning. See Steiner (2013).

³ Dewey (1934; 1925). What is here at stake is similar to the conflict between the partisans and the opponents of «qualia». The «intrinsicists» and the «mysterians» play more or less the same roles. Voir Dennett (2005).

⁴ See for instance Massey (2009), presented as stemming from a convergence of art and technology, and as the alliance of neuro-sciences and aesthetics: the neuro-aesthetics.

are based upon this assumption can be considered as open to discussion, but the assumption as such is not controversial. We could call this way a «via modesta»⁵.

On the contrary, the first assumption is much more ambitious, and therefore more attractive. Strictly speaking, it lets glimpse some intrinsic properties of mind whose aesthetic behaviour, judgments or feelings should be the effects or manifestations.

From an historical point of view, this conception gets us back to the constitution of aesthetics as a special field and a special science, emerging from the long tradition which denied any cognitive status to sensitive⁶. Aesthetics constituted itself as a separate and distinctive field of experience beside other parts of experience more specifically linked to common and practical way of life⁷. This distinction was incorporated in our very notion of aesthetics, while combining itself with the dualisms inherited from philosophical tradition⁸. One aspect of the problem is to know what such dualisms imply for aesthetics, and also for individual and social existence, but the question here is to know what part they play in cognitive approaches and in the notion of the «aesthetic mind».

3. *Experience and emotions*

Aesthetic reactions — as we are able to observe them — are very unstable, differentiated and variable. How do they relate to brain processes, and how can we evaluate their relevance? Is it necessary to attribute to them specificity by comparison to the ordinary feelings? Shall we make a distinction — like in Physics or other fields of scientific knowledge — between what we experience and the actual processes — as causal processes — underlying this experience?

We are used to speak of «musical emotions», and to think that there is a special kind of feeling or a special way of experiencing music which is not the same as the way we are moved by an everyday situation. Is enjoyment the same for someone who won the lottery

⁵ Such is mainly the attitude of the authors of *The Aesthetic Mind*. They aim to plead for a collaboration of empirical sciences and philosophy, such as (their own words) to combine empirical research and speculation *a priori*, in order to check the outcomes of conceptual analysis.

⁶ It is worth reminding that « aesthetics », as Baumgarten called it, emerged first from a leibnizian background as a science of sensitive *knowledge*.

⁷ Cf. Dewey (1925): chap. IX.

⁸ Cf. Dewey (1934): chap. III, where Dewey stresses the consequences of the mind vs body contrast, and what derives of such a division.

and for another listening Beethoven's *Ode to Joy*. We are probably right to make a difference between these *two experiences*, but what does it mean exactly? Should we assume that this difference is an intrinsic (essential) one? And if it is, should we also assume that there are two special kinds of mental states corresponding to each of them?

Perhaps we should remind ourselves that having two experiences is not the same thing than to be moved by two distinctive feelings, in the sense we could say that sadness is not the same feeling when it is linked to the death of a friend and when it is felt in a movie. «Sadness» or «fear» refers to different objects (my friend, on one hand, and Michel in Godard's movie «A bout de souffle»). Situations and circumstances in which I experience such feelings can also be very different, but this does not mean that there are two sadness or two fears as two distinctive entities. The difference comes from the experience I have and what I have learned to discern in the various circumstances of life. Of course if there is a difference between several ways of experiencing what we call «sadness», some of which we call aesthetic and others ones that we are used to take as ordinary, there should be two different mental states corresponding to each of them. This is the tribute we have to pay to the body. But this does not imply that they are incorporated in the very *structure* of the brain. The evidences we have are based on what we can observe by means of mental imagery, for instance, and on the descriptions that someone as a witness of himself is able to give (with his *vocabulary*) when he is listening music and/or when he learns that he won to lottery. In such a situation his words are those he has first learned to articulate. As Wittgenstein said, «for understanding poetry you have first to learn language». It may be that brain's structure is the same for all people, whatever their culture. We do not need to assume there are as many distinctive brain resources as distinctive feelings and reactions in all humanity during all its history. Nevertheless feelings and reactions are not anywhere and at any time the same: they are probably infinite. Now for considering such a connection as relevant, you have to assume a common ontology between the two kinds of things: the brain processes such as they happen and the words as they denote feelings and emotions. But such a translation (so to speak) is undetermined: experience is *under-determined* and language is *over-determined*. Our vocabulary (our words, our concepts or categories) help us to describe what we feel, but given the same brain processes there is not one and only one possibility of description for each case. For the things be different it would be necessary to conceive human brain as containing in itself *all* the relationships instantiated in *all* the situations we can meet in existence — exactly as if it was necessary for language to contain all the meanings related to words

one by one. Relations between feelings and brain events can be thought in terms of *supervenience*, i.e. as covariant, but such a covariance may occur without presenting any uniformity in each of its occurrences. Otherwise we should call it *causality*. Our scientific tools do afford us the means to observe what happens in our neural circuits, but there is not only one way of describing the same «facts» and observations⁹.

Our vocabularies and beliefs cannot be taken for indifferent or neutral with regard to our experiences. As Dewey stresses it in *Art as Experience*, there is no difference in nature between dispositions implied in enjoying art and our capacities to feel any other kind of pleasure in ordinary life: «Even a crude experience, if authentically an experience, is more fit to give a clue to the intrinsic nature of aesthetic experience than is an object already set apart from any other mode of experience» (Dewey [1934]: 10). In fact, for Dewey, if we want to understand what seems so characteristic of art and aesthetic emotions, we have to concentrate upon the way organisms behave in relation to their surroundings: «In order to understand the aesthetic in its ultimate and approved forms, one must begin with it in the raw»¹⁰. Dewey gives many examples in order to show that aesthetic experience is rooted in biological elementary processes of life. The notion of experience as it is defined in his books *Art as Experience* and *Experience and Nature* is intended to show what places society and culture in the continuity of natural interactions. For Dewey, «experience is the fulfilment of an organism in its struggles and achievements in a world of things, it is art in germ» (Dewey [1934]: 25).

4. *The mind / body problem and after*

I need not take into account all the arguments that Dewey gives in support of this thesis. There are nevertheless some that require attention. First by considering the problem of

⁹ Covariance is a principle we have to assume, but I think that the situation (for the mind and what it is supposed to relate) is similar to the one that Quine described about translation. Let us also observe that when the inquiry appeals to mental imagery, the subject that describes what he feels relies on what he is supposed to observe inside himself. It is what we called formerly «introspection». The empirical method appeals to the resources of the «first person».

¹⁰ Dewey (1934): 16-17. Aesthetic reactions are diverse and various; they depend on conditions that are also very various, and rooted in education, cultural and historical habits, etc. See Dewey (1925): chap. IX. Such variability requires special inquiries in order to clarify what standards are relevant in such or such case. Hypothesis admitting the existence of constants (just like the Chomsky's deep grammars) tends to lean on evidences coming from empirical studies on beauty. But the question goes beyond the only case or aesthetic qualities. The impact of arts on taste and ways of perceiving is crucial.

art and aesthetics in the light of Dewey's positions one can better understand what place they take in human life, and why the many dualisms inherited from our intellectual traditions train so many obstacles. But in order to go further one have to explain : 1) how art can be in the continuity of the aesthetic experience, and 2) how the many ways of reacting to art can both depend on cultural conditions and physiological and neurological processes. This last point is connected with what pragmatist philosophers call beliefs: *habits of action*. The main aspect of such a definition consists in unifying physical and mental conditions in (the concept of) *action*. This last point is connected with what pragmatist philosophers call beliefs: habits of action. In other words, it replaces the old mind / body problem by what appears now undissociated in experience. In experience, what refers to body and what refers to mind is not separated. It is only by analysing its constituents that we come to consider them in a separated way.

In going over an experience in mind *after* its occurrence, we may find that one property rather than another was sufficiently dominant so that it characterizes the experience as a whole. There are absorbing inquiries and speculations which a scientific man and a philosopher will recall as «experiences» in the emphatic sense. In final import they are intellectual. But in their actual occurrence they were emotional as well. They were purposive and volitional (Dewey [1934]: 44).

Such a conception offers many advantages. It takes leave of the inappropriate mind/body problem and puts in question the distinction we usually make between «nature» and «culture». It calls for a way of taking them that combines together what human beings owe to nature and what they owe to culture: it calls for what Philippe Descola names a «natural anthropology» (Descola [2005]). One of the conditions that helps to take this position is the following: «There is no limit to the capacity of immediate sensuous experience to absorb into itself meanings and values that in and of themselves — that is in the abstract — would be designated “ideal” and “spiritual” [...] The sensible surface of things is never merely a surface» (Dewey [1934]: 36). In other words, we have to understand — without losing sight of the continuity of «culture» and «nature» — how meanings — depending on social and cultural ways of organisation and interactions — can be inlaid in ways of behaviour and physical reactions, and conversely how physical and biological (adaptation) processes can be implied in the various ways in which actions and interactions combine with meanings and words.

In *Experience and Nature*, Dewey devotes a chapter to this question¹¹. The main outcome of his analysis consists in the connection between meanings, interactions and communication¹². What he shows is close to the Wittgensteinian connection of language and forms of life in « language games ». But a main aspect of his suggestions is the light he throws on the condition and the role of rules. As we shall see later, an important point for relating art to interactions entrenched in forms of life is the *normative* dimension of human practices. In Dewey's concept of experience, because of the role played by social acting, rules are *implied* in interactions: there are rules because our *actions* are *interactions* and because they are ways of coordination and cooperation, in other words because they constitute the web of social relationships and beliefs¹³. « Meanings » do not exist apart from social life and action; they do not exist in brain or in mind in such a way that we could neglect the soil from which they derive. In the same way aesthetic experience cannot be isolated from its elementary sources and components. For Dewey, « Experience is the result, the sign, and the reward of that interaction of organism and environment which, when it is carried to the full, is a transformation of interaction into participation and communication» (Dewey [1934]: 28).

5. *Aesthetic conditions and conditions of art*

This conception can be considered as an expression of Dewey's loans to Darwinism. In this sense, it is consistent with evolutionary conceptions which try to understand aesthetic experience from an adaptationist point of view. As Roberta Dreon has showed in her book on Dewey's aesthetics (Dreon [2012]), it is close to the Ellen Dissayanake's views. For Ellen Dissayanake also, aesthetics feelings and behaviours are part of what the living creature is experiencing as a living creature. As she writes, «religion and art are usually treated by anthropologists as aspects of "culture", which according to conventional theory is opposed to "biology". An adaptationist view, however, views the various components that are called "culture" as outgrowths of evolved psychobiological

¹¹ Dewey (1925): chap. V.

¹² Dewey (1925): 141: «The heart of language is not «expression» of something antecedent, much less expression of antecedent thought. It is communication; the establishment of cooperation in an activity in which there are partners, and in which the activity of each is modified and regulated by partnership».

¹³ Rules are implied in the very possibility of social ways of acting. The Wittgensteinian's model of «language games» explains how actions and words as shared and exchanged involve rules underlying what happens in any situation of cooperation.

predispositions»¹⁴. But is it enough for explaining why we usually give to art a special meaning and a special status. The fact that «these works are products that exist externally and physically» (Dewey [1934]: 9) helps us to conceive why we usually consider them without taking into account the process from which they arise¹⁵. Is it the only reason? Unless to think that art derives *purement et simplement* from experience in its aesthetic dimension, we need a difference that *makes* the difference in order to explain what gives art its status.

For Dewey this status is related to the compartmentalization which characterizes our societies. Contrasting with other cultures or older times, art has been dissociated from common life and from the whole experience of everyday life. The wall that surrounds it comes from the divisions which developed inside our societies with new economic conditions. Beside institutions as religion, state, and so on, we have « art as an institution» (Burger [1988]). Such remarks suggest that if we fail to take into account the institutional conditions to which our concept of art is related and if we do not consider their implications on our behaviours and our beliefs we shall inevitably underestimate the way our concept of art weighs on our analysis. This is one of the objections that can be addressed to inquiries aiming to find in brain models or processes the natural basis of what they take for specific to art¹⁶. Aesthetic experience and ways of art making and art looking are too plural and diverse for being put in the same mould. Ellen Dissayanake is probably right to make what she calls « making special » the condition of art. By using this concept she provides herself the means to connect art with aesthetic experience and ways of adaptation. But I am not sure that «making special» is a sufficient mark specific to art and cannot apply to other fields of activity.

Here we face a difficulty. I do not want reintroduce any discontinuity between nature and culture and between art and life, but it seems to me that the attempt to explain art on the only basis of aesthetic conditions cannot be sufficient. The limit of this kind of explanation occurs in Dissayanake's work, but also in Dewey's way of dealing this

¹⁴ Dissayanake (2008). Dissayanake criticizes the views based on «function». She defends «adaptation» while refusing any functional view.

¹⁵ One misunderstanding comes from the fact that aesthetic reactions refer to objects, and from the fact that among these objects some are produced by activities which we call «art». Dewey (1934): 98-99.

¹⁶ It is significant that inquiries attempting to discover in mind the heart of some artistic properties (pertaining to visual works for instance) seems mainly to select one type of properties which seems correspond to our most classical art.

problem, even if he makes room to cultural and institutional conditions. If we could think about art in terms of beauty (it is significantly a main point in cognitive approaches) this would be sufficient for locating art in the continuity of the aesthetic experience, but art depends on many other dispositions, because of what is changing in it, in culture and society. In other words, when speaking of art we must pay attention to: 1) the many ways we use this word in several and very different historical contexts; 2) the ways art can act upon our mental and physical dispositions. Naturalizing aesthetics cannot consist in only making natural interactions the sources of aesthetics and art. If Dewey is right in giving to interactions the main role in nature and in society, we have to consider their features in situations depending on various conditions and contexts.

It is clear that if art is an experience — or may be considered as an experience —, we may not hope to find in its only natural sources a sufficient light for the uncountable various forms that it can take according to the meanings whose it is invested in the context of the various cultures or historical conditions which it depends on. Ellen Dissanayake is probably right to see in what she calls « making special » an important feature of artification¹⁷. But «Art» cannot be just defined by special ways of *doing* and *showing*; what *makes* the difference — between aesthetic experience and the same experience when it refers to art — is also the way of *seeing*, the kind of *attention*, the meaning they take for us, i.e. many things which cannot be separated from cultural habits and conditions. In this respect, «making special» is probably a necessary but not sufficient condition. We also have to explain how natural conditions may be combined with social and cultural variables, i.e. how human beings combine their animal part with their cultural habits, and what makes that brain — in its various functions or resources — depends also on social potentialities. In most cases and under numerous aspects the attempt to naturalize aesthetics has paid special attention to perception, emotions and expression, in such a way that art seems to emerge from such a background. (as a product or a by-product of the so called «aesthetic mind»). By considering art *as* an experience whose roots belong to the very conditions of life, Dewey has embarked on a similar path, while being aware that human habits have also their conditions in social

¹⁷ Dissayanake (2008): «I propose that “making special” (which I now use interchangeably with “artifying”) is the ancestral activity or behaviour that gave rise to and continues to characterize or imbue all instances of what today are called the arts. The term “making special” can be substituted for “art” in the six characteristics of an adaptation».

and cultural environment which for human beings is like a «second nature»¹⁸. A Last point as a conclusion: this means that where you have art you also have rules. Such an evidence should lead us to ask how rules or social norms may be incorporated in reactions and behaviour related to body and how they combine with our ways of interacting with our natural and human environment. In fact we have to extend our investigations to this question and ask how to conceive social norms, actions and interactions in such investigations, because the capacity of following rules is implemented in our habits and our ability to describe the content of our experience, especially as it is used in psychology. I can only ask the question without going further, but it is precisely a question which pragmatist philosophers have approached, without abandoning the road which Dewey drew in his attempt of naturalizing art and philosophy¹⁹.

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¹⁸ See Dewey (1925), where Dewey claims that art achieves nature.

¹⁹ See again Dewey (1925), and more recently Brandom (1998). For Dewey, «art» refers to practices, and practices have first a social character; the interactions they involve, the forms of communication to which they give access are closely linked to rules. There is not any praxis without rules. Such rules have an *implicit* status. A main confusion we make when speaking of rules consists to give them an *explicit* status that they do not acquire necessarily, and which is secondary. Rules are never *a priori*; they depend on the paths that social practices take and the habits they generate.

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