Dewey's Aesthetics

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John Dewey is well known for his work in logic, scientific inquiry, and philosophy of education. His fame is based largely on his membership in the school of American pragmatists of which Charles Sanders Peirce and William James were the leading early figures. He has also had a great deal of influence in aesthetics and the philosophy of art. His work *Art as Experience* is regarded by many as one of the most important in the 20th century. Yet it is not as widely discussed as that evaluation would indicate. There are several reasons for this.

First, although Dewey seems to write in an almost folksy style, his philosophical prose is often difficult and dense. Second, the book early on had the misfortune of receiving two reviews that negatively impacted its reception. The first, by an avowed follower, Stephen Pepper, complained that it was not truly pragmatic and that Dewey had reverted to an earlier Hegelianism (Pepper 1939). The second, by Benedetto Croce, seemed to confirm this (Croce 1948). Croce, widely seen as Hegelian himself, saw so many similarities between Dewey's work and his own that he accused Dewey of lifting his ideas. Dewey insisted otherwise, but the sense that there was something too Hegelian in *Art as Experience* remained. This did not stop many philosophers, educators, and other intellectuals from producing works that were strongly influenced by *Art as Experience*. These included Van Meter Ames, Albert Barnes, Irwin Edman, Horace Kallen, Bertram Morris, and Stephen Pepper.

However, in the 1950s there was an analytic revolution in English-speaking aesthetics. Prior aesthetic theories were considered to be too speculative, unclear, and in general “dreary.” Dewey's work was caught up in this condemnation. Arnold Isenberg (Isenberg 1987, originally 1950) for instance, in a founding document of analytic aesthetics, dismissed *Art as Experience* as a “hodgepodge of conflicting methods and undisciplined speculations,” (128) although he found it full of profound suggestions. Dewey's theories of expression and creativity were particular targets of analytic attack. Dewey was caught up in an overall critique of expression as a defining characteristic of art, although often his own distinctive theory was ignored in the process. A situation followed, and continued well into the 1980s, in which, according to one editor of the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Dewey's
aesthetics was virtually ignored (Fisher, 1989). While Monroe Beardsley, one of the most important 20th century aestheticians who came after Dewey, kept an interest in Dewey alive (Beardsley 1958, 1975, 1982), particularly in his discussions of aesthetic experience, other major figures, including Nelson Goodman, Arthur Danto, Mary Mothersill and Richard Wollheim, completely ignored him. Joseph Margolis (1980), another leading theorist, was to some extent an exception in that he had a natural affinity to pragmatist ways of thought. His idea that works of art are culturally emergent but physically embodied entities is Deweyan in spirit, as is his insistence on a robust relativist theory of interpretation. But Margolis seldom refers to Dewey and although he believes himself closer to Dewey's "Hegelianism" than to Peirce's "Kantianism" he finds Peirce more interesting, and he faults Dewey for not being a historicist (Margolis, 1999). The most important serious advocate of Dewey's thought during this period was Arnold Berleant, often a lone voice in the wilderness (1970, 1991). Berleant, who continues in this line today, adopts many of Dewey's themes in his concepts of the "aesthetic field" and "engagement."

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1. Introduction

The relative lack of interest in Dewey changed for several reasons in the late 1970s. First, Richard Rorty turned analytic philosophy on its head by advocating a return to pragmatism (Rorty 1979, 1982). In this, Dewey was one of his avowed heroes. Unfortunately, Rorty was not a close reader of Dewey's aesthetics. The Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy along with their publication, *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, and the Center for Dewey Studies also contributed to this revival. Dewey was further promoted in aesthetics through the work of Richard Shusterman (1992, 1997, 2000). Shusterman went so far as to advocate a pragmatist aesthetics, with Dewey being his main champion. He particularly emphasized the possibilities of treating popular art as fine art with his well-known example of rap as fine art. He also extended aesthetics into the realm of everyday life through his concept of “somaesthetics.” This strand of pro-Deweyan thinking has also been recently pursued by Crispin Sartwell in response to multi-culturalism and everyday aesthetics (Sartwell 1995, 2003) and by Kupfer (Kupfer 1983) and Leddy (Leddy 2005) in their efforts to extend aesthetics to everyday life. In the 1980s Dewey's aesthetics finally received an excellent exposition in the work of Thomas Alexander (1987), who has continued to develop a Deweyan aesthetics (Alexander 1999a).

Meanwhile, there has been a steady interest in Dewey's aesthetics in the philosophy of education, with articles appearing on a regular basis in such publications as the *Journal of Aesthetic Education* and *Studies in the Philosophy of Education*.

Dewey's renewed influence was due in part to increased interest in various continental aestheticians. The similarities between Dewey and Merleau-Ponty are the most striking (Kestenbaum 1977), but he also shares certain features with Gadamer (Gilmour 1987, who also notes important differences, and Jeannot 2001). Given his critique of capitalism, one can also find connections between his thinking and Marxist aestheticians, particularly Adorno (Lysaker 1998). Some contemporary feminist aestheticians have come to realize that Dewey speaks to them and shares many of their concerns, for example their rejection of mind/body dualism, their democratic instincts, their contextualism, and their tendency to break down traditional distinctions (Seigfried 1996a, Duran 2001). There has also been some work on marked similarities between Dewey's aesthetic thought and that of Taoism (Grange 2001), Transcendental Meditation (Zigler 1982), Dogen's version of Zen (Earls 1992), and the great Indian aesthetician, Abhinavagupta (Mathur 1981).

Although *Art as Experience* is Dewey's greatest work in aesthetics, the book had its antecedents. There were scattered short essays and remarks in the 1880s (Dewey 1972a, 1972b). Somewhat more discussion appears in *Democracy and Education* (Dewey 1966, originally 1915). He also published a few short articles on aesthetics in the publication of the Barnes foundation in 1925 and 1926 (Dewey 1954). Dewey

http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/dewey-aesthetics/
laid out the beginnings of a theory of aesthetic experience in his major work, *Experience and Nature* (Dewey 1958, originally 1925). There are also two important essays in *Philosophy and Civilization* (Dewey 1931) that address aesthetics.

An interesting aspect of Dewey's writing, and perhaps another reason for the lack of on-going positive reception, was his lack of strong interest in the history of aesthetics. He seldom explicated or critiqued the aesthetic works of others. Although full of quotations, *Art as Experience* originally lacked adequate footnotes. (Fortunately, the recent Boydston edition tracks down all quotations and even notes which books were in Dewey's library.) Poets figure as strongly in Dewey's reading list as philosophers, especially Coleridge, Housman, Keats, Poe, Shakespeare and Wordsworth. Visual artists are often quoted, especially Cezanne, Constable, Delacroix, Manet, Matisse (whom he met), Reynolds, and Van Gogh. He was of course aware of the work of Plato and Aristotle. Yet in *Art as Experience* he never mentions Hume's aesthetics, Hegel receives only one citation (surprisingly, given the accusation that Dewey was too Hegelian), and Nietzsche none. Kant plays an important role as an opponent. Schopenhauer receives a few mentions. Amongst contemporaries, he mainly references Matthew Arnold, Clive Bell, Bernard Bosanquet, Andrew Bradley, Benedetto Croce, Roger Fry, Thomas Hulme, Violet Paget (who wrote under the name Vernon Lee), Walter Pater, George Santayana, Hippolyte Taine, and Leo Tolstoy. Although William James did not write in aesthetics, his psychological views had a strong influence on Dewey's aesthetics. Dewey never cites Karl Marx, perhaps because he was so committed in his public life to defending an anti-communist form of social liberalism. However his views on the relation between art and society were very close to those of Marx, especially the young Marx. Another figure hovering in the background was Sigmund Freud, for although in other books he is critical of Freud's hypostatization of entities within the unconscious, in *Art as Experience* he gives subconscious processes a significant role in the creative process.

Albert C. Barnes, the industrialist and collector, was Dewey's strongest influence in aesthetics. The two were close friends, and Dewey was a member of the staff of the Barnes Foundation. Barnes, who originally was a student of Dewey's, avidly advocated Dewey's form of pragmatism. He considered himself a strong defender of democracy, although ironically, he made it very difficult for people to see his own extensive collection and was authoritarian in his formalist theories of appreciation. Dewey not only quotes extensively from Barnes's writings but dedicates *Art as Experience* to him. Dewey was well familiar with Barnes's art collection, from which came many of the illustrations in his book.

The selection of illustrations Dewey chose for *Art as Experience* was relatively multicultural for the time. They included Pueblo Indian pottery, Bushmen rock-painting, Scythian ornament, and African sculpture, as well as works by El Greco,
Renoir, Cezanne and Matisse. “Winged Victory” was the frontispiece. Both Barnes and Dewey followed the Harlem Renaissance and the movement of the “New Negro.” Because of his visits to Mexico, Dewey showed a particular interest in traditional and folk arts there, admiring the designs of the rural schools over those of the cities. (1984b, originally 1926)

Although Dewey was widely versed in literature, architecture, painting, sculpture, and the theater, he was relatively uneducated in music. He was said to be tone-deaf. Yet he often had insightful things to say about music, and many musicians and music educators have drawn inspiration from his theory (e.g., Zeltner 1975). He seemed, unfortunately, to have been totally unaware of both photography and film as separate art forms.

Many writers complain that Dewey showed little interest in the avant-garde art of his time. It is true that neither Cubism, Dadaism nor Surrealism play a role in his writing. His theory seems to actually preclude Non-objective painting (Jacobson 1960), although he does speak positively of Abstract art. It is also true that he did not refer much to such innovative poets as T.S. Eliot or Ezra Pound. Although this may indicate a conservative approach to the arts, Dewey nonetheless had considerable influence on various innovative art movements both in his own time and later. Perhaps most significantly, the director of the Federal Art Project from 1935–1943, Holger Cahill, was a Dewey follower (Mavigliano 1984). Amongst painters, Thomas Hart Benton, the regionalist realist, was an early convert to his philosophy. Dewey's influence on Abstract Expressionism was especially strong (Buettner 1975, Berube 1998). For example, Robert Motherwell considered Art as Experience to be one of his bibles (Berube, 1998). Earth Art, with its emphases on getting art out of the museum, might even be seen as applied Dewey. There is also reason to believe that Allan Kaprow, one of the originators of Happenings and Performance Art, read Dewey and drew on his ideas (Kelly 2003). Although one author has argued that contemporary Body Art has moved away from the integrated consummated aesthetic experience Dewey commends (Jay 2002) another argues that Dewey anticipates Body Art (Brodsky 2002).

Dewey's methodology may be off-putting to readers trained in analytic philosophy. He was not much given to argument. (See Aldrich 1944, for a partial defense of Dewey's philosophical method.) However, he did give reasons for rejecting other leading theories in the field. Nor was he adverse to public debate in philosophical journals. Given his emphasis on experience, his method was somewhat similar to that of phenomenologists in the tradition of Edmund Husserl. Yet, unlike Husserl, he was strongly committed to a scientific world-view and did not bracket scientific knowledge in his search for philosophical understanding. His anti-dualism would have also made him hostile to Husserl's Cartesian tendencies. This same anti-dualism meant that he was constantly engaged in undercutting distinctions. It is not surprising
then that he did not follow the method of contemporary analytic philosophy of progressively making more and more subtle distinctions in the search for precise definition. Because of his undercutting of distinctions his thinking can sometimes seem similar to the deconstructionism of Jacques Derrida. However, unlike Derrida, Dewey would never claim that there is nothing "outside the text." The starting point of his philosophy is always the live creature in its environment. Also his emphasis on continuity and his commitment to organicism exhibit a typically modernist belief in harmonious wholes that was not shared by Derrida or by postmodernists generally. Nor would he have accepted Derrida's one-sided insistence on the importance of differences. Dewey could be seen as against method if method is seen as requiring certainty, but not if method focuses on probability. He did share with analytic philosophy a tendency to back up his points with appeals to common sense and to the meanings of words. In evaluating Dewey's method one must also take into account his considered views on the logic of inquiry as expressed in several books which will be reviewed in other articles in this encyclopedia.

2. Early Psychological Aesthetic Theory

Dewey discusses aesthetics and the arts at various points in his first book, *Psychology* (1967, originally 1887). (For a good discussion, see Alexander 1987.) This work comes from Dewey's idealist period and is somewhat unoriginal, although it hints at later developments. Early in the book he remarks that music is harmonious and regular whereas noise is inharmonious and irregular. Musical notes happen when simple tones are combined so that their phases regularly strengthen and weaken one another. Turning to another art form, he notes that poets perceive subtler analogies than others and the form of their language is controlled by deeper feelings. In general, unity of feeling gives artistic unity to compositions (97).

As in his later *Art as Experience*, Dewey emphasizes the importance of rhythm to our psychic lives, both in perception and in expression. The soul tends to express its most intimate states, especially emotion, in rhythmic form. Poetry, he thinks, is "an earlier and more natural mode of expression than prose" (161). Music is the earliest art. Dance is the earliest form of physical activity. Rhythm is defined as the mind's reduction of variety to unity or its breaking unity into variety. It happens when certain beats are emphasized at regular intervals, and it requires that elements be organized temporally, through the mind being carried back and forth, to form a whole. It is not confined to the arts but is pervasive in our experience of time.

Dewey's theories of fanciful and creative imagination are also relevant to his early theory of art. In Chapter Seven, he distinguishes between different forms of imagination. He defines imagination as intellect embodying ideas in particular images. Othello is a product of imagination, and unlike Caesar, has no reference to existence in space and time. Imagination is involved in perception and memory.
Fancy is a higher stage than mechanical imagination, and it is manifested in metaphors and analogies.

The highest form of imagination, creative imagination, allows us to penetrate into the hidden meaning of things through finding sensuous forms that are both highly revealing and pleasurable. The creative imagination makes its objects anew: it separates and combines, but not mechanically. It senses the relations of parts to the development of the whole and it raises details to the level of the universal. It develops the ideal aspect of things, freeing it from the contingent. Unlike perception, it subordinates existence to meaning. It is neither fantasy nor idle play, but reveals universal nature in ideas, as Aristotle saw when he said that poetry is truer than history. Implicitly following Kant, Dewey holds that creative imagination's goal is free play of the self's faculties. Its function is to seize meaning and embody it in sensuous form to give rise to feeling, thus representing the freely acting subjective self.

Poetry that is based on fancy is ephemeral. The imagination of a poet also fails when only his own mood is projected onto nature. Art which reflects enduring interest is universal. It is best when it reveals the unity of man and man, and man and nature, in one organic whole, articulating, as in the case of Wordsworth, what we already feel (174).

Part Two of *Psychology* is devoted to feeling: sensuous, formal, qualitative, intellectual, personal and, in Chapter Fifteen, aesthetic feeling. This chapter also deals with fine art and taste. Aesthetic feelings characteristically accompany perception of "the ideal value of experience" (267). The mind immediately responds to certain relations to ideals through feelings of beauty or ugliness. Every content of experience has beauty in it to the extent that it contains an ideal element. A train engine, for example, is beautiful insofar as it is felt to successfully embody its ideal, i.e., its ability to overcome distances and bring men together. The beautiful object requires a sensuous material, the arrangement of which is of greater importance artistically than intellectually. However this sensuous material is only important insofar as it presents the ideal.

Because of this, art appears freer than science. Art cannot be purely idealistic in the sense of abandoning sensuous material, but it is idealistic in that it uses such material to promote the appreciation of ideal values of experience. The aesthetic feeling of beauty is universal and not a thing of place or time. If an author portrays the ideal significance of a society then he or she has produced art.

True art is universal and true to human nature. This universality excludes such lower senses as taste and smell from the beautiful. It also excludes the feeling of ownership and any reference to external ends. Art cannot, however, be defined. For we cannot
know ahead of time what qualities will appear beautiful. Nonetheless, we can still say that harmony constitutes beauty. Harmony is defined as the feeling that accompanies agreement of experience with the self's ideal nature (273). Art attempts to satisfy the aesthetic in our nature, and it succeeds when it expresses the ideal completely. The ideal, in turn, is the “completely developed self.” So the goal of art is to create the perfectly harmonious self.

Dewey then makes claims about the various fine arts, ranking them according to their level of ideality: architecture is the least ideal art, although it is most fit for religious expression; sculpture ranks higher in that it is less tied to use and is usually associated with a human ideal presented in the human figure; painting is more ideal in that its sensuous side is limited to pigment on a two-dimensional surface and it represents man's passions and needs; music is more ideal yet as its material is not in space, its beauty manifests man's soul, and harmony is at its core; poetry, is fully ideal, having little that is sensuous in it, concentrating as it does on the vital personality of man himself (and nature as only a reflection of this); finally, within poetry, drama gives us the highest ideal in that it deals with humans in action, overcoming the limitations of epic and lyric poetry.

Finally, in this work Dewey held that in saying that something is beautiful we objectify our aesthetic feeling. The great artist is impelled to creation, but the ordinary individual recognizes it. Aesthetic judgments operate according to principles of taste. These give us the characteristics of the objects which feeling calls beautiful. Taste is a matter of individual feeling, not of dry rules, and thus only a man of artistic nature is the right judge of works of art. Finally, aestheticism is the degeneration of aesthetic feeling, for it is simply love of the pleasures of beauty rather than a key to objective beauty in nature.

3. Aesthetics and Dewey's Theory of Education

Much of Dewey's early interest in aesthetics centered around his theory of childhood education. In a work from 1896, “Imagination and Expression,” he stresses the importance of directing the psychical impulse that provides the motive for expression (Dewey, 1972a). Here, unlike later writings, he emphasizes the distinction between the idea to be expressed and the technique by which it is expressed. He argues that although technique should be subservient to idea, it should not be neglected. He rejects the notion that the idea is spiritual and the technique physical. However, in the idealist vein typical of this period, he insists that the child draws from his or her own image, not from the object, and concludes that teachers should help children to present and construct complete images having their own value.

Throughout his early writings on education Dewey emphasized the importance of
aesthetic education. For instance, he writes about the educational role of museums in *The School and Society* (1990, originally 1902). He locates a museum in the center of his ideal school, his diagram of that school representing his effort to synthesize the arts and sciences in education (Constantino 2004).

In his 1915 book *Democracy and Education*