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New Directions: Dewey, Aesthetics, and Psychology

Spring, 1992

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"Aesthetic questions have nothing to do with psychological experiments but are answered in an entirely different way." -- L. Wittgenstein.¹

The purpose of this paper is to determine whether psychological information is relevant to solving aesthetic problems. Along the way I will point out that there are disparate senses of the word 'psychology' and I will discuss how those senses may be relevant to the goals of aesthetics. I will show how John Dewey can be perceived historically as an early contributor to what we now call 'cultural psychology', which I believe is a viable alternative to experimental aesthetics.

If we reflect upon early philosophy, we may safely say that Aristotle's theory of catharsis ranks among the first psychological theories which sought to describe those special emotions (which we might say have an aesthetic emphasis) we feel when we view a work of art. According to Aristotle, tragic drama "contrives to purify the emotions of pity and fear (Bambrough, *Poetics*, II.6.)." Aristotle meant "catharsis" to be a word which describes in general terms what it is people feel when they experience tragic drama. Catharsis not only describes a function of the body, but also a function of drama in its relationship with people. Both the context and meaning of the play combine to produce a cathartic experience. As Richard Janko explains, "According to the argument of the *Poetics*, if the action represented (the plot) is correctly structured, it will arouse in the audience the correct emotional response; in the case of tragedy this is pity and terror."² Meaning is not only given to us through the subject-matter (e.g. pitiable, terrifying, painful events) of the drama, but the audience-members interact with its context to instill meaning as well. In the age following Aristotle, the understanding that catharsis comes about through audience participation was perhaps not lost entirely, but more emphasis was certainly put on the notion that catharsis is a psychological *reaction* to tragic drama. Perhaps catharsis was thought

¹ D.E. Beryne, *Aesthetics and Psychobiology*, p.vi.

² Richard Janko, "Introduction" to Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Janko. p.XVII.

of in the past as a mostly psychological property because Aristotle was known to be interested in labeling and categorizing the properties of things. We must not forget that catharsis occurs not only within the individual, but is according to Aristotle also an interactive, communal experience which is shared by the audience as a whole.

Rene Descartes was the philosopher who founded the movement which sought to find the underlying, basic principles of art. Descarte's emphasis on reason led critics to believe that there are rules by which art can be judged. How well the artwork fulfills those rules was thought to determine its value.³

Alexander Baumgarten expanded upon Descarte's ideas in Meditationes Philosophicae de Nonnullis ad Poema Pertinentibus (1735) where he coined the term "aesthetics" and declared that poetry, and indirectly all of art, is "sensate discourse." He said that the rules for judging poetry [art] have to do with the clarity of sensual perceptions. "Clarity" presumably depends on the critic's judgment. Behind Descarte's and Baumgarten's conception of criticism is the urge to use a system or method for the interpretation of art. The fact that these philosophers were attempting to use rules and a system of interpretation signifies that they were searching for the essence of art. They believed that if they could find the necessary and sufficient conditions for art, beauty, etc., then they would have knowledge of its essence. At this point in time it was believed that the essence of aesthetic value is found in the art object.⁴

Immanuel Kant initiated a philosophic shift when he asserted that aesthetic value lies not in the object, but that judgment of value must lie with the individual. Kant understood that one makes an aesthetic judgment with the idea that all rational beings would decide the same.

³ Paul Edwards, ed., The Encyclopedia of Philosophy. vol1. p.25.

⁴ Edwards, p.25.

Many aestheticians began to discuss something called the 'aesthetic experience' of individual human response which is essential to the enjoyment of art. The methodology of such thinkers as Descartes and Baumgarten influenced many aestheticians to treat aesthetic experience as a kind of behavior which could be quantified and isolated from other factors (such as, from my modern point of view, cultural context, personal background, learning, and so on). The traditional aesthetician's search for the essence of aesthetic experience implied that, through this search, one could uncover the essence of the aesthetic object as well. Aristotle's notion that an aesthetic experience such as catharsis could be shared by an audience (rather than be only subjective), or that an experience depends on an interaction between self and medium, had lost much of its emphasis (if it had not in some cases been forgotten). Both the aesthetic object and the behavior which points to the aesthetic experience were looked upon as things which are not indistinct, but can potentially be defined.

In his book, Aesthetics and Psychobiology, D.E. Berlyne recounts that In 1876, the German physicist and philosopher G.T. Fechner published Vorschule der Aesthetik thus giving birth to the field of experimental aesthetics.⁵ Fechner outlined methodologies which are still in use today for conducting experiments that are based on polling subjects on how they feel about a work of art. Choice-oriented experiments of this type, called preference studies, are also used within the field of experimental psychology.

Before I begin my exploration of experimental aesthetics, I would like to discuss the traditional differences between general psychology and aesthetics.

General psychology, and I am speaking broadly of psychology here,

⁵ Berlyne, p.11.

conceptualizes the human perception of the world as divided into our reception of sense data and its subsequent ordering and categorization by our intelligence. Every perceived sensation must correspond to some mechanistic, physical function of the body (e.g. retinal stimulus, the firing of nerves in the hand , and so on, leading to neurons of the brain). Psychology is concerned with causes for behavior, and asks the question whether human response (whether it be a physical or psychological function) in certain cases can be traced to a common physiological origin. Experimental aesthetics, which operates within this ideology, bears a resemblance to classical science because underlying both projects is a search for a kind of universal theory of the functions of the body which we may use to explain behavior. The effort to explain actions inevitably comes down to reductive, cause-and-effect investigations of human behavior. Underlying this theoretical search is a lust for the predictability of human behavior. Psychologists do not want to put forth the view that all subjects will respond the same way given a certain situation (be it an aesthetic situation or otherwise), but they want to be able to show that a situation will cause a certain response to occur in a predictable fashion. By 'situation' here I mean the environmental framework which surrounds the subject and contains information to which the subject can respond.

On the other hand, the (philosophical) aesthetician is not concerned with the psychologist's explanation of behavior, but with the description of the generic attributes of the aesthetic situation. One describes a situation by simply observing the artwork state of affairs and recounting what one sees. The goal of one who describes need not be to unearth causes for the situation. The search for causes presupposes that there are quantifiable causes to be found. The aesthetician would want to point out that the psychologist can attempt to isolate the factors which are essential to a person's response, but there will always remain certain accidental attributes of the artwork or situation which the psychologist does not take into account. The accidental

attributes of an artwork as described by one individual could influence someone else in a much more substantial (or essential) way. The common reply to the experimental aesthetician is that s/he does not take into account the human freedom to respond to the aesthetic situation and that one has one's own reasons for judgment -- aestheticians ask, "What does it mean to choose to create or evaluate the quality of an artwork?" Many aestheticians support an intentional model of judgment, meaning that aesthetic taste is in large part our creation rather than the result of factors over which we have no control. The meaning which we find in a work of art is one that we have intended to construct from it, rather than only something which has been given to us. Because one's responses within the aesthetic situation cannot be categorized into predictable patterns, the aesthetician seeks to describe the common attributes of the quality of experience as a whole rather than to pinpoint the inner mechanisms of human response which "determine" quality. If taste is contingent upon individual judgment, then how do we discriminate between good and bad taste? Questions of taste are the foundation for questions pertaining to good and bad criticism.

The psychologist responds to the aesthetician that a psychological explanation of behavior is not something incompatible with what the aesthetician does because the psychologist is simply attempting to describe in detail the making up the aesthetic situation which leads to behavior. The goals of the psychologist's precise descriptions do not seem to be too far removed from the aesthetician's general ones. And so, the psychologist believes that s/he can furnish data which is relevant to the classical aesthetic questions. According to George Dickie, these questions generally fall into two related categories: (1) "Logical considerations" center around the meaning of critical concepts and the truth of critical judgments. For example, logical questions address the problem of whether there is good or bad art, or whether one should look for and/or criticize the artist's intentions in producing the artwork. (2) The second

group addresses the nature or quality of the aesthetic experience. Questions in this category might be, "What are the generic traits of the aesthetic experience?", and "How does one feel during the aesthetic experience?"⁶

Furthermore, in response to the criticisms of the aesthetician, the psychologist reasserts the value of the goal of predictability of responses to art. The psychologist is not trying to explain human beings as mechanistic robots who are causally determined to respond to aesthetic stimulus in fixed ways. Rather, the psychologist wishes to predict behavior in the sense that it answers the question, "What is the most likely response to this stimulus?" By the word 'behavior' the psychologist means changes in the body which can be detected either by observation and questioning, or by sensitive instruments which, when attached to the body, can detect physical response (this is distinct from the introspection of the aesthetician).⁷ The psychologist feels that the effectiveness of a work of art depends on the question of whether certain factors are or are not present, and that we should be able to measure these factors in a certain way.⁸

The psychologist interested in aesthetics engages in what is called 'experimental aesthetics', a practice in which the psychologist imposes structured methods of questioning upon the subject in order to produce verbal responses which can be mathematically analyzed and correlated into overall probabilities for response. There are three main methods (which date back to Fechner) used distinctly or combined in order to produce data in experimental aesthetics. First there is the "method of choice," in which the subject selects from a sample of objects which is most "pleasing." Next, there is the "method of production," in which subjects produce (by drawing on paper or manipulating a device) an object which is most pleasing to the eye. Third, in the "method of use," psychologists examine select works of art in order

⁶ George Dickie, "Is Psychology Relevant to Aesthetics?" Philosophical Review, July 1962, p.288.

⁷ Berylyne, p.7.

⁸ Berylyne, p.5.

to determine which characteristics are most common, and therefore most widely approved of in the sample community or society from which the artworks are derived.⁹

The report, "Properties of a Population of Artworks in Experimental Aesthetics," by George K. Shortess and James Craig Clarke, exemplifies a research method which seeks to isolate properties of a population of artworks. Three major art history texts were used to select a stimulus population of 113 western rectangular paintings having the appropriate consensus regarding quality and importance. Forty-three Lehigh University undergraduates rated the works on a thirteen-point scale according to complexity (the number of parts of the work), preference (personal liking), and familiarity (having seen the work before, knowledge of it, etc).¹⁰ Shortess and Clarke were then able to give the mean scores for each of the artworks. Because the subjects were able to rate the intensity of their feelings regarding the artworks, this testing procedure seems closest to the "method of choice." By measuring these "psychological attributes" of the artworks, Shortess and Clarke hope to provide material for researchers attempting to "draw conclusions about the general characteristics of aesthetic stimuli," thereby enabling future researchers to make predictions for response patterns to specific stimuli.¹¹ Therefore, the study is also an example of a "method of use" testing procedure.

It is a major premise of the psychologist that because the practice of art is a manifestation of human behavior, it must be related to other forms of behavior as well. The psychologist uses as a model the success that we have had in the accumulation of scientific knowledge by means of discovering covering laws which link together seemingly unrelated scientific phenomena. It seems strange to the psychologist that

⁹Berlyne, p.11.

¹⁰ George K. Shortess and James Craig Clarke, "Properties of Artworks in Experimental Aesthetics," *Visual-Arts-Research*, Fall, 1988, p.6

¹¹ Shortess and Clarke, pp.1-2.

the practice of art would be unrelated to other forms of human action. It is a frequent reply of the aesthete that the limited facts garnered by preference studies tell us little about the meaning of art as a whole. There are just too many possibilities for the kinds of value which humans might conceive, and there are too many possibilities for art objects which which would display an indefinite number of attributes. The covering theory of the psychologist would seem to be far too deterministic; even if the psychologist could predict response patterns to works of art, s/he could tell us nothing about the meaning the subject associates with his/her judgment. The aesthete also points out that the facts which the psychologist pursues are already suffused with value judgments. Shortess and Clarke had to look to consensus regarding artworks in order to decide which were the most valuable to study. How can facts which we have already judged as valuable tell us any more about why they are valuable?

The psychologist responds that early scientists had also to rely on simple phenomena as the objects of experimentation. For example, our knowledge of chemistry began with the study of the simplest organic compounds.¹² Berlyne makes the point that because art of some kind is found in all cultures on earth, it would seem to be a common behavior; and as all behavior is determined by the human nervous system, then art must be a function of the nervous system as well.¹³ If the psychologist can relate specific aesthetic reactions to general patterns of response, then s/he will come closer to reaching the goal of finding characteristics which may be common to works of art.

D.E. Berlyne admits that it is impossible to completely distinguish between fact and value when forming research questions because statements of fact must first be judged as worthwhile before they are pursued. But any convergence of fact and value

¹² Berlyne, 27.

¹³ Berlyne, 27.

should be kept at a minimum during experimentation.¹⁴ The psychologist believes that facts (including those pertaining to values which people use), the most immediate fruit of experimentation, can later be used to answer logical questions. For example, Berlyne points out that a psychologist may discover that the behavior associated with producing a form of art is conducive to the survival of the race as a whole. A critic then might use that information to decide on how effectively that work confers these benefits upon society.¹⁵ However, a potential problem with the psychologist's distinction between the logical and qualitative categories is that, while having a similar understanding of the logical considerations of the aesthetician, s/he seems many times to equate factual results of experiments to descriptions of the 'qualities' of the aesthetic objects/experiences. There is the possibility that this is an ideological difference which simply cannot be bridged. For the psychologist, facts about behavior, physical responses to aesthetic stimulus, and direct answers to questions about stimuli simply are descriptions of the qualities of an experience. Indeed, Berlyne states:

In view of the multitude of subtly interacting factors that govern reactions to art, many of the keys to an eventual understanding of art can only be revealed, in the first instance, through investigation of much simpler psychological processes.¹⁶

If the psychologist is pursuing 'logical questions' relevant to criticism, we must ask, "How could an experiment relating to this question possibly influence the critic in making his or her judgments pertaining to a work of art?" For instance, we could have a preference test where subjects are asked to choose whether a painting is "bright," "lively," or "dull." Here the psychologist has already suffused the characteristics being tested for by the study with evaluative content. Also, if we have a competent critic (one

¹⁴ Berlyne, p.2.

¹⁵ Berlyne, p.22.

¹⁶ Berlyne, p.27.

who is already knowledgeable about works of art), he or she should have no reason to pay heed to the opinions of amateur critics.¹⁷ The critic might be able to use a particular characteristic of an artwork as a reason for a judgment, but that reason typically would not be the basis for the entire judgment. And, again, these characteristics could be noticed by the critic even without the help of the experiments. Therefore, these experiments do not seem to be helping at all to solve questions of value. The psychologist would respond to this criticism by pointing out that experimental aesthetics reveals information which we might not have known before, and this information has a great likelihood of pointing out characteristics which we might not have been *aware* that we were responding to. The aesthetician might simply respond, "But you are still not addressing aesthetic questions. The critic responds to the overall meaning of the artwork, not the characteristics in themselves." Even if experimental aesthetics could reliably predict that a population would find certain characteristics 'familiar' or 'complex', that would not change one whit the discussion regarding the value of the work. The psychologist would seem to be committing a reductive fallacy. We cannot relate the simple factual characteristics of a work of art to the meaning or value of the entire work unless we have good reasons to do so.

Perhaps we can say that the psychologist is making a category mistake. There has not been established hard evidence which would lead one to believe that aesthetics is like a science or is governed by similar laws. The psychologist would like to prove that his or her experiments are relevant to solving the logical and qualitative considerations of aesthetics, but as of yet there is simply no good reason to make the link that simple characteristics (which are supposedly pointed out by experimentation) are significant to explaining the meaning of the whole. Experimental aesthetics does

¹⁷ Dickie, p.292.

continue to be relevant to scientific questions -- it can help us understand how the body works and responds to stimulus -- but there will remain a chasm between the dialogues of science and philosophical descriptions of experience.

Even in the face of these arguments, experimental aestheticians continue to believe that their experiments are relevant to aesthetics. Why do experimental aestheticians continue to believe that the quality of an aesthetic experience can be understood as a function of the body? Hidden behind their appeal to the explaining power of the central nervous system is the notion that human beings are causally determined creatures. We are universally 'hard wired' to respond in the same way to simple stimuli. One's knee jerks when it is thumped; one's hand recoils from a hot flame. As Richard A. Shweder coins the phrase, general psychologists postulate that human beings have a "central processing mechanism" as a function of which they think, act, and otherwise interpret the world.¹⁸ Because cultural contexts and environmental conditions blur our understanding of the reflexive responses of the central processing mechanism, the psychologist must study the very basic facts and stimuli to which humans respond. The goal of the psychologist is to observe experimental, laboratory-like conditions that are free of contextual clutter so that s/he can better discover the underlying laws which determine the responses of the central processing mechanism. If the psychologist can get such an untainted look at the central processing mechanism and its laws, then s/he can better understand the factors which determine cultural context, such as discrimination, categorization, memory, learning, motivation, inference, etc.¹⁹ Therefore, "the central processor itself must be context-and-content independent," meaning that the properties which psychologists describe as inherent to the central processing mechanism must be

¹⁸ Richard A. Shweder, "Cultural Psychology -- What Is It?" in *Cultural Psychology*. Stigler, James W., Richard A. Shweder, and Gilbert Herdt, eds. p.4.

¹⁹ Shweder, 7.

either bleached free of context or general to all contexts.²⁰ Again, Berlyne tells us that this hermetically sealed experimental environment represents the ideal rather than what is experimentally possible.

The bottom line is that the psychologist and the critic seem to be operating within two incommensurable modes of discourse. Aestheticians relate value judgments to the result of empirical inquiry (meaning, in this sense, simply observation of a situation or artwork), but the goal is to deliberate over those value judgments, not the empirical inquiry itself. Conversely, the psychologist operates within the realm of facts and events and looks for the causes of those facts and events. Psychologists do not normally make value judgments about those (causal) facts; whatever significance they have is determined by their effect or function in relation to other facts. One of the central premises of the scientific project is that the concept, 'causality', can be applied to explain why events take place and why objects are formed in the way that they are. Every motion effects a reciprocal motion. The psychologist assumes that the concept, causality, can be applied to the aesthetic realm as well. But is this a valid assumption? Can we explain our appreciation for a work of art in terms of its being caused? The psychologist needs good reasons (other than the fact that aesthetic questions *exist*) to back up his or her assumption that aesthetic questions can be explained in terms of causality in the same way as can events in the physical world. Many scientists (and empirical psychologists) reason that all phenomena in the world can be explained by scientific law. In seeking to derive critical judgments from statements of fact about works of art, the psychologist would seem to be trying to derive an "ought from an is," and it has been shown persuasively that normative principles simply cannot be derived directly from descriptions.²¹ It seems to be the case that aesthetic questions

²⁰ Shweder, 7.

²¹ Dickie, p.295.

are abstracted from the physical world and exist in the realm of values, in the same way that ethical questions have to do with values and are thought of as values rather than facts.

In opposition to the ideology of experimental aesthetics, an observer of culture such as John Dewey would be quick to assert that we should not presuppose the existence of a central processing mechanism which determines one's responses to situations because the human self (that which interprets and behaves) exists as the continuing integration of those very situations and cultural contexts which psychologists seek to exclude from their experiments. The way a human being interprets the world constantly evolves throughout his or her lifetime, and is molded by such factors as learning, experiences, and environment. I shall argue that thought such as Dewey's is a precursor to what we now call 'cultural psychology', which I believe is a better way of doing psychological aesthetics.

John Dewey is intent on *re*describing the human relationship with the world. Our relationship is composed of a life-long network of lived experiences. First of all, when discussing aesthetic questions, we must make the distinction between having day-to-day experiences and having an experience. To clarify this, Dewey states:

We have an experience when the material experienced runs its course to fulfillment. Then and then only is it integrated within and demarcated in the general stream of experience from other experiences. A piece of work is finished in a way that is satisfactory...a game is played through...a situation..is so rounded out that its close is a consummation and not a cessation.²²

An experience, then, is also an aesthetic experience. So as not to confuse matters, from now on I shall use the phrase, "aesthetic experience," to describe what Dewey refers to as an experience.

Dewey holds the view that many aestheticians have fallen victim to the same

²² John Dewey, Art as Experience, p.35.

dualistic (subject vs. object) world-view which has affected science. In the past, aestheticians such as Bullough had been mucking about with the concept of 'aesthetic distance' which was thought to be essential to a good judgment of art. Bullough believed that the critic should not try to participate with the work in any way -- that is, one should not let one's personal interests or emotions get in the way of what is revealed by the artwork itself. Bullough was preaching the necessity that the good critic should be detached from the artwork. Conversely, Dewey shows us that our judgment of art involves an interrelationship of the art object and person, and now that aestheticians are recognizing this closure of the subject-object gap, they feel that the good critic recognizes the interaction of personal and cultural contexts and actively seeks the integration of the artwork and self.

John Dewey supports the theory that the regime of science has resulted in a world-view in which humans are self-centered, individualistic beings who observe the world in terms of its being a manipulatable instrument. Within the practice of science and general psychology (which includes experimental aesthetics), one tends to understand the self as the center of one's environmental framework, and everything else becomes a 'them' or an 'it'. Dewey states:

Any psychology that isolates the human being from the environment also shuts him off, save for external contacts, from his fellows. But an individual's desires take shape under the influence of the human environment. The materials of his thought and belief come to him from others with whom he lives. He would be poorer than a beast in the fields were it not for traditions that become a part of his mind, and for institutions that penetrate below his outward actions into his purposes and satisfactions.²³

Dewey wishes to point out that science is only one project among many, and that the human relationship with the world is much deeper than the subject-object distinction. Rather, humans have an interrelationship with the world. The human being is an

²³ Dewey, p. 270.

active as well as a reactive creature. The experiences and actions of a person in the world act as building-blocks which constantly reinforce one another and affect the way future experiences are had, and so on, producing a circular interrelationship of meaning.

It is part of the fallacy of the world-view of experimental aesthetics to try to isolate facts about the aesthetic experience because that effort is an inherently reductive exercise which isolates facts from their meaning, and meaning is essentially what we want to talk about in aesthetics. The problems resulting from the psychological effort to explain a situation are compounded by the presence of a seemingly endless array of personal experiences having effects which defy predictability. Instead, says Dewey, if we wish to describe a situation we must confine our discussion to the "generic features of the human contribution."²⁴ If we cannot isolate simple facts such as sense-data which are common to human experience, then it would seem to be a better route to talk about the general functions of experience. If we refer back to our psychologist-aesthetician debate, the psychologist might respond that statements of function seem to be 'facts', just as statements regarding sense-data are facts. What distinguishes the two types of statements? Dewey might point out that statements regarding generic features or functions of experience should apply to all experiences, while we just cannot be sure that individuals will respond in the same (or a similar) way to simple sense-data. We cannot be sure whether a central processing mechanism which orders sense-data exists. On the other hand, we can presuppose a concept, such as the human freedom to act, because it describes the way humans behave in everyday situations. Freedom in this sense is immediately verifiable through direct evidence; freedom is a concept we need to have in order to adequately understand our existence. We are able to talk about generic features if we find them

²⁴ Dewey, p. 245.

useful in explaining the world around us. Dewey relies on three generic features to describe the aesthetic experience: doing, undergoing, and consummation. Dewey would not claim "doing, undergoing, and consummation" to be perfect in their descriptive power, but as of now they give the most adequate descriptions of the experiences which we wish to discuss.

Doing describes the active work of the individual during an aesthetic experience. Undergoing is our reciprocal response to our doing. For example, a person lifts a stone, and that is a doing. Entailed by the doing is the undergoing of stress, the tautness of muscles, the grating of rock against skin.²⁵ Because doing requires undergoing, the two functions are inseparable. Doing and undergoing describe the way a human being interacts with his or her environment -- and if we think in this way, the subject/object barrier is broken and the subject/object forms a unity. Any time we work with a tool, eat a meal, or write with a pen we are both doing and undergoing. We reach out to use a hammer, and do use it, but in a sense the hammer also helps dictate *how* we will use it. The composition of the thing (is the hammer made of metal or wood?) we view, act with, or think about plays a large part in how we respond. The relationship between doing and undergoing has a kind of inertia; initial relationships spur on further interaction. The artist also does and undergoes when s/he produces a work of art. We might be misled into thinking that his or her work involves only an active, doing process. However, the *medium* the artist works with influences the way s/he works. The artist uses white oil paint. Why not acrylic? Why not another color? Dewey states, "An artist..is one who is not only especially gifted in powers of execution but in unusual sensitivity to the qualities of things. This sensitivity also directs his doings and makings."²⁶ Past doings and undergoings dictate the way

²⁵ Dewey, p. 44.

²⁶ Dewey, p. 49.

we think about and interpret what the oil paint, or hammer, or pencil *is*. Past experiences tell us how these things feel and are used, so that we interpret their existence in that way. The concept of a thing is just as important in affecting how a person (or artist) undergoes its use as is the person's power in influencing what the doing will be.

Dewey uses the metaphor of a storm of waves to describe consummation. Waves (which could very well be ideas, or sensations) bounce off and crash into one another, forming a kind of continuous tension.²⁷ A few waves merge into one another and build up a kind of inertia as the resulting wave grows ever stronger, moving towards the goal which acts like a magnet: the Crash! of consummation. There is something in the nature of humans that spurs us to wish to feel this end, this consummation of feelings. We have an interest in it -- we do not wish to leave this process cut off or incomplete, because we are enjoying the interplay of forces. An aesthetic experience is something which we are intent on having. Not all experiences have the "satisfying emotional quality" of the aesthetic experience that is the hallmark of its integrated movement.²⁸ It is this feeling, emotion, or enthusiasm related to the aesthetic experience which unifies disparate elements and pushes the process forward. Our feelings constantly merge into an overall emotional quality.

Doing, undergoing, and consummation are generic terms for the patterns which are common to all aesthetic experiences. The persons, facts, and context relative to the aesthetic experience may differ between situations, but at least with doing, undergoing, and consummation we have common ground to discuss. The attempted descriptions of experimental aesthetics so far have not done the same.

For Dewey, habits constitute the way we are accustomed to interpreting the

²⁷ Dewey, p.38.

²⁸ Dewey, p.38.

world around us, and are the domain of everyday experiences. From the day we are born we begin to form habits which influence the way we see and act in the world. Habits, like experiences themselves, tend to build upon one another. For example, I habitually conceptualize a chair as existing a certain way. I categorize a chair as having four legs, a seat, etc. Any object that has 'chair-like' features I habitually categorize as a chair.

Habit can have both a positive and negative function when it comes to the possibility of having an aesthetic experience. In a positive sense, when we are greeted with a work of art, our habits of interpretation act as a starting point for our interaction. The artist may have similar habits of interpretation and expression as we, but never the same, so we work with the medium with which we are presented as we can. One's individual habits are not the same as another's because habits have been made and are constantly being remade through one's personal history of experiences of learning, traditions, and culture. If we are to reach the goal of consummation, we must be able to extrapolate from and build upon our old habits of interpretation in order to create a new experience which is aesthetic. Conversely, our habits might also form a barrier between the artist/artwork/viewer, and the rigid distinctions of that habit could impede the occurrence of any consummation.

Is it possible that I might interpret a chair in a way in which I never have before? Well, it would have to be presented in an unfamiliar way and I would have to use my imagination. If I am to have an aesthetic experience, then I must circumvent habits which might impede my interpretation and interact with the chair in a different way than is customary. An artwork is a unique construction, and many times forces us not to fall back on habit as our only interpretive tool.

Thomas M. Alexander in John Dewey's Theory of Art, Experience, and Nature points out that habits "frame or establish a temporal context, a referential basis for

interpretation and action."²⁹ It is through our habit that we are able to learn, expand upon our experiences, and create new meaning. Our habits and experiences act within the context of the hermeneutic circle, with the past acting as a catalyst for present experiences, and the present constantly building upon and reconstituting the past. The point of this outline of the self-determining experience is not the view that individuals simply perceive the world in different ways, but that individuals and cultures live different lives from those of other peoples. There is a network of cultural reasons explaining why peoples act differently in the world. We interpret not only through our vision, but through the lens of our world-view itself.

"Nature," for Dewey, denotes a much more holistic meaning than only a reference to the physical world; it also encompasses human relations, institutions, and traditions.³⁰ Whatever are the elements of nature which are presented to us, not one is intrinsically aesthetic until the subject unites them, producing a meaning which is aesthetic in nature.³¹ More than anything, Dewey is interested in discussing the meaning which the subject finds in an aesthetic experience.

Dewey's generic descriptions of aesthetic experience are relevant to (logical and qualitative) aesthetic questions in ways that experimental aesthetic explanations are not. The terms doing, undergoing, and consummation refer to functions which are so broad that the quality of any aesthetic experience can be discussed within their confines without infringing upon anyone's uniqueness. The critic might use these generic terms to answer a logical question by describing how an artwork has emancipated him or her from thinking about the subject-matter in a purely habitual, stale way. The critic may recognize that the way s/he interprets things is largely a product of acculturation. Dewey's generic terms are interpretive tools which remind

²⁹ Thomas M. Alexander, John Dewey's Theory of Art, Experience & Nature, p. 145.

³⁰ Dewey, p. 333.

³¹ Dewey, p.326.

the critic (and us) that we are not distanced from the artwork by an interpretive chasm, but rather that the artwork, our selves, and nature exist in a continuous interrelationship.

Therefore, meaning is not a property of the art object (or any object) itself, but is created during what Dewey calls a situation. We as humans participate with factors such as social context, intentions, traditions, and obligations during a situation. A simple example of a human situation is a wedding. We may read all sorts of meaning into this situation based on the way we understand it.³²

Dewey (in reference to his later works) might have been the first to protest that he was not attempting to answer psychological questions, and this assertion would be true if we were referring the practice of experimental psychology. However, it is also true that one of Dewey's deep-seated concerns is how we should be able to talk about the self. Dewey asserts,

Individuality itself is originally a potentiality and is realized only in interaction with surrounding conditions. In this process of intercourse, native capacities which contain an element of uniqueness, are transformed and become a self...The self is both formed and brought to consciousness through interaction with the environment.³³

Indeed, in his early works, Dewey recommended that, instead of the investigation of physical responses, psychology should study linguistics, anthropology, sociology, ethnology, and child psychology.³⁴ Psychology has always had a concern with explaining, in addition to physical behavior, what it is that we call a 'mind' -- can it simply be equated with 'brain', or is it really something different? Is it anything at all? In recent years, the field of cultural psychology has sought to describe the human self in much the same way as Dewey. Cultural psychology attempts to show that humans

³² Alexander, p.104-115.

³³ Dewey, pp.281-282.

³⁴ Alexander, p.21.

are social beings shaped by environment, community, and intentions.

In his essay, "Cultural psychology -- What is it?" Richard A Shweder explains, "Cultural psychology is the study of the way cultural traditions and social practices regulate, express, transform, and permute the human psyche, resulting less in psychic unity for humankind than in ethnic divergences in mind, self, and emotion."³⁶

Intentional worlds are the object of investigation for cultural psychology. There are intentional worlds and intentional persons. 'Culture' helps constitute an intentional world.³⁹ An intentional world can best be described as a world of active and reactive meaning; it is a world in which history and tradition affect the way we interpret a situation, and we must act in ways which reflect that history and tradition. All of the objects in our world have a meaning which we have *grown* to understand. These objects are what constitute our reality, and we work with them according to the way in which we know them. Every one of our actions, even our concepts, vibrates in unison with our reality. Our intention (to act in the world) is a kind of reciprocal reinforcement of what we know; we are continually injecting intentional meaning into a situation that embodies meaning with which we are already familiar.

Every person within an intentional world is stimulus-bound and every stimulus is person-bound; within the intentional world there is an interpenetration of meaning.³⁷ We should not presuppose to exist the central processing mechanism of experimental psychology because we cannot in practice completely distinguish whether human responses are brought about by hard-wiring or environment. The general psychologist discusses the existence of a universal, autonomous central processing mechanism which is present in all humans, but the research of cultural psychology reveals that there is little about the human psyche which is context-independent.

³⁶ Shweder, p.1.

³⁶ Shweder, p.25.

³⁷ Shweder, p. 24.

Cultural psychology is not cross-cultural psychology. Cross-cultural psychology takes many of the procedures of experimental psychology "on the road," so to speak. Cross-cultural psychologists encounter the same problems and make the same assumptions as do experimental psychologists: they try to distinguish the psychological functions which are a result of the central processing mechanism from all of the other behavior which is incidental to different cultures. Even when greeted with evidence that people of different cultures respond to situations in different ways, the cross-cultural psychologist has two explanations for population-based differences to performance on psychological tests and tasks: (1) The central processing mechanism has not yet become fully developed in other peoples of the world, or (2) The psychological testing procedures are so culturally biased that the subjects cannot understand or do not have experience with understanding the procedures and requirements of the test.³⁸ The first explanation seems to be biased regarding the more advanced state of the psychologist's (western) mind, while the second points to the claim that for others the testing procedures are too unfamiliar and artificial and need to be better conformed to the activities and situations to which the test-taker is more accustomed.

These explanations fail to take into account the point which is precisely the concern of the cultural psychologist -- that people of other cultures simply live different lives, and think and respond to situations in different ways.³⁹ However, even in the face of the "method effects" (variation in research findings due to differences in procedure, questioning, subject population, etc), the cross-cultural psychologist continues to search for a more finely-honed, appropriate method which will in fact reveal the existence of the central processing mechanism.⁴⁰

³⁸ Shweder, p.11.

³⁹ Shweder, p. 11.

⁴⁰ Shweder, p.12.

There do not seem to be any psychological functions in humans which are significantly universal with regards to the aesthetic experience because psychological functions are the product of human interrelationship with the world. This is not to say that we will not find some psychological functions which are the same between cultures. The physical make-up of our bodies is the same, and we all seem to respond in similar ways to simple physical stimulus (e.g. pain, reflexive responses).

However, the fact that human beings are hard-wired in an identical fashion does not tell us that we must have a universal starting-point for interpretation of the world. The cultural psychologist recognizes that there is no sense in trying to ignore the nature/nurture problem because nature and nurture are two interdetermining factors; humans are hard-wired in a certain way, but the use of that wiring during psychological functions varies according to the individual. The major stepping-stone of the cultural psychologist towards the discovery of real interpretive meaning is the *recognition* of the indeterminate nature of this relationship. The cultural psychologist recognizes that the statements of a subject are descriptions of local response patterns which are dependent on "context, resources, instructional sets, authority relations, framing devices, and modes of construal."⁴¹

But let us not write off hard-wiring as not in any sense relevant to the possibility of having an aesthetic experience. Cultural psychology tells us that we should greet with skepticism the proclamation of an experimental psychologist that s/he has found a universal response for a stimulus characteristic. But this is by no means impossible. Certain stimuli may actually enhance the *possibility* for having an aesthetic experience (but cannot in themselves determine it). As a case in point, researchers have shown that light influences the way we feel about our surroundings and is necessary for our

⁴¹ Shweder, p.13.

mental and physical well-being.⁴² Jeff Hayward, an environmental psychologist, observed the behavior of 140 people, half of whom sat in a room lit with direct table lighting, the other half sitting in a room dimly lit with table lamps. Those sitting in the dimly lit room were more apt to interact with others and carry on conversations. Researchers speculate that a darkened room (such as where one might have a candlelight dinner) reduces the number of stimuli and makes people feel more in touch with those around them.⁴³ Furthermore, light directly affects the body's environmental adjustment system. Individuals afflicted with "Seasonal Affective Disorder," or SAD, fall into bouts of depression during the autumn and winter months when natural light is at a low.⁴⁴ Researchers have found that patients who sit under a bright light for a few hours a day experience greater mental health. While light has not been shown to have a direct correlation to one's having an aesthetic experience, there is the fact that lighting affects the way we feel and behave, and that certainly may contribute to whether or not we have an aesthetic experience. Even though it has not been conclusively shown that lighting helps to treat SAD for people of all cultures, based on the large amount of evidence we have good reason to believe that it does. It is therefore a good bet to believe that lighting is a factor in influencing everyone's experiences, which includes the possibility of having an aesthetic experience.

Cultural psychology does not give way to a wildly relativistic outlook on what cultures are or can be. The intentional world of a culture has a foundation which we can discuss, and that is the population of individuals which give rise to the intentional world itself. The business of cultural psychology is to interpret the interrelationship between self and culture, between the intentional person and the intentional world, and we must continually keep in mind that one cannot exist without the other. Any of

⁴² Jeff Mear, "The Light Touch," *Psychology Today*, Sept. 1985, pp.60-67.

⁴³ Mear, p.63.

⁴⁴ Mear, p.67.

the truths which we are able to formulate through cultural psychology depend entirely on our involvement with our information and will inevitably reflect what is important to us. We will be able to talk about specific truths in relation to specific intentional worlds, but we must also recognize that these truths are subject to change because of the evolving nature of cultures.⁴⁵

In the same way that Dewey's habits allow one person to have a different interpretation of a situation from someone else, the cultural psychologist understands that divergent intentional worlds bring about separate meanings and interpretations. One's intentional world indicates one's entire way of life -- given the same set of circumstances, inhabitants of different intentional worlds will find different interpretive meanings. For example, a Native American, who finds religious meaning and self-definition in nature, might find some important personal or traditional symbolism in a mountain. And also, a miner might see in the mountain a hulk of coal and shale deposits ripe for excavation.⁴⁶

While Dewey gives an individualistic account of experience, and cultural psychology gives a more holistic, cultural account, both ways of thinking recognize the truth that any human experience requires the interrelationship between self and nature. It is obvious how Dewey's philosophy is related to the tenets of cultural psychology; the only difference is that Dewey primarily give an account of the self/nature integration on a personal, rather than cultural, scale. There would seem to be a ladder-like escalation of levels in which persons and cultures interpret the world. On the first rung are the personal habits and experiences which affect the way one reacts and behaves in a situation. Next, cultural psychology shows us that within cultures as a whole, persons attach similar intentional meanings to intentional worlds,

⁴⁵ Shweder, p.31.

⁴⁶ Alexander, p. 143.

and within certain traditions and contexts people are expected to behave in a similar fashion. We could call these the present-day truths which pertain to behavior within a certain culture. Because communities of people have historically different intentional worlds, they will produce different forms of art. A person's habits of interpreting and relating to the world will vary between cultures, and s/he will associate indigenous meanings to characteristics of art when s/he experiences them. However, Dewey would clarify that the meaning of an artwork as a whole cannot be predictable because one's habits of integration of personal meanings are unique. Dewey's generic descriptions of the aesthetic experience -- doing, undergoing, and consummation -- will apply to all aesthetic experiences because he recognizes the fundamental truth that any experience requires one's interrelationship with a coconstituting and coconstituted world.

Shweder's account of cultural psychology may now open doors for our understanding of our place in the world, but there remain potential problems with his concept of the self. Shweder advocates the "reality principle" that a self exists for all peoples and shapes the forces of culture into an ordered schema:

The assumption is that the organization of the psyche is based on a reality principle whereby culturally constituted realities and reality-constituting psyches are mutually adjusted to one another until some attractive equilibrium is reached -- a graceful or proportionate fit between the world as the other has made it out/made it up and the other's reactions to the world made out and up.⁴⁷

Shweder seems to presuppose that it is intrinsic to "human nature" that a self must exist. In other words, there must be an intrinsically human self which orders reality, even if how reality is ordered varies between cultures. It seems to me that it just might be the case that cultural forces are the initial shapers of human thinking, and then as a consequence of that shaping a consciousness is formed which shapes ever more. For

⁴⁷ Shweder, p. 33.

example, psychologists Hazel Rose Markus and Shinobu Kitayama have hypothesized that in Japanese culture where persons have an interdependent view of self and community, "the sense of belongingness to a social relation may become so strong that it makes better sense to think of the *relationship* as the functional unit of conscious reflection."⁴⁸ Perhaps a better approach to interpretation is not to presuppose that an intrinsically human self does or does not exist, or that there is or is not a central processing mechanism, but to try instead to focus on the meaning of cultural practices or art. Let us discuss what are the typicalities for a culture, rather than universal responses or drives which may or may not be the case. Let us do away with the preoccupation with questions of essence which have troubled aestheticians in the past. Nature and culture obviously play large roles in forming the human world, but it may be useless to attempt to isolate one as more deterministic than the other. Both the aesthetician and cultural psychologist who think in this way will find that they will be able to incorporate this newfound meaning into ways of thinking about their own lived worlds.

It should now be clear that although cultural psychology is not general (classic) psychology, it has shed the prescribed methodology of experimental aesthetics while preserving one of its interests: that of exploring the relationship between the subject and community. Dewey's aesthetics has done a similar job of eliminating the misconception that the artwork and subject inhabit separate worlds. The individual who understands Dewey's philosophy recognizes that the potential for aesthetic experience lies in all experiences, and that consummation, along with doing and undergoing, can be actively sought out and enjoyed rather than occur as something for which one must wait to stumble upon. Both Dewey and the cultural psychologist reunite self and culture, subject and object, and reveal criticism to be an ongoing

⁴⁸ Hazel Rose Markus and Shinobu Kitayama, Psychological Review, vol. 98, 1991, p.226.

interpretive process rather than the inspection of a finite, quantifiable event. Cultural psychology has integrated some of the concepts from philosophy, sociology, and anthropology, and stemming from this example we can expect to see in the future a similar hybridization of concepts from different disciplines in order to solve historical problems and achieve mutual goals. Indeed, we have seen Deweyan aesthetics and cultural psychology address such common hindrances as the presence of a confining scientific methodology, the prevalent notion of a subject/object dualism, and the mistaken effort to separate evaluative judgment from the creative experience itself.

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