

Commentary

Complexities of Aesthetic Experience: Response to Johnston

I am grateful for this opportunity to clarify my views on aesthetic experience and somaesthetics that Scott Johnston discusses. Combining two very vague and contested ideas (“experience” and “the aesthetic”), the concept of aesthetic experience is an extremely ambiguous notion some of whose principal different conceptions I have carefully tried to outline.¹ It is therefore rash for Johnston to presume that what I mean by aesthetic experience is simply “the [Deweyan] sort of experience that connotes an immediate, qualitative whole” that is “consummatory.” Though I deeply appreciate John Dewey’s view, I have also criticized it on several counts. I insist, for example, on the existence and value of aesthetic experiences of fragmentation and rupture that have neither the unity of coherence nor that of completion that Dewey demands. In fact, as I have often pointed out, part of my interest in rap music was connected to its aesthetic of fragmentation.²

Dewey and I both affirm (in sometimes different ways) some sort of primacy of the immediate in aesthetic experience. But primacy and immediacy are polysemic notions whose meaning is very context-dependent and shifting. Insufficient attention to these multiple meanings and contexts seems to confuse some of Johnston’s discussion and leads to his puzzlement about how I can emphasize both immediacy and reflection and whether I consistently accord primacy to the former. The first step toward clarifying matters is to note that affirming immediacy in aesthetic experience is not to deny two important dimensions in which aesthetic experience is importantly mediated. First, aesthetic experiences are rarely, if ever, immediate in the sense of being instantaneous; they require some time of processing. Even with allegedly nontemporal arts such as painting (and even with paintings that do not demand complex decoding), there is, in aesthetic experience, a process of focusing on the work, of reacting to it, and of deepening appreciation or absorption. Second, at least in the arts, an aesthetic experience should be mediated by some prior (typically extensive) training in what is necessary to understand and appreciate such art. My aesthetic experience of French poetry required a sustained training in French language, literature, and culture, a training that required reflective thinking.

However, despite these crucial mediations, aesthetic experience is usefully characterized as distinctively immediate in that its meanings and values are perceived and savored directly in our experience of the work rather than being only revealed, understood, or appreciated at a later time. I appreciate

the poetry of Baudelaire as I hear or read it, and not only after it is explained to me or after I subsequently reflect on or recollect this poetic experience. Aesthetic experience is immediate in the sense of being immediately enjoyed and valued rather than being an experience in which gratification and appreciation is deferred to a later time. An aesthetic experience of climbing a mountain (which obviously takes time and requires some training) means enjoying the climb *while* one is climbing, not when one's enjoyment is postponed till one has reached the summit and enjoys its view. When I emphasize the immediacy of aesthetic experience, I am celebrating this character of direct, undeferred, imminent appreciation or sense of value, which is what makes such experience enjoyed or valued for its own sake.³ Such immediate enjoyment is all that is usefully meant by saying that aesthetic experience is appreciated intrinsically or as an end in itself rather than a mere means to some further end, even though there are obviously many good ends to which aesthetic experience can usefully serve as means.

This sense of immediacy — of direct, undeferred appreciation of meaning, enjoyment, and value — does not deny a role for reflection. Not only can prior reflection prepare the way for immediate enjoyment but reflection itself offers its own aesthetic pleasures of immediacy. We can enjoy the process of reasoning, speculating, interpreting in a direct or immediate way without postponing our satisfaction to a subsequent appreciation of the results of our reflective process, that is, when we (meta-)reflect, at a later time, on what that initial reflective experience has engendered. Moreover, subsequent reflection on an aesthetic experience can prepare the way for a future experience of aesthetic immediacy of still greater intensity, depth of meaning, and accuracy of judgment. This is one of the crucial values of art criticism and aesthetic education. In a similar way, though we cannot do without our immediate unreflective bodily competencies that we have acquired mostly through habit (though sometimes also through explicit instruction), we further need disciplines of somatic reflection to improve our bodily and mental functioning by correcting the faulty habits and misuse that often pervade our spontaneously immediate behavior, whether such behavior be characterized as bodily or mental.⁴

Like immediacy, the notion of primacy or priority has a plurality of senses. There is, for instance, temporal priority, logical or functional priority, and priority of importance. With respect to our dealings with art and experience, as Johnston rightly argues, there is a productive continuum of immediacy and reflection, of ends and means, of developments and consummations, so that the synergetic unities and harmonizing functions of elements and processes are more essential (in my view and, I think, Dewey's) than hierarchies of importance. There will always have been prior experience that in some way influences aesthetic experience, so that the immediacy of that experience has no absolute temporal priority. There is, however, a functional or logical (as well as a temporal) priority of any specific aesthetic experience as immediately had in contrast to subsequent reflection on that particular experience. This is simply a grammatical point that the immediate experience serves as the necessary object of further reflection on that experience.

Does this mean that the immediacy of aesthetic experience is always also primary in the sense of being more important than the reflection that deepens it and that subsequently contributes to better aesthetic experiences more powerful and discerning than the original one immediately had? I would be very reluctant to say yes because I am not at all sure how to measure importance here. One would need to inquire more precisely importance for what, for whom, and in which context? One is also tempted to ask whether, or to what extent, reflection on an aesthetic experience can form part of that experience itself and of its enjoyed immediacy. Can we not enjoy with immediate satisfaction the reflective recognition that we are enjoying ourselves aesthetically? Cannot even subsequent reflection prolong or reactivate an already experienced immediacy that lingers in the specious present of short-term memory or in the proximate past?

Such a question raises the issue of the limits of the aesthetic experience. Dewey's description of such experience — as a developing, dynamic, enjoyably harmonizing unity of doing and undergoing that works through tensions and obstacles and eventually leads to a satisfying consummation — suggests a sense of completeness that in turn suggests a clear climactic end or limit to the experience. His account of aesthetic experience always evoked in me (perhaps because of my own wayward thinking) the idea of sexual experience with its culminating consummation of orgasm. But, one might ask, what about the subsequent emotions, tremors, and afterglow? Can they not be considered part of the sexual experience when it is “*an*” experience in Dewey's evaluative sense. And, by analogy, cannot a lingering reflection on an aesthetic experience be part of the aesthetic experience by which it was evoked? Such questions suggest that there still remains much to explore about the limits, varieties, features, and structures of aesthetic experience. Johnston's article can be taken as a useful provocation to such inquiry.

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NOTES

1. See “The End of Aesthetic Experience,” in my *Performing Live* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000).
2. See for example the chapters on rap in Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics* (Blackwell: Oxford, 1992); Richard Shusterman, *Practicing Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 1997) and Richard Shusterman, “Pragmatism and Criticism” *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 16 (2002): 26-38, which is a response to three critics in a symposium on the second edition of *Pragmatist Aesthetics* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000).
3. There is a further complexity in Dewey's discussion of immediacy that needs to be mentioned. Johnston seems prone to identify immediate meanings and immediate experiences with immediate qualities, and therefore criticizes Dewey for inconsistency in affirming that immediate qualities do not have meaning though there are immediate experiences of meaning and there are immediate

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meanings. For Dewey, immediate qualities are just had or experienced, and although they structure our search for meaning and are influenced by prior products of meaning (which prestructure our experience), they are themselves too immediate, fleeting, and mute to be meaningful in themselves. When we give them meaning or reflect upon them, they are then no longer the immediate qualities they were in their immediacy. I am not saying here that Dewey is correct, simply that he is not inconsistent in the way Johnston suggests, because he distinguishes more carefully than Johnston does between immediate qualities (on the one hand) and immediate experiences and immediate (that is, immediately grasped) meanings.

4. Somaesthetics, as I have repeatedly insisted, involves a critique of body-mind dualism. For example, somaesthetics argues that habits we typically identify as bodily also exert a very strong but usually unrecognized influence on what is generally considered to be our merely mental lives, not only in the realm of emotion but in that of perception and reasoning. For more on this point, see Richard Shusterman, "Wittgenstein on Bodily Feelings: Explanation and Melioration in Philosophy of Mind, Art, and Politics," in *The Grammar of Politics: Wittgenstein and Political Philosophy*, ed. Cressida J. Heyes (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2003), 202-19.