

## HOW TO DO DIFFERENT THINGS WITH WORDS:

### WHY DEWEY'S AESTHETICS IS PECULIAR

Roberta Dreon

Ca' Foscari University, Venice

In this paper I intend to define some underlying features of Dewey's pragmatist aesthetics, distinguishing his own approach to this discipline from that of others. The very title of the paper – John Dewey's aesthetics – creates some embarrassment. For at least two and a half centuries we have been accustomed to think of aesthetics as a specific philosophical discipline, which is mainly characterized by exclusion. Aesthetics has been defined as sensitive cognition in opposition to intellectual knowledge, as subjective or intersubjective judgement, unable to capture any objective knowledge, as philosophy of art in contrast to the philosophy of nature, and as the contemplation of pure forms, detached from any practical interest. Above all, the birth of aesthetics as a specific discipline in Western culture has historically been linked to the affirmation in Europe and then in North America of a unitary system of the arts, i.e. to the emergence of a substantive idea of Art as a singular noun with a capital A, a process intimately related to the radical affirmation of the autonomy of artistic pursuits vis-à-vis other human activities.<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, we should at least try to limit this embarrassment by speaking of inclusive aesthetics in Dewey's case. I use the expression 'inclusive' because on the one hand the chief aim of this aesthetics is to find the aesthetic in experience, by both rooting it in the structural biological dependence of human organisms upon the natural and social environment of which they are part, and by seeking to recover the aesthetic aspects originally underlying our ordinary practices. From this perspective, Dewey's approach is characterized by two

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<sup>1</sup> See P.O. Kristeller, "The Modern System of the Arts: A Study in the History of Aesthetics, Part I", *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 12/4 (1951), pp 496-527 and "The Modern System of the Arts: A Study in the History of Aesthetics, Part II", 13/1 (1952), pp 17-46.

interrelated principles: "cultural naturalism" and ethical and political critical implications. On the other hand, Dewey proposes a broad concept of art, since this is understood as every "mode of activity that is charged with meanings capable of immediately enjoyed possession".<sup>2</sup>

However, it would be too time-consuming to deal with these subjects in the present paper,<sup>3</sup> where I think it will be more fruitful to limit the inquiry by focusing on three expressions. It seems to me that they help define some specific aspects of pragmatism, distinguishing it from other philosophic traditions. These three words are more or less widely used and discussed in recent and contemporary philosophical debate, but Dewey used them to pursue very different goals from those prevailing in other philosophic reflections.

The first expression, which has been made the subject of a wider debate, is that of 'aesthetic experience'. I am going to argue that this expression is primarily used by the American philosopher in order to challenge the compartmentalization of works of art and their separation from our ordinary lives and to affirm the primary aesthetic connotations of our experiences. In Dewey's thought this formula appears to be used in a very different way from in either continental research on aesthetic autonomy or unsuccessful analytical attempts to define art.

The second expression, 'aesthetic qualities', has been broadly discussed in analytical aesthetics, but almost no attempts have been made to compare the term with Dewey's proposals.<sup>4</sup> Dewey's thesis is that we have to assume that qualitative aspects are basically part of our

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<sup>2</sup> John Dewey, *Experience and Nature, Volume 1:1925 of The Later Works, 1925-1953* (Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale & Edwardsville, 1988), p. 269.

<sup>3</sup> I discussed these aspects of Dewey's thought in: *Fuori dalla torre d'avorio. L'estetica inclusiva di John Dewey oggi* (Marietti 1821, Genova-Milano, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> Except for some observations in: H. Putnam, *The Threefold Cord: Mind, Body, and World* (Columbia U.P., New York, 1999).

common experiences, that they are modes of meaning of our environment and cannot be reduced to subjective phenomena or be restricted within special compartments.

The third expression, 'consummation' or 'consummatory experience', is actually connected to a wider lexical constellation, which includes 'enjoyment', 'satisfaction' and 'fulfilment'. Dewey's pragmatic approach is based on the recognition of our aesthetic needs, as conceived from a quasi-anthropological perspective; in this regard it differs substantially from the exclusively negative approach to art characterizing Adorno's critical theory. If aesthetic aspects have been removed from our ordinary experience, the arts cannot limit themselves to negating the present unequal and impoverishing conditions, but must pose the problem of finding alternative ways for improving our lives and for making our experience of the shared world more fruitful and satisfying for everyone.

### 1. What is 'aesthetic experience' for?

Let us begin from the first formula, which is 'aesthetic experience'. I shall start by arguing that, if we wish to understand what Dewey meant when talking of 'aesthetic experience' or, better, of those aesthetic aspects that are inherent in our experiences, we must not refer to Monroe Beardsley's definition. Rather, we should turn again to George Mead's interpretation, which may be found in a brief but significant essay published in 1926, "The Nature of Aesthetic Experience", a text that was written under the explicit influence of Dewey's *Experience and Nature*.<sup>5</sup>

The problem with Beardsley's approach is that he

actually used some indications proposed by Dewey in *Art as Experience* in order to define an alleged "aesthetic value". But in Dewey's book these traits are meant to characterize what he called "an experience", that is an interaction that is marked out from most comings and goings of our environmental exchanges; it may be eminently artistic or peculiarly aesthetic, but it refers more generally to every kind of experience which comes to its consummation. Beardley's displacement may be understood as an answer to the central problem of defining the concept of art, which became a pressing issue with Morris Weitz's famous article exploring the possibility of defining art after Wittgenstein, given some of the implications of his *Philosophical Investigations*.<sup>6</sup>

Beardsley adopts a general pragmatist point of view, that is an instrumentalist perspective with regard to the problem of understanding "what it would mean to say that something is a good aesthetic object, and how this could be shown to be true".<sup>7</sup> According to him, in order to answer this question we should focus on the peculiar kind of function an aesthetic object can perform that is on its capacity to engender an aesthetic experience. Indeed, in Beardsley's opinion the common feature characterizing the class of objects we call works of art would consist precisely in their ability to generate an aesthetic experience.

In order then to explain what such a peculiar experience might consist in, Beardsley expressly refers to Dewey (surprisingly comparing him with Kant), by recovering some of the underlying features which according to the American pragmatist characterize a complete experience, making it stand out from the continuous, habitual and often inconclusive flow of our interactions with the environment.

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<sup>5</sup> See G.H. Mead, "The Nature of Aesthetic Experience", *International Journal of Ethics*, 36/4 (1926), pp 382-393 and M.C. Beardsley, "Aesthetic Experience Regained", *The Journal of Aesthetic and Art Criticism*, 28/1 (1969), pp 3-11, M.C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics. Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism* (Hackett P.C., Inc., Indianapolis-Cambridge, 1981), in particular § 28, "The Instrumentalist Theory", pp 524-543.

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<sup>6</sup> See M. Weitz, "The Role of Theory in Aesthetics", *The Journal of Aesthetic and Art Criticism*, 15/1 (1956), pp 27-35.

<sup>7</sup> M.C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics. Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism*, p. 524.

In this move from every experience, which can be identified as “an experience” to specifically artistic experiences, a number of restrictions come into play. The phenomenological relevance of a given experience and a person’s awareness of how it stands out in his or her own memory or imagination are envisaged in terms of the peculiar attention elicited by a piece of art capturing one’s aesthetic attention or causing an aesthetic experience. The vital intensification or enhancement of meaningful exchanges with the environment turns into the intensity of an artistic experience or into the peculiar kind of concentration inspired by works of art. The unitary and consummatory features of an experience change into the hallmark of that peculiar experience generated by a work of art, capable of producing its differentiation from other experiences: “The experience detaches itself, and even insulates itself, from the intrusion of alien elements”.<sup>8</sup>

But as Richard Shusterman has argued,<sup>9</sup> Dewey’s intention was not to distinguish art objects and the aesthetic experiences they generate from other kinds of things and other sorts of human practices. Using some of Dewey’s ideas in order to define aesthetic experience and artistic objects means using a blunt weapon, an unsuitable tool that has been more or less rightly criticized on several fronts.<sup>10</sup>

On the contrary, the concern guiding Dewey’s investigation is simply the continuity thesis, which is probably so familiar as to appear almost naïve, namely the thesis that you cannot understand origination unless

you start by investigating mountains rooted in the earth’s crust, of which they are an integral part. In other words, you cannot understand those “refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art” unless you start from “everyday events, doings and sufferings, that are universally recognized to constitute experience”.<sup>11</sup> But the peculiarity of Dewey’s approach is not merely the fact that this continuity is based on the “biological obviousness” of human organisms’ structural dependence upon the natural and social environment of which they are basic parts. The point is that his leading scientific questions converge with ethical and political ones. Why did so-called works of art turn into “ethereal things” that are separated from everyday practices and constitute the privileged possession or enjoyment of a few? Why do we consider it an obvious fact that there is no enjoyment in work, but that it must essentially coincide with exertion? Why do we also assume that satisfaction in a well-done work must remain alien to the logic of scientific research, for otherwise the work would risk losing its seriousness? Are we to give up in the face of the compartmentalization of artworks and their confinement to special places and times, or can we imagine more satisfying forms of engagement with our world? How can we contribute to enhancing our personal and shared experience?

Mead focuses his attention on just this kind of issue, stressing an intentionally broad and hopefully pervasive conception of aesthetic experience. Aesthetic aspects or phases of our ordinary experiences relate to the ability to enjoy things immediately, to appreciate what we are doing by avoiding solely focusing on the ends we are pursuing, in such a way as to enjoy (or suffer, I might add) only the experience constituting a particular practice and the situation in which it occurs – that is by enjoying, according to Mead’s interpretation, the means

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 528.

<sup>9</sup> R. Shusterman, “The End of Aesthetic Experience”, *The Journal of Aesthetic and Art Criticism*, 55/1 (1997), pp 29-41.

<sup>10</sup> See G. Dickie, “Beardsley’s Phantom Aesthetic Experience”, *The Journal of Philosophy*, 62/5 (1965), pp 129-136 and N. Carroll, “Aesthetic Experience Revisited”, *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 42/2 (2002), pp 145-168, N. Carroll, *Beyond Aesthetics* (Cambridge U.P., Cambridge, 2001), esp. the chapter “Four Concept of Aesthetic Experience”.

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<sup>11</sup> J. Dewey, *Art as Experience, Volume 10:1934 of The Later Works, 1925-1953* (Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale & Edwardsville, 1989), p. 9.

themselves instead of merely using them instrumentally, while being in fact completely absorbed by the results we have to achieve. Aesthetic appreciation, therefore, does not concern a particular class of objects, but the aptitude to let enjoyed meaning be a part of everyone's life.<sup>12</sup> In aesthetic appreciation we do not almost blindly pursue an end, regardless of the means used, but rather enjoy what we are doing; we stop in order to appreciate and contemplate what we are doing and undergoing, says Mead. But it is quite clear that the contemplation he is speaking of is not a disinterested gaze, turned to a particular set of objects. It is rather an ability to enjoy human activities as such.

Besides, in his characterization of aesthetic experience as consummatory experience Mead remained faithful to Dewey. The isolated individual is not a natural fact. He or she is the result of the competitive conditions of industrial society, and this is also true of the separation of enjoyment from work, which reduces the latter to mere exertion. In the actual situation where the division of labour has become an obvious given, it seems natural that the fruits of labour can only be enjoyed by a privileged few. But if we recover the basic biological idea that human interdependence is structural, i.e. that it is linked to the largely deficient constitution of our organism – as stated in *Human Nature and Conduct*<sup>13</sup> – then it is evident that “shared experience is the greatest of human goods” and that enjoying it is a way to enhance the experience of life itself.

From this point of view the aesthetic attitude appears a basic and healthy attitude, of which the so-called fine arts constitute a development, a refinement. But while the aesthetic attitude in contemporary society has been turned into a separate field and removed from other

human practices, “the thirst of enjoyment is still there”:<sup>14</sup> hence, it will look elsewhere for other possible satisfaction. In this perspective, the celebration of great artists can become a mere compensatory enjoyment for the absence of consummatory experiences in our ordinary life.

It is true, however, that in *Art as Experience*, which Mead could not have read when writing his article, Dewey poses the problem of distinguishing, albeit within the context of a basic continuity, between what is eminently artistic and the aesthetic, understood as a “primary phase in experience”. Dewey reaches a solution by drawing upon the concept of having an experience that stands out in comparison to our usual and often inconclusive comings and goings with the world. But it is an answer that is explicitly based on differences of degree. It is certainly an unsuccessful solution if it is intended to draw a definite distinction between art and non-art, because it admittedly also applies to reading a novel, to confident participation in an election campaign, to a dinner with an old friend or to quarrelling with one's lover.<sup>15</sup>

But the point is still that Dewey does not wish simply to describe a state of affairs. He is much more interested in the question of what can we do, even on a philosophical level:

... it is safe to say that a philosophy of art is sterilized unless it makes us aware of the function of art in relation to other modes of experience, and unless it indicates why this function is so inadequately realized, and unless it suggests the conditions under which the office would be successfully performed.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> G.H. Mead, *The Nature of Aesthetic Experience*, cit., p. 384.

<sup>13</sup> J. Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct, Volume 14 of The Middle Works, 1899-1924* (Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale & Edwardsville, 1988).

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<sup>14</sup> G.H. Mead, *The Nature of Aesthetic Experience*, cit., p. 387.

<sup>15</sup> See J. Kaminsky, “Dewey's Concept of an Experience”, in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 17/3 (1957), pp 316-330 and D.C. Mathur, “A Note on the Concept of “Consummatory Experience” in *Dewey's Aesthetics*, 63/9 (1966), pp 225-231.

<sup>16</sup> J. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, cit., p. 17.

In my opinion this is the one aspect really qualifying Dewey's 'pragmatic' aesthetics. In this perspective it appears fully consistent with Pierce's thesis that the intellectual scope or the meaning of a theory must be measured against the effects that it is able to achieve in our life conduct.<sup>17</sup>

## II. On aesthetic qualities

I am going to say some words now about 'aesthetic qualities', a term that significantly already appears before *Art as Experience* in *Experience and Nature*, where it plays a basic role in Dewey's conception of experience. On the other hand, the analytical discussion on the alleged aesthetic qualities was extensive and articulated and led to the introduction of the notion of aesthetic supervenience or emergentism. The major contributions here are those first by Frank Sibley and later by Jerrold Levinson.<sup>18</sup>

In a preliminary survey of this debate, the issues at stake ambiguously appear sometimes to relate to the same things and sometimes not. What I mean is that both Dewey and the two aforementioned authors often propose a number of adjectives to illustrate what is meant by aesthetic qualities, in the absence of criteria of definition; most significantly, their proposed lists appear

partially analogous. Dewey states that in our continuous relations with our environment, things are naturally perceived as "poignant, tragic, beautiful, humorous, settled, disturbed, comfortable, annoying, barren, harsh, consoling, splendid, fearful".<sup>19</sup> In "Being Realistic About Aesthetic Properties" Levinson provides a varied list of aesthetic attributes, which he distinguishes according to their greater or lesser evaluative force. These adjectives range from "striking, splendid, excellent, miserable" to "balanced, chaotic, unified" and "melancholy, anguished, cheerful" and "graceful, gaudy, garish".<sup>20</sup>

It is evident, however, that while for the American pragmatist the point was to detect a basic structure behind our interactions with the environment on which we depend, and, I would add, a basic trait of the common language in which we move, Sibley's and Levinson's main field of investigation is the art critic's vocabulary. Besides, their most important problem is that which underlies our modern aesthetic tradition, namely the possibility or impossibility of justifying our judgements about works of art, and of finding any realistic or subjective bases for supporting them. I nonetheless wish to argue that Dewey's reflections can be useful not in resolving difficulties in the analytical debate, but in resetting the terms of the debate itself.

In what follows, I shall broadly summarize some basic elements of the analytical debate on aesthetic qualities.

1. First of all, both authors present what should be meant by aesthetic concepts, qualities, judgements or expressions (Sibley) or by aesthetic attributes and properties (Levinson) by means of lists of examples such as those mentioned above. Whereas Levinson declares he is not addressing the question of "what counts as an

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<sup>17</sup> See J.P. Cometti, *Qu'est-ce que le pragmatisme?* (Gallimard, Paris, 2010), p. 18. Thomas Alexander has expressed some doubts as to whether Dewey's aesthetics may be defined as 'pragmatist', because of the limited presence of this formula in *Art as Experience*.

<sup>18</sup> See F. Sibley, "Aesthetic Concepts", in *The Philosophical Review*, 68/4 (1959), pp 421-450, F. Sibley, "Aesthetics and Nonaesthetics", in *The Philosophical Review*, 74/2 (1965), pp 135-159, J. Levinson, "Aesthetic Supervenience", in *Music, Art & Metaphysics. Essays in Philosophical Aesthetics* (Oxford UP, Oxford-New-York, 2011), pp 134-158, J. Levinson, "Being Realistic about Aesthetic Properties", in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 52/3, 1994, pp 351-354, J. Levinson, "Aesthetic Properties, Evaluative Force, and Difference of Sensibility", in E. Brady, J. Levinson (ed.), *Aesthetic Concepts: Essays After Sibley*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 2001, pp 61-80.

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<sup>19</sup> J. Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, cit., p. 82.

<sup>20</sup> J. Levinson, "Being Realistic about Aesthetic Properties", pp 351-352.

aesthetic attribute”<sup>21</sup>, Sibley states that it is not possible to define this rigorously, adding that he believes there is “no need to defend the distinction”.<sup>22</sup> According to him it is quite clear from our use of these kinds of words that when we say that something is “large, circular, green, slow, or monosyllabic”, we are not formulating aesthetic judgements, while when we say that something is “graceful, dainty, or garish, or that a work of art is balanced, moving, or powerful” we are indeed doing so. The qualities that are expressed in this second set of cases would imply “an exercise of aesthetic sensitivity or perceptiveness”, an exercise in taste. Non-aesthetic judgements are based on “natural, observable, perceptual, physical, objective and neutral” qualities.<sup>23</sup>

2. Both authors note these sorts of words are rather common in ordinary language too, but this kind of occurrence is clearly not the object of their scholarly interest. Levinson, in particular, considers these sorts of attributes in everyday conversation to be ambiguous, because both descriptive and evaluative aspects are typically intertwined with them.<sup>24</sup>

3. Sibley argues that there is a dependency relationship between aesthetic and non-aesthetic qualities or that the former emerge out of the latter. “Emergence” here means that while there are “non-aesthetic features which serve as conditions for applying aesthetic terms”<sup>25</sup>, they cannot be considered as necessary and sufficient conditions. When I try to justify the judgment that a certain sculptural work is harmonious because it presents a good integration of full and empty spaces, the relationship between harmony and the integration of solids and voids is not a necessary and sufficient

condition, but only a characteristic or typical one. In other words, there is no predetermined rule for correlating an aesthetic aspect to a non-aesthetic one.

Levinson’s basic thesis is that “the aesthetic attributes of an object are supervenient on its nonaesthetic ones”<sup>26</sup>, in the sense that the non-aesthetic properties of an object would not even provide any negative conditions for the government of aesthetic properties. Therefore aesthetic properties are in no way reducible to subvenient properties, that is to perceptive ones, or to subperceptive, microphysical ones.

4. Levinson argues that aesthetic qualities are not inherently evaluative, or at least that it is always possible to distinguish a descriptive component from any attached evaluative connotations of the term, so that we can talk about aesthetic terms that are valuation-added. On this basis, Levinson later argued that aesthetic attributes should be understood realistically as properties possessed by objects that are judged “striking”, “splendid”, or “chaotic”.<sup>27</sup> They are not to be interpreted idealistically, as if the judging subject were projecting subjective attributions on what he is judging.

Dewey’s approach is very different and may possibly appear surprising given its context. At the risk oversimplifying things, I will try to identify some traits by distinguishing this new context from the previous one. I will focus my attention on *Experience and Nature* and *Art as Experience*.<sup>28</sup>

First of all, it must be said that when Dewey speaks about aesthetic qualities, he is talking about experience in general, that is about continuous exchanges taking

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<sup>21</sup> J. Levinson, “Aesthetic Supervenience”, cit., p. 134.

<sup>22</sup> F. Sibley, “Aesthetics and Nonaesthetics”, cit., p. 135.

<sup>23</sup> Frank Sibley strongly supported this thesis, even though he explicitly stated his dissatisfaction with all terms used to illustrate the distinction he aims to point at. See F. Sibley, *Aesthetic Concepts*, cit., p. 421.

<sup>24</sup> See point 4 below.

<sup>25</sup> F. Sibley, “Aesthetic Concepts”, cit., p. 424.

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<sup>26</sup> J. Levinson, “Aesthetic Supervenience”, cit., p. 134.

<sup>27</sup> See in particular J. Levinson, “Being Realistic about Aesthetic Properties”, cit.

<sup>28</sup> Two particularly incisive passages can be found in J. Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, cit., p. 82 and in J. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, cit., pp 21-22.

place between human organisms and the natural and social environment on which their survival depends at all levels.<sup>29</sup> Obviously, he is not only talking about specific artistic practices or the vocabulary adopted by the art critic, but also about careful observers. At this level aesthetic qualities are clearly primary or basic, not supervenient on supposed merely perceptual or purely physical properties. Because our survival radically depends on the environment we belong to, including other individuals from whom we receive nourishment and protection from birth,<sup>30</sup> it is simply inevitable that the environment itself will have an immediate impact on us, and that situations in which we find ourselves in constant interaction with it will be perceived as friendly or dangerous, favourable or harmful, sweet and comforting or hostile and disturbing, embarrassing and annoying. For this reason, before you can postpone this impact, before you can plan or implement new strategies, by using what elements are available in a certain situation as means in view of further aims, you will experience these situations in terms of the way they directly operate on you, against you or for you. It is properly this aspect that Dewey identifies as the aesthetic or qualitative characterization of every experience.

Aesthetic qualities are not descriptive and neutral, but in themselves revealing of the way in which our exchanges with the environment are carried out. In other words, they imply a primitive form of evaluation that is not cognitive but rather affective. This is exactly Dewey's

point when he says that "Even such words as long and short, solid and hollow, still carry to all but those who are intellectually specialized, a moral and emotional connotation".<sup>31</sup> Our immediate experience has a sort of proto-evaluative extent; it implies rejection or acceptance, rejection or approval.

In this context, even the alleged merely sensory or purely physical recording of a situation appears to be an abstraction. First of all, I will experience a certain situation as being warm and friendly, for example, and then, by returning analytically to my immediate experience, I will distinguish some aspects I can relate to specific perceptual channels or will investigate the physical or microphysical structure of the objects involved. But it must be clear that those aspects are the results of further operations, or of new experiences distinguishing the different phases of a past experience to solve a problematic or an indeterminate situation.<sup>32</sup>

It should also be recognized that when I feel a certain environment to be hostile or comfortable, I do not consciously perceive it as a cognitive content: first of all I experience and feel something, and only then can I know it explicitly or reconsider it analytically and reflexively; but the point is that knowledge is not the only factor in play. For this reason Dewey constantly stresses that as long as our exchanges proceed normally, without any problems arising, there is no need to *know* "immediate qualities, sensory and significant" since they are "*had*".<sup>33</sup> He always thundered against the so-called intellectual fallacy of providing interpretations of experience in exclusively or predominantly cognitive terms.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> J.P. Cometti has helped me recognize Darwin's deep influence on Dewey, which is not to be understood reductionistically, deterministically or teleologically. The basic point is not to start with entities conceived as fully possessing their properties, but to consider the emergence of certain characteristics from an organism's interactions with its environment. I would add that these characteristics are not to be understood as a set of properties, but as answer modalities, as behavioural habits.

<sup>30</sup> On this point see J. Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, cit.

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<sup>31</sup> J. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, cit., pp 21-22.

<sup>32</sup> R. Bernstein in his "Dewey's Metaphysics of Experience" (in *The Journal of Philosophy*, 58/1 (1961), pp 5-14) observes that in Dewey "qualities are not limited to those which have been called sense qualities, or to primary and secondary qualities. There are tertiary qualities which are directly felt" (p. 7).

<sup>33</sup> J. Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, cit., p. 202.

<sup>34</sup> See R. Bernstein (op. cit), insisting on this aspect (p. 6).

In philosophical discourse it is customary to speak about aesthetic 'qualities' as a noun. Dewey, who was very attentive to ordinary language habits, notes that in order to speak about how we experience the manner or tone of a certain interaction between our organism and its environment, we often use adjectives or adverbs. Life circumstances can be sweet or bitter, and this sort of affective tone tends to guide our behaviour, but it can be revised and corrected when things do not work. Yet, there are no abstract or material entities such as sweetness or bitterness, harmony or dissonance, which we could assign to life circumstances.

This last remark brings me to my final point. It could be argued that, if aesthetic qualities have neither stable nor regular correlations with the allegedly physical or sensory substrate supporting them, then they are subjective, as are secondary qualities in our modern tradition. It seems that there is no way out of the alternative between subjectivist idealism and realism. Dewey, however, turns the problem around by arguing that when I feel a certain situation is difficult or a piece of music disturbing, I am neither finding a property of the situation or of the song, nor am I subjectively projecting my private impressions on the objects I am trying to cope with. I am rather perceiving a 'real' characteristic of my ongoing relation with these objects, which both tells me something about the environment I am facing and guides my behaviour within it. And to support this kind of non-dualistic position, Dewey has no need to become a pseudo-idealistic philosopher<sup>35</sup>; rather, he adopts a form of Darwinian naturalism and Jamesian empiricism.

Experience is neither the reign of the subject nor objective reality. It is the open result of a reciprocal exchange between organisms and their environment, both of which contribute to making the world what it is, determining and modifying, and yet no activity can be

considered the final one, capable of providing the world with all its supposed properties.<sup>36</sup> Besides, as William James noted in his polemic against classical empiricism, radical empiricism must recognize the reality of relations; they are not a sort of secondary entity, derived from the association of atomic ones, but are realities that are immediately experienced, so that they "must be accounted as 'real' as anything else in the system".<sup>37</sup>

### III. Against aesthetic asceticism

I now come to the last part of my paper, which is devoted to the topic of "consummatory experience", or the "consummatory phase" of experience, with a particular focus on the philosophical issue of enjoyment. In order to provide an idea of the typical continental disrepute of enjoyment, I shall begin by quoting a passage by Hans Robert Jauss, taken from an interesting chapter on pleasure in his book *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics*, which very clearly illustrates a certain kind of aesthetic asceticism we are used to:

[...] Today aesthetic experience is mostly considered authentic only when it has left behind itself any pleasure and has raised itself to the level of aesthetic reflection. The most decisive criticism of every artistic experience based on enjoyment can be found, once again, in Adorno: whoever in art works searches and finds pleasure is a philistine, and "expressions like 'ears delight' prove he is guilty". Whoever is not able to free art from taste for pleasure places art near food and pornographic products. After all, aesthetic pleasure is nothing but a bourgeois reaction to the spiritualization of art and therefore it represents the basic assumption of the contemporary culture industry, which serves the vested interests of dominant powers managing the vicious circle of needs and satisfactions and using aesthetic surrogates. In short, we read in Adorno's *Ästhetische Theorie*: "The bourgeois wishes that art is thriving and life ascetic, but the opposite would be better".<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> On this point see Bernstein's criticism.

<sup>36</sup> See J. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, cit., p. 251.

<sup>37</sup> H. James, "A World of Pure Experience", originally published in *Journal of Philosophy, Psychology, and Scientific Method*, 1/20 (1904), pp 533-543.

<sup>38</sup> H.R. Jauss, *Ästhetische Erfahrung und literarische*



Dewey's approach to enjoyment, both life enjoyment and the specifically artistic ones, is very different.<sup>39</sup> First of all we must remember that Dewey introduces the term "consummatory experience" in *Art as Experience* to characterize his concept of having an experience, that is in order to distinguish an experience that may be eminently artistic or aesthetic, but which more generally stands out from our inconclusive daily experiences, from ordinary interactions that mostly go further, leaving no trace and giving no satisfaction. Every human interaction with the natural and social environment will have a stronger or weaker immediate aesthetic quality, according to Dewey, because in the first instance our existence is structurally exposed to other human beings and to natural circumstances which can be comfortable or dangerous for us, which will make us suffer or enjoy. However, not every interaction with our world is brought to completion and becomes a "consummatory

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*Hermeneutik* (Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1982), It. transl., p. 95.

<sup>39</sup> The contrast between this typical aesthetic asceticism and Dewey's approach was increased in my own national context by the Italian translation of both *Art as Experience* and *Experience and Nature*, which led to a misunderstanding on this point. In the two translations by Granese and Bairati "consummation" is rendered with "consumo", that is "consumption", and "consummatory experience" with "esperienza consumatoria", that is "consumption experience". I must confess that when I was reading these translations for the first time I was upset as, I imagine, every philosopher trained in the continental tradition must have been. This embarrassment is due to the fact that Dewey seems to argue that consumption was discovered by human being before identifying what is good and preparing the means to achieve it, or that what marks out a certain experience from most inconclusive comings and goings with our environment is the attainment of a form of consumption. Besides, associating artistic experience with consumption immediately triggers a sort of instinctive reaction in the average European philosopher, because a strong suspicion arises that what is being proposed is a new version of artistic enslavement to consumption, confirming the reduction of culture to an uncritical culture industry. In any case it must be noted that in his new Italian translation of *Art as Experience* Giovanni Matteucci chose "perfezionamento" for translating "consummation", a term that is better connected to "fulfillment", "compimento" in Italian, which is very often used by Dewey in related sentences.

experience". In the English language 'consummate' means to complete; in this sense, it means to bring a certain process to its perfection, for example a marriage through the consummation of the sexual act, a premeditated murder through its perpetration. 'Consummate' is also used to talk about the culmination of a desire and the correlated efforts made to pursue it that is to fulfil it.

Consummatory experiences are those experiences we can consciously appreciate for their completeness and capacity to enhance our lives. In Dewey's opinion, these particularly include artistic and aesthetic experiences.

Some scholars, such as George Mead, Jack Kaminsky and especially D.C. Mathur, have emphasized that the "consummatory phase" of an experience is the one leading to its fulfilment. As such, it lends the experience its unity and brings a certain relief from the tritest routines. In particular, according to Mathur's reconstruction, in experiencing rhythm we could recognize a first phase of immediate quality of the experience of doing and undergoing, a further stage of reflective experience, where the involved organism reaches the awareness of doing and undergoing relations that are taking place, and a final consummatory phase, "which incorporates the significance and meaning of the reflective phase and is thereby rendered more rich and deepened in its immediacy".<sup>40</sup> Mead on his part, as I mentioned earlier, points out that an experience comes to its end not simply when a certain goal has been achieved, but when the pursuit of it does not preclude an appreciation of the means by which we tend to realize it, that is when we enjoy instrumental activities for themselves, therefore producing an enhancement of life.

From this point of view it is clear that the distance is again very considerable with respect to the typical critical theory approach, which is essentially based on a

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<sup>40</sup> D.C.Mathur, cit., p. 226.

strong dualism between value rationality and instrumental rationality – a dualism Dewey constantly calls into question.

In addition to these comments I would like to recall the natural context in which the American pragmatist introduced the idea of the consummatory phase of an experience, because from this point of view aesthetic needs appear to be basic anthropological traits we can answer more or less critically, but cannot simply neglect.<sup>41</sup> Experiences in general can be fulfilled because we live in an unstable world and our existence depends on the constant exchanges occurring in our world. It is quite natural for interactions to have a rhythmic flow: organic and environmental energies have moments of instability and disequilibrium and moments of deeper integration or balance. And likewise it is quite natural for human organisms not only to pursue forms of equilibrium with their environment, but also to tend to enjoy it, as an opportunity for energetic enhancement. Abstractly denying these aesthetic needs, namely the need to enjoy and expand life interactions, means removing these interactions and uncritically displacing them into other objects and in other forms.

Dewey notes how this point has serious implications especially in the artistic field. Closing the arts in museums, but also making their fruition the prerogative of just a few and precluding their enjoyment by the majority of people, may mean that most people have to search for mere surrogates. From Dewey's perspective these surrogates are not necessarily represented by the popular arts, jazz or the mass media, as Adorno suggested. On the contrary, an aesthetic surrogate may

be found in any artistic practice that does not produce an intensification of the vital energies, but rather their impoverishment, dissipation or consumption.

On the other hand, the typical trend in advanced industrial society of erasing enjoyment from daily work, of denying the opportunity for everybody to enjoy his own work results and the connected sense of fulfilment, produces a tendency to search for those pleasures, habitually denied in routine activities, in one's private time, that is in time free from work, now merely perceived as fatigue.

From this point of view, and perhaps with some surprise, we can find a certain affinity between Dewey and Herbert Marcuse, in contrast to Adorno's opposition to all affirmative forms of art. Marcuse's 1978 book *The Aesthetic Dimension* draws a close connection between a sort of biological naturalism and the demand for a fairer and happier society for everybody. Marcuse affirms that "Marxist theory has the least justification to ignore the metabolism between human being and nature" and that a classless society firstly requires the recognition of human desires and bodily needs, as well as "an organic development within the socio-historical".<sup>42</sup>

But we can find some interesting proximities in a paper written many years before, in 1938, entitled "On Hedonism". First it should be recognized that hedonism was able to denounce the spiritualization and internalization of happiness, conceived as only possible in a non-material dimension. However the problem is that hedonism has claimed material or bodily approaches as the only legitimate form of access to happiness, without calling into question the assumption of its mostly private, personal and subjective characterization. But if happiness can have no place in

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<sup>41</sup> See Abraham Kaplan's "Introduction" to *Art as Experience*, in which he notes that Dewey's philosophy of art is close to Aristotle's naturalistic biology. Both scholars conceive energy in biological terms, because "Dewey shares with Aristotle (who was also a naturalist in the biologist's sense) an awareness of the primacy in these domains of the developmental psychology of adaptive responses to the environment" (p. xvii).

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<sup>42</sup> H. Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension. Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics* (Beacon Press, Boston, 1978), p. 16 and p. 17.

relations between men in contemporary society, if happiness cannot be shared, then it "is restricted to the sphere of consumption".<sup>43</sup> Yet it is a sort of consumption that by seeking to satisfy human natural urges towards consummation produces an impoverishment of living energies rather than their enhancement. From Dewey's point of view, in the current world the consummatory phases of experience are transformed into forms of mere consumption.<sup>44</sup>

I shall conclude my paper with a quotation from Marcuse that will not fail to impress readers of Dewey's *Ethics*. In his analysis of both emancipatory and regressive aspects of hedonism, the German philosopher asks:

Does not happiness, with its immanent demand for increase and permanence, require that, within happiness itself, the isolation of individuals, the reification of human relations, and the contingency of gratification be done away with? Must not happiness become compatible with truth?<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> H. Marcuse, "On Hedonism", in *Negations. Essays in Critical Theory* (MayFlyBooks, London, 2009), p. 129. In the same volume see also "The Affirmative Character of Culture".

<sup>45</sup> By formulating a pragmatist suggestion, however, we should perhaps begin to call into question our consolidated and regressive habit to consider consumption only as a form of energy dissipation, which inevitably tends to confirm the existing forms of economic power by exploiting our most urgent needs of immediate satisfaction. I am thinking here, for example, of ethically shrewd forms of consumption, where commodities can be enjoyed because of the environmental or social working conditions they contribute to improving or because they favour our bodily health or forms of wealth-sharing.

<sup>45</sup> H. Marcuse, "On hedonism", cit., p. 129.