

# Aesthetics of Emotions: Between Phenomenology and Pragmatism

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This paper aims to investigate the nature of aesthetic experience, focusing on the interplay between emotions and cognition. We shall establish a link between a phenomenological account of emotions and a pragmatist, anti-dogmatic view on aesthetics, such as that defended by John Dewey. Although pragmatism and phenomenology have historically emerged as separate traditions, they might mutually share resources to achieve an exhaustive description of aesthetic experience. Both traditions conceive aesthetics as a “philosophy of experience”, and they agree on the decisive role emotional intentionality plays in the constitution of an aesthetic experience.

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“Aesthetics” is, to some extent, a problematic word. On the one hand, “aesthetics” might be connected to a logical-epistemological dimension, since it might be defined as “the science of sensible knowledge” in opposition to intellectual rationalism. On the other hand, “aesthetics” is the study of beauty in its various forms, intersecting with philosophy of art. In what follows, we shall accept this polysemy of aesthetics, without trying to force different senses of “aesthetic” under one constraining definition, providing a rather careful description of the wide territory and horizons that open up. Although the domain of aesthetics does not coincide with the domain of art – we might also formulate aesthetic judgements about nature (in front of a landscape, for instance) as well as non-aesthetic judgements about art (describing what a painting represents, or the technique applied, etc.) – we might take art as a *paradigmatic* case among aesthetic practices, one which highlights the essential features of *any* experience that might occur.

Historically, pragmatism and phenomenology have emerged as separate traditions; however, these traditions might mutually share resources to achieve an exhaustive description of aesthetic experience. Firstly, we shall examine the relationship between pragmatism and phenomenology, focusing on how both perspectives defend continuity *contra* any dichotomy between

mind/body, subject/object, emotion/cognition, value/fact. In this sense, both traditions consider aesthetics to be a “philosophy of experience”; although art often seems to exceed the context of human practices, it is not separate from the wider context of human activities and abilities, and cannot be considered isolated. Secondly, pragmatism and phenomenology agree on the decisive role emotions play on the constitution of aesthetic experience.

### **Against Dualisms: The Role of Emotions**

In *Experience and Nature*, Dewey outlines a peculiar definition of experience, as interaction between living beings and nature, rejecting any empiricist account of experience as a chaotic flux of sense data<sup>1</sup>. Experience is rather a “rhythmic” interconnection of passivity and activity; things “out there” show themselves a peculiar autonomous organization, or a specific legality. Dewey agrees with Williams James’ rejection of atomistic and associationist principles, asserting that experience is not a mere collection of atomic data, extrinsically connected by the thinking subject. In this sense, any dichotomy between object and subject is devoid of any sense. Art develops precisely in this interplay of world and subject, making use of different languages and media.

Similarly, phenomenologists pursue their research in two diverging yet intertwined directions. On the one hand, they analyse the feeling acts which characterize the aesthetic experience, while on the other hand, they examine the intentional object. Both the production and reception of a work of art are connected to the morphological structure of the work of art itself; only in this interaction between a feeling subject and a given object, does art unfold<sup>2</sup>. Art necessarily requires a subject that experiences the “object” in question, regardless of it being material or immaterial (as a performance or an idea).

A significant point of connection between pragmatism and phenomenology is offered by the crucial role that emotions play in the construction of the aesthetic experience. According to Dewey, emotion and cognition are not

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<sup>1</sup> J. Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, (1925, 1929), in *Later Works*, I, ed. by J.A. Boydston, Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale-Edwardsville 1981.

<sup>2</sup> For a thorough exploration of phenomenological aesthetics, see G. Scaramuzza, *Sulle origini dell'estetica fenomenologica*, Antenore, Padova 1976.

conceived as opposing psychological dimensions, but rather as intertwined abilities. For the pragmatist, the world around us affects us immediately; we are not abstract minds or disembodied consciousnesses, but rather living bodies who express through arts their freedom to define themselves. Emotions do not express anything private. They rather work as magnets that select and reorganize the material of experience<sup>3</sup>. The artwork, which results from the emotional rearrangement of the material, is something active, that *does* something. It is *not* an inert product and should not be seen in isolation from the process that produced it. In this sense, art «demonstrates the gratuitous falsity of notions that divide overt and executive activity from thought and feeling and thus separate mind and matter»<sup>4</sup>.

An analogous intertwining of intellectual and emotional experiences is defended by phenomenologists. Although phenomenology is a diverse movement, it is nonetheless possible to identify a few unifying theses. More specifically, any phenomenological inquiry shares Brentano's theory of intentionality<sup>5</sup>, according to which every psychological act – emotions included – are directed to an object. In this sense, the “aesthetic” lies in the interaction between a feeling subject and a value-object, a definition that deprives of any sense the traditional dichotomy between subject and object. From Husserl's perspective, the aesthetic object cannot be conceived as a closed, self-sufficient entity, but it is rather the necessary correlate of an emotional intentional act. Indeed, Husserl expressed irritation against Roman Ingarden's ontology of art, accusing it of being one-sided, since it neglected the subjective side of investigations<sup>6</sup>. We might identify, hence, two sides of any phenomenological investigation. On the one hand, we have the analysis of the object, of its structures and morphology (*Gegenstandsphänomenologie*); on the other hand, we find the analysis of the

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<sup>3</sup> J. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, in *Later Works*, I, ed. by J.A. Boydston, Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale-Edwardsville 1989, p. 75.

<sup>4</sup> J. Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, cit., p. 293.

<sup>5</sup> See F. Brentano, *Die Psychologie vom empirischen Standpunkt*, Duncker & Humblot, Leipzig 1874; *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*, translated by A.C. Rancurello, D.B. Terrell, and L. McAlister, Routledge, London 1973.

<sup>6</sup> For Ingarden's view on the ontology of art, see R. Ingarden, *Das literarische Kunstwerk*, Niemeyer, Halle 1931.

psychological acts that are directed to the object (*Aktphänomenologie*). While Ingarden, Conrad and Hartmann, have favoured the object-analysis, Moritz Geiger, conversely, focused on the phenomenology of the act<sup>7</sup>. Nonetheless, they all rejected the traditional dichotomy between subject and object, defending their necessary interaction. Furthermore, against any alleged dichotomy, emotions are not opposing cognition as “irrational” states of mind. Emotions share the same structural intentionality of intellectual acts. Emotions intend a certain object; any given emotion has a *formal* object, which makes the emotion intelligible.

For Dewey, too, the intentionality of emotions, i.e., their ability to be directed to a specific object, cannot be overlooked. «For emotion in its ordinary sense is something called out by objects, physical and personal; it is response to an objective situation»<sup>8</sup>. Emotion is, so to speak, «an attitude or disposition, which is a function of objective things»<sup>9</sup>.

### **The Claim to Intersubjectivity**

Once we have assessed the role of emotions in our appreciation of a work of art, we might wonder as to whether the emotional perception of an artwork could hinder the possibility of formulating “objective” aesthetic value judgments. Indeed, if we take an empiricist account of emotions, emotions are represented as the most “irrational” part of human life; since emotions are thought to be primarily responsible for aesthetic experiences, their alleged idiosyncrasy seems to condemn them to be biased and partial. Furthermore, the widely accepted dichotomy between subject/object and values/facts, according to which only statements of facts are capable of being “objectively true”, seem to jeopardize their objectivity, insofar as value judgements do not seem to be empirically verifiable. From this perspective, aesthetic and ethical judgements seem to be meaningless if not bound to peculiar aesthetic or moral

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<sup>7</sup> In what follows we shall consider Meinong as a member of the phenomenological movement, insofar as he shares important phenomenological assumptions, namely the intentionality of psychological acts, developed by Brentano. For further details, see J.N. Findlay, “Meinong The Phenomenologist”, *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, XXVII, 104/105 (2/3), 1973, pp. 161-177.

<sup>8</sup> J. Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, cit., p. 292.

<sup>9</sup> Ivi, p. 292.

properties. What, then, does actually mean to formulate an “objective” value judgement?

While empiricist and rationalist philosophers have traditionally erected a separate “realm of values”, which they tried to reconcile with the realm of existence, for Dewey values permeate existence, and are immediately felt and possessed by the subject through emotions. Nonetheless, he claims that this immediate appraisal needs a critical *justification*, and this critical justification is what he defines an “aesthetic judgement”. An aesthetic judgment occurs whenever we want to see if we are *justified* in our experiencing something as elegant or beautiful, whenever we wonder if the «given value» might be «justified by reflection»<sup>10</sup>. Therefore, aesthetic judgements are not just a question of individual preference. From this anti-relativist perspective, we might say that some judgements of beauty, elegance, or repulsiveness are more appropriate than others, insofar as we can provide reasons to support them. Any value judgement must have the possibility of being evaluated by other people. We need to provide *reasons* for our formulations<sup>11</sup>, making reference to a common external world with which we constantly interact.

Similarly, from a phenomenological perspective the question of the objectivity of our value-judgements has been well investigated. Alexius Meinong assigns to emotional experiences a specific kind of intentionality<sup>12</sup>, by which emotions apprehend what we generally define as values – the good, the beautiful, the true, the pleasant. Insofar as the value is considered in its relation to an apprehending subject, we shall deal with “personal” values, while we may talk about “impersonal” values when we abstract from any apprehending subject. Thus, besides a “relative” and “personal” value, we can

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<sup>10</sup> Ivi, p. 301.

<sup>11</sup> For the idea of a shared “space of reasons”, see W. Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, in *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, H. Feigl, M. Scriven (ed. by), vol. I, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1956; repr. in *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 1997.

<sup>12</sup> A. Meinong, *Über emotionale Präsentation*, (1917), in *Gesamtausgabe*, III; *On Emotional Presentation*, translated by M-L. Schubert Kalsi, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 1972. Admittedly, Meinong does not use the word “intentionality”, using rather the words “direction” and “reference” to an object. For Meinong’s theory of intentionality, see C. Travanini, *Oggetto e valore*, Mimesis, Milano 2016.

also recognize an “impersonal” one, which belongs to the thing as such; impersonal beauty is independent from the variability of personal inclinations and tastes. How, then, can we get in touch with this impersonal value? A strong dichotomy emerges between the epistemic and the ontological level of our discourse on values. From an ontological point of view, Meinong is certain that there are impersonal, absolute values, which subsist independently from our thinking processes. However, from an epistemic point of view, it is apparent that we have no direct access to them. This means, that in daily life we have to follow an indirect path to reach impersonal values; indeed, only practical experience might tell us whether a certain aesthetic value is *correctly* attached to a given object, and whether our aesthetic judgment is *correct*. We need to consider the circumstances in which an emotion occurs, and we also need to rationally confront with other agents. In this view, “objective” judgements need interpersonal agreement; they need to be tested and shared.

We find, hence, a public, objective dimension of our aesthetic judgements. In the background, it seems that an intersubjective horizon opens up, insofar as the notion of correctness requires shared criteria of legitimation within a certain social community.

Both phenomenology and pragmatism challenge Kant’s insistence that there is an alternative to the rationalist and empiricist views, one in which judgements of beauty are subjective and singular *and* make a claim to universal validity. With his *Antinomy of Taste* (§ 56), Kant holds that an authentic aesthetic judgement implies the possibility of obtaining *argumentatively* (not demonstratively) other people’s approbation. The judgement of taste is allowed to claim subjective validity, since it is based on a *Gemeinsinn*, on a common sense, that permits us to communicate with others<sup>13</sup>. In this sense, the objectivity claimed by aesthetic judgements is rather a form of intersubjectivity.

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<sup>13</sup> I. Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, in *Kants gesammelte Schriften*, Bd. III, 1790; *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, translated by P. Guyer and E. Matthews, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2000.

Likewise, phenomenologists defend the idea of the correctness of our aesthetic value judgements, while insisting on a distance from a dogmatic realist view on values. Even within a strong realist account of values, such as that of Alexius Meinong, we end up taking into account pragmatic factors. An impersonal value is ontologically determined, but epistemically largely incomplete. What our emotions do give us is the general form of value. How, exactly, an objective, “absolute” value is attached to objects is not a question we can resolve *a priori*, but one that requires reference to a plurality of empirical factors. In daily life, we need to rationally confront other agents. Objective value judgements need interpersonal agreement; they need to be shared.

Dewey also rejects any form of dogmatism; an aesthetic value judgement always entails a certain hypothetical element and, hence, a certain risk of being wrong. According to him, an aesthetic judgment is objective insofar as we are able to provide generally available reasons in order to justify it. These must be reasons that can be tested by other persons in their direct relationship with a public, shared object. An aesthetic judgment is therefore “objective” in the sense that it can be checked by others, to whom the same objective material is available. While formulating our value judgements, we always need to make reference to our own experiences, as the work of art becomes a part of our experience. An interaction occurs between the object’s structure and our past, sensibility, and knowledge. We do not have any general rules, prescriptions, or quantitative standards which could possibly guarantee the correctness of our aesthetic judgements. Nonetheless, since we insist on the public qualities of a work of art, others who have the same material at their disposal can evaluate our judgement. In this sense, the aesthetic value judgement can be defined as “objective”, insofar as it demands to be shared, in virtue of the common world we are all in. There are not any objects or properties of objects «which carry their own adequate credentials upon their face»<sup>14</sup>. This is «the delusion of the whole historic tradition

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<sup>14</sup> J. Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, cit., p. 303.

regarding knowledge, infecting alike sensational and rational schools, objective realisms and introspective idealisms»<sup>15</sup>.

Phenomenology and pragmatism share, thus, this same claim to *intersubjectivity* for our aesthetic value judgements. To define an object as “beautiful” always requires the exercise of rational, logical and emotional abilities, which characterize the human means of experiencing the world in general. Indeed, experience is «the fulfilment of an organism in its struggles and achievements in a world of things, it is art in germ»<sup>16</sup>.

Cooperation between pragmatism and phenomenology becomes, hence, significant for our understanding of the complexity of aesthetics, and for reshaping our concept of objectivity into one that is *not* opposed to subjectivity. From phenomenology, we have learnt that the ascription of objectivity to an aesthetic judgment always requires a subject that feels a certain value, revealing new aspects of things. As intentional acts, emotions and values are not separable entities, and the aesthetic lies in this very interaction of the two polarities. Accordingly, the dichotomy between subject and object blurs, and the same happens to the idea that “subjective” means “biased” or “partial”. We rather found out that “objectivity” is not separable from the concept of subjectivity, intended not only in a first-person perspective, but also – as suggested by Dewey – in a “we” perspective (first person plural perspective). As Dewey pointed out, an aesthetic judgement makes sense within a community of people who share a common world of beliefs, emotional attitudes and concepts. It remains a question open to further investigation how exactly to circumscribe the particular community we belong to, and how to define the conditions of membership.

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>16</sup> J. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, cit., p. 25.