

Response

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PRAGMATISM BETWEEN AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE AND
AESTHETIC EDUCATION

A response to David Granger

SITUATING *PRAGMATIST AESTHETICS*

I am very grateful to Professor David Granger for his perceptive discussion of the second edition of *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, and to the editors of this Journal for generously providing the space for such an ample review of my work. I am particularly pleased to be engaged with specialists in the philosophy of education, since I regard education as one of the core concerns of philosophy. Though its centrality may not be evident in today's philosophical mainstream, education was certainly a key concept for many of philosophy's most influential figures. Plato, Aristotle, Rousseau, Kant, Nietzsche, and Dewey are among the first that spring to my mind, but education was also a crucial interest for Ludwig Wittgenstein, who spent six years teaching in a rural Austrian elementary school after having written his early masterpiece, the *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*, and also composed and published a *Dictionary for Elementary Schools*. The theme of education, I think, pervades Wittgenstein's later philosophy, which often seeks to explain our concepts of meaning and knowing through notions of teaching and training. More than any thinker but Dewey, Wittgenstein informs my philosophical perspective. But Granger is right that Dewey is the most dominant inspiration of *Pragmatist Aesthetics* and more generally of my neopragmatist theory, so I will confine my response to Granger's discussion of my work's relationship to Dewey and to issues of education, while also clarifying a few points in Granger's fine commentary that could lead to a misunderstanding of my views.

Granger graciously credits me for providing "an authoritative voice" that gives Dewey's old message more resonance in today's field of "philosophical aesthetics". If this is true, it is not due to any personal endowment or institutional privilege, but because my work in pragmatist aesthetics



engages more than Dewey and other pragmatist theory by seriously working through their prime competitors in contemporary aesthetic theory. The sad truth is that in an academic field where misleading habits of dualistic thought still prevail, philosophy of art is still largely dominated by the alleged poles of analytic aesthetics and continental theory. So pragmatist voices are likely to gain little hearing beyond the already converted unless they enter into a substantive, sympathetic, and constructive yet critical dialogue with these other approaches.¹ It is therefore noteworthy and helpful that Granger highlights this “positioning with respect to analytic and continental aesthetics” as one of the two themes on which he concentrates his review of my book.

Fortunately, the best of analytic and continental philosophy contains methods or insights that can enrich, refine, and sharpen Dewey’s ideas to provide a fresher, more convincing neopragmatism that seems more useful for current times. There is also considerable areas of overlap between Dewey’s thought and these other traditions. As Adorno shared with Dewey a materialist version of Hegelian historicism (and expressed great admiration for Dewey himself), so there is a strong pragmatist strain in two of the most influential analytic aestheticians of the last fifty years: Monroe Beardsley (who made aesthetic experience the cornerstone of his definition of art and aesthetic value, and acknowledged, in doing so, his deep debt to Dewey) and Nelson Goodman (whose account of art in terms of action and cognition and whose critique of museums has strong Deweyan overtones). I should confess that I only began reading pragmatism seriously in the late 1980s, when I was already a tenured Associate Professor, and it was my old Oxford background in analytic philosophy and my more recent readings in continental hermeneutics, poststructuralism, and critical theory that prepared me to appreciate the scope and power of Dewey’s thought, but also gave me some tools to criticize some dimensions of it.

DEFINING ART AS EXPERIENCE

I argue the paradox that Dewey was right to define art as aesthetic experience, even though this definition – by the dominant standards of philosophical definition (and certainly those that govern analytic aesthetics) –

¹ It is an illusion to think we can ignore the present state of theory and instead simply revert to theorizing from the pure experience of art. Even if we could have a totally pure experience of art (untouched by any theories about what art’s nature and function are), the interpretation of that experience would be shaped to some extent by the prevailing theories that prestructure our engagement with art and our presumptions about it, no matter how misguided those theories may be.

is clearly inadequate, because aesthetic experience clearly fails to provide necessary and sufficient conditions for being an artwork. Such conditions should pertain to all and only those objects or events we rightly call works of art. Dewey's definition of art as experience is both too wide and too narrow to meet this criterion. Many things that create powerful aesthetic experiences (such as objects of natural beauty) are not works of art. Conversely, his experiential definition is too narrow since many artworks (particularly bad ones) do not engender aesthetic experience as he defines it. But the fact that Dewey's definition fails to define art's extension – the class of all artworks – does not entail that it is not a useful definition for other purposes. Indeed, I go on to argue that it is more useful than today's dominant analytic definitions of art, which I criticize as “wrapper theories,” since they aim more at perfect coverage of art's extension than at illuminating the special point and value of art or at improving art's appreciation.

In contrast, to define art in terms of aesthetic experience usefully emphasizes a crucial background condition, direction, and valued goal of art. Though many artworks fail to produce aesthetic experience, if such experience were never achieved, art would probably have never existed. If artworks universally abandoned the aim of aesthetic experience, then art as we know it would likely disappear or lose importance in our lives. Defining art as experience also has value in widening the realm of art by challenging the rigid division between art and action or real life, a distinction supported by theories that define art as *mimesis* or *poesis* or as the narrow practice of fine art defined by the institutional artworld. Dewey's definition of art as experience is then extremely useful for deepening and transforming our understanding of art, for reminding us that art's value is in its rich and dynamic experience, and not primarily in collecting or connoisseurship or scholarly interpretation. His definition has what I call “directional” or motivational value by directing us toward the value of aesthetic experience. As Dewey himself remarks, “a definition is good . . . when it so points in the direction in which we can move expeditiously to having an experience (*Art as Experience*, 220). But we need to distinguish, more clearly than Dewey did, this transformational and directional role from the essentialist aim of definition as conceived by traditional philosophy; just as we need to be more explicit that the merit of defining art as experience is more of insight into the point, ground, and value of art, but that it fails as a taxonomic definition that correctly map's art's extension.

Here I need to qualify Granger's claim that my pragmatism “abjures the project [of defining what is art] outright.” What I reject is the value of wrapper definitions or other totalizing definitions of extension, and this

is why I am, on the whole, sympathetic to Dewey's experiential definition despite its limitations. Rather than spurning the whole question of defining art, I think we have to study more carefully the different kinds and uses of definition that can be given, so as to provide definitions that can be more helpful to our appreciation and understanding of art. In that spirit, I have recently offered my own definition of art as dramatization by arguing for the utility of this definition for explaining certain key features of art and for resolving certain dilemmas in aesthetic theory.² Of course, all definitions have their limitations (for limitation, after all, is the core meaning of definition). But rather than outline the virtues of my definition and speculate about its limitations, let me return to Dewey's.

POPULAR ART AND THE LIMITS OF IMMEDIATE EXPERIENCE

If defining art as immediate aesthetic experience directs us profitably toward the core of art's value, such experience itself cannot take us as far as Dewey thinks in justifying our evaluative verdicts. Since the immediacy of aesthetic experience is in itself mute and evanescent (as Dewey often notes), I argue that evaluations of art require that aesthetic experience be filled out or anchored by discursive critical means that make our experiences more effectively communicable, durable and powerful by grounding them in socially legitimated practices. I can illustrate this issue by reference to a central theme of my book where I found Dewey both inspiring and frustratingly lacking: the aesthetic legitimation of popular art. Because so much of our lives are immersed in this art, refusal to accept its aesthetic value reinforces painful divisions in our society and in our individual psyches. We are made to disdain the things that give us pleasure and to feel ashamed of the pleasures they give. Unlike most philosophers, Dewey recognized the problem and its threat to art in a democratic culture.

Philosophic theory concerned itself only with those arts that had the stamp and seal of recognition by the class having the social standing and authority. Popular arts must have flourished, but they obtained no literary attention. They were not worthy of mention in theoretical discussion. Probably they were not even thought of as arts (*Art as Experience* 191).

When . . . art is relegated to the museum and gallery, the unconquerable impulse towards experiences enjoyable in themselves finds such outlet as the daily environment provides [such as "the movie, jazzed music, the comic strip," etc.]. . . . When because of their remoteness, the objects acknowledged by the cultivated to be works of fine art seem anemic

² See Richard Shusterman, *Surface and Depth: Dialectics of Criticism and Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), ch. 13.

to the mass of people, esthetic hunger is likely to seek the cheap and the vulgar (*ibid.*, pp. 11–12).

Dewey's definition of art as experience tries to legitimate popular art by locating art's value in its dynamic lived experience, while resisting the artworld's institutional tendencies to commodify, specialize, and thus divide art from popular experience. But Dewey's own remarks ironically reveal the legitimational inadequacy of aesthetic experience on its own. If popular arts "were not even thought of as arts" because they "obtained no literary attention", their mere experience and Dewey's brief mention of them "in theoretical discussion" are clearly not sufficient attention. While his text does contain aesthetic analysis of works of high art and of non-Western folk art, there is no real discussion of contemporary popular arts. Moreover, his passing reference to movies, jazz, and comics ends by associating them with "the cheap and the vulgar" to which the frustrated "esthetic hunger" of the masses is directed. Without concentrated aesthetic attention to the popular arts, how can they escape their image as cheap and vulgar? And why does Dewey not provide this when they need it more than those arts that have already achieved aesthetic recognition?

Dewey seems to answer that if art is redefined as aesthetic experience, then simply our experiencing that experience will establish something as an artwork. Thus, nothing but aesthetic experience is needed for legitimation, and criticism is simply a means to bring the reader to have the relevant experience. As Dewey says, criticism is but "an auxiliary" "guide" to the work of art that serves to make the experience of that work "enlarged and quickened". It simply helps the reader "through the expansion of his own experience by the work of art to which criticism is subsidiary" (AE 328). So if we had the right experience, we would not need criticism at all, neither for understanding nor for legitimation. The power of the experience would be enough.

But legitimation has a social dimension of justification and thus requires means of consensus-formation that are not as immediate as aesthetic experience. In short, criticism is needed not simply to sharpen perception, but to provide the social preconditions and practices necessary for proper appreciation. If popular arts are not considered worthy of aesthetic attention, they will not be able to afford aesthetic experience. One crucial way of establishing their worthiness is to show that they deserve and reward serious critical attention, and the only way to show this is by providing that attention. Moreover, since the tools of serious aesthetic criticism are already invested with great social status, such criticism transmits a measure of that status to the objects towards which it is directed. That is one reason I have devoted so much effort to close aesthetic analysis of rap

songs (in *Pragmatist Aesthetics* and *Practicing Philosophy*) and later (in *Performing Live*) also to country music and its cinema.

If legitimation of popular art requires not mere experience but also theoretical argument and detailed aesthetic criticism, then we should also realize that even all these may not be enough. Concrete social and educational reforms are also needed. My project has sometimes been criticized by sociologists for focusing on the reform of aesthetic theory, which, they argue, can then blind us to the more material dimensions of society that structure the field of culture. My reply to this critique is that pragmatist theory and aesthetic criticism should neither replace nor preclude concrete social analysis and political reforms; they instead complement and facilitate such reforms (as they also promote educational reforms) by helping to transform our attitudes.³

I now turn to another point where Granger's perceptive commentary on my work is somewhat misleading. He writes that I follow "Dewey's lead in arguing for the possibility and value of 'uninterpreted understandings'; to wit, a 'form of meaning and experience beyond or beneath the web of language' (p. 117 and p. 135)". I do indeed follow Dewey in affirming uninterpreted understandings and their pervasive role in non-linguistic experience. But it is wrong to identify the whole class of uninterpreted understandings (or for that matter the class of all immediate experience) with nonlinguistic experience, since we can have immediate understandings of linguistic entities. In *Pragmatist Aesthetics* (and elsewhere), I distinguish between the immediacy of uninterpreted understandings of language (e.g., of simple, pertinent utterances of a language I know well) and the mediacy of interpretation that is needed when I face a text or utterance that I cannot initially understand (either because of its word meaning or contextual relevance) and thus have to figure out what it means through interpretation.

Thus I write (in *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, 125), "When, on my way to the beach, I am told that the surf is up, I immediately understand what is said Only if I were unfamiliar with idiomatic English, or unable to hear the words, or in a situation where the utterance seemed out of place [e.g., in the midst of downtown Berlin] would I have to interpret it."

Dewey, I think, also recognizes this distinction, but his writings often encourage the confusion of immediacy with nondiscursivity because he insists that there is always and must be something crucially nondiscursive in all immediate experience, a qualitative feeling that is essentially

³ See, for example, "Légitimer la légitimation de l'art populaire," *Politix* 24 (1993), 153–157; and "Rap Remix: Pragmatism, Postmodernism, and other Issues in the House", *Critical Inquiry* 22 (1995), 150–158.

aesthetic and that not only accompanies all perception, thought, and action but is necessary for structuring and unifying them. I distance myself from this view in *Practicing Philosophy* (ch. 6), where I argue that Dewey's own theory of habit, practical interest, and the structuring of environmental context are often enough to guide our thinking and behavior and to shape it into a reasonable functional unity, without presuming the nondiscursive aesthetic glue of a special qualitative feeling.

SOMATIC EXPERIENCE AND DISCURSIVITY

Just as we must not equate immediate, uninterpreted understandings with nondiscursive experience, so we must not identify somatic experience as entirely nondiscursive, even if much somatic feeling defies reduction to language and precedes our linguistic formulation of it. First, even our nondiscursive experience – those nameless feels, flows, and surges – are shaped in some way by the language-conditioned environments and institutions in which our bodies perform. Second, language can be a very useful tool in improving nondiscursive bodily experience by directing conscious reflection to what we are doing with ourselves and explaining how we can do things differently. Of course, language alone cannot do the job; somatic education requires nonlinguistic bodily action and often hands-on intervention. But language too is often essential here as a device to focus our attention on a body part and its position, or on our breathing, or even the quality of a desired movement (whether it is slow, smooth, effortful, reversible, etc.), even if there is always some dimension of the quality that the mere words seem unable to capture.

In the Alexander Technique that Dewey celebrated and studied (just as in the Feldenkrais Method that I prefer), language is carefully deployed, even when it is only a matter of silently thinking or “talking” to oneself in order to focus one's concentration so as to bring one's bodily actions and feelings into greater, sharper consciousness.⁴ We need to bring our somatic functioning and its attendant experience into more explicit consciousness in order to detect subtly different modalities of posture or movement and compare their qualitative feelings of ease and coordination, so that these modalities can be more freely chosen or possibly modified in the future. Without detecting the difference between these modalities, we could never consciously, rationally choose to adopt new ways of posture and movement that are different from our habitual ones, because we could not consistently

⁴ I explain the reasons for this preference in *Performing Live: Aesthetic Alternatives for the Ends of Art* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), ch. 8.

feel or recognize the difference to be chosen and thus could not effectively develop them into improved habits. We need to be more aware of what we are actually doing somatically in order to do better what we want.

This is the crucial truth that underlies Alexander's insistence on "conscious constructive control." But the goal should not be to perform every act with maximal deliberate consciousness. That would be horribly impractical, if not impossible. Heightened somatic consciousness and control (and the linguistic means of focusing they often require) are only to be introduced in certain contexts, principally contexts of learning or relearning, as when one is trying to correct bad habits of body use. Once the new, improved form of moving is learned and habituated, it can be allowed to sink from explicit awareness and into spontaneous immediacy, so that consciousness can be freed to focus on other matters, which are usually more interesting and urgent than attention to the subtle kinesthetic feelings of our own bodies. These productive dialectics – between spontaneous immediacy and conscious mediated control, between sensitivity to the nondiscursive and appreciation of discursive means to enhance that sensitivity – lie at the core of my theory of somaesthetics and are crucial to improving our use of ourselves. I do not, however, want to discount the aesthetic interest of somatic awareness for its own sake; there is real aesthetic satisfaction in feeling ease and grace of movement that is heightened through a consciously cognitive grasp of how one is moving, a recognition of which body parts are moving, which parts initiate the movement, in which joints do they move, and what is the aesthetic quality of the movement (quick, slow, flowing, rhythmic, etc.). Such satisfactions are also central to my view of somaesthetics, and they are recognized by somatic educators like Alexander and Feldenkrais.

There is, I think, great potential for the introduction of such somaesthetic methods into curricula of aesthetic education and philosophy rather than confining them to the realm of physical education in which they barely find a place in the academic curriculum. Of course, the idea of introducing somatic training as part of aesthetic and philosophical education certainly bucks the dominant idealist tradition of aesthetics and philosophy, as I explain in *Pragmatist Aesthetics*. But part of the charm of pragmatism, at least for me, is that it looks beyond traditional theory and toward new possibilities of practice and practice-oriented theory. The collaboration of specialist theorists of education would be invaluable in developing the potential of somaesthetics for aesthetic experience and philosophical insight. But here is not the place to propose a detailed research agenda. Instead, let me conclude by cautioning against a misunderstanding that haunts somaesthetics.

SOMAESTHETICS: SELF AND OTHER

Granger is far too acute a reader to commit this error but his discussion of somaesthetics (though sympathetic and discerning) is likely to provoke it in others. He rightly notes that I link somaesthetics to “the arts of self-perfection” and describe it as centrally concerned with “the experience and use of one’s body as a locus of sensory-aesthetic appreciation (*aesthesis*) and creative self-fashioning.” Given these points, and given the fact that philosophy typically identifies the body with the private and personal, it is tempting to misconstrue somaesthetics as a narrowly selfish affair and identify it with the superficial, narcissistic body aestheticism that is all too rife in contemporary American culture. That would be a gross distortion of somaesthetics, which I portray as a critical discipline that is engaged precisely in the critique of our preoccupation with such narcissistic body practices that focus exclusively on external form as defined by certain stereotypical paradigms to the neglect of more exploratory, inner-directed and experiential somatic disciplines.

We should also remember that self-perfection and creative self-fashioning can be sought and used for purposes much wider than the self. One seeks to better oneself not just for private self-satisfaction but to become a better teacher, colleague, friend, neighbor, husband, father, citizen. And indeed, what we call self-satisfaction most typically involves the sharing of communicative interaction with colleagues, friends, and loved ones. Self realization, as Dewey recognized, is much richer when one focuses not on one’s self but on projects and groups that extend beyond the individual. In *Practicing Philosophy*, I argue that this provides an aesthetic justification for participatory democracy. But let me close by bringing this point of the other-directedness of self-perfection back to the issue of somaesthetics. For one’s efforts to improve one’s experience and use of one’s body can be directed largely to the good of others. One’s body is the crucial, indispensable tool for all action, including acts for the good of others. Hence better use of our bodies can improve our capacity for virtue, as ancient Greek and Chinese philosophy often urges. My work as a Feldenkrais practitioner concretely exemplifies this dialectic of self-care and other-directedness.

When I give a student a Feldenkrais lesson (in Feldenkrais Method we have an educational model and thus work with “students” rather than “patients,” and we give “lessons” rather than “therapy sessions”), I have to be aware also of my own body positioning and breathing, the tension in my hands and other body parts, and the quality of contact that my feet have with the floor. I need to make myself somatically comfortable in order to communicate the right message to the student. Otherwise, I will be passing

my feelings of somatic tension and unease to the student when I touch him. And since one often fails to realize when and why one is in a mild state of somatic discomfort, part of the Feldenkrais training is devoted to teaching one to discern such states and distinguish their causes.

This is but one example of the crucial theme of caring for oneself as a means of caring for others. A wise pragmatism knows that effective concern for the ends requires equally respectful concern for the means necessary to achieve those ends. This is also an argument for the crucial role of aesthetic education and criticism, even if one's ultimate aim is simply richer aesthetic experience. But aesthetic experience, like the experiencing self, will be all the richer if its interest reaches well beyond itself and out to the environing fields that gives it structure.

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