Emotions, values, and aesthetic perception

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1. Introduction

Aesthetics emerged as a theory of fine arts, specific skills for creating beautiful experiences. The basic concept is that of disinterested pure beauty. It suits for the purpose of detaching aesthetic perception from everyday life with its interests. Museums, galleries and concert halls were constructed as special places for pure aesthetic contemplation. The interest in fine arts served well for the development of the life style of the new social stratum, real fine gentlemen, as becomes clear from one proposal to the name of these special skills: polite arts for polite people (Mortensen, 1997; Shiner, 2001).

John Dewey’s book Art as Experience deals with the same topic. It should be noted, however, that his philosophical framework is completely different. Traditional aesthetics was formed within German idealism, which Dewey rejected at some point of his career. This fact is often ignored when commenting or developing his later work. In his philosophy of art Dewey uses the same word “esthetic” (with the difference of one letter) but the concept is not the same. Dewey’s philosophical naturalism is the framework for developing an alternative conception of the experiences typical in (but not restricted to) fine arts. In one sense naturalism is a direct opposite to traditional aesthetic theory. Pragmatist notion of habits as meanings gives a basis for a conception of emotions and values in the framework of organism environment interaction. Any object of perception may be a carrier of meanings if some habits are involved. This holds for linguistic expressions as well as for tones of color, doors and windows, museums, galleries and other non-linguistic sign-vehicles. The outcome is a multilayered system of meanings with which aesthetic perception is interpreted.

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The social and cultural reality is an essential element in the environment of human beings. Soft naturalism with the emphasis on interaction helps to find out the role of cultural factors in aesthetic perception. Not everything is revealed by investigating the brain. This is not to diminish the value of brain imaging or other methods of brain research. The point is that the same findings may have different interpretations in different conceptual frameworks. The purpose of the following analysis of the structure of experience and the character of values and emotions in the light of this structure is to provide a coherent conceptual framework for the analysis of aesthetic perception.

2. The structure of experience in pragmatism

The traditional view in philosophy is that experience is sense perception. Sense organs function as channels through which the internal mind observes the external world. Visual perception has dominated the discussion since it was discovered that the eye functions like a camera obscura. The retinal image was thought to continue to the brain and to change into a mental image. This view was originally developed by Johannes Kepler, Leonardo da Vinci and René Descartes (Noe, 2004, pp. 35–48). Classical empiricism adopted this approach. “The senses at first let in particular ideas, and furnish the yet empty cabinet” (Locke, 1704, I, 48; emphasis in the original). David Hume considered the possibility that perceptions are produced by external objects and came to this conclusion. “But here experience is, and must be entirely silent. The mind has never anything present to it but the perceptions, and cannot possibly retain any experience of their connection with objects” (Hume, 1751, p. 153). The object of knowledge in this kind of approach is the external world as the hidden cause of perceptions. The hidden causes as such cannot, of course, be perceived, and therefore the task of the experiencing subject is to find out what we can really know about these hidden causes. They form the mind-independent real world that we must come to know.

This dichotomy of internal and external established by Descartes, Locke and their followers is still influential. Contemporary discussion continues this line of thought in attempts to relate mind and brain to each other. The mind/brain is internal quite literally. However, it has its critics that represent alternative view. For example, it has been criticized for a mereological fallacy. Mental predicates are properly attributed to behaving persons, not to a part of them, namely the brain (Bennett & Hacker, 2003, pp. 68–107). This fallacy stems from Descartes. What Descartes said about the soul, is said about the brain.

The dichotomy of external and internal can be questioned. Damasio (1995) enlarges the analysis from the brain to the whole body. Clark and Chalmers (1998) started the discussion about extended mind, which refers to the need to take things outside the brain into account. Further, there is a close connection between action and perception as Dewey already pointed out. “While the optical apparatus may be isolated in anatomical dissection, it never functions in isolation. It operates in connection with the hand in reaching for things and in exploring their surface, in guiding manipulation of things, in directing locomotion” (Dewey, 1980, p. 100; emphasis in the original). Nowadays there is plenty of empirical evidence for it (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999; Noe, 2004). Visual perception selects properties that facilitate organism environment interaction (Gibson, 1979; Rizzolatti & Sinigaglia, 2008). The environment becomes objectified in relation to motor capacities (Franks, 2010, p. 88). There is not any gap or dualism between acting and reasoning in intelligent behavior (Caruana & Cuccio, 2016). Various versions of enactivism (since Varela et al., 1992) also emphasize organism environment interaction. The role of interaction has found its way also to aesthetic theory (Määttänen, 2015a; Xenakis & Arneillos, 2015; Xenakis, Arneillos, & Darzentas, 2011). The main difference between these views and the present pragmatist approach is the explicit notion of meaning as habit of action.

The pragmatist alternative to the classical approach is based on the ideas of Charles Peirce and John Dewey (see Määttänen, 2015b). The pragmatist notion of experience is broader than sense perception; action must be included in it. The world is experienced as possibilities of action. To know is to know what to do in the present situation in order to achieve some goal. This view about the structure of experience opens the possibility for a very different conception of mind. Action and perception form a loop or a cycle that characterizes organism environment interaction. On this view mind is a property of this loop as a whole rather than a property of the brain or even the body. There are, however, different forms of pragmatism. Not everyone agrees with this view (see Hildebrand, 2003; Määttänen, 2010).

The basic notion is that of habit of action. Habits are schematically structured forms or ways of action that are formed when similar behavior is repeated in similar circumstances. Action according to habits involves actions of objects. The habit has the property that the schematic structure of the formed habit fits with the objective conditions of action, the structure of the world. The habit is a belief about these conditions, and the fit between this belief and that what it is about is operational (Määttänen, 2015b, pp. 29–39). Note that this definition applies to both the physical and the social environment. Habits function also as meanings (Määttänen, 2015b, pp. 41–50). What a thing means is simply what habits it involves. Any object of perception may be a carrier of meaning, a sign-vehicle. All that is required is that some habits are involved. By virtue of habitual action, the object refers to anticipated consequences of that habitual action associated with the thing in question on the ground of past experiences of acting in similar circumstances. Note that this definition provides both tacit (non-linguistic) meanings and linguistic meanings. Ludwig Wittgenstein’s principle that meaning is use is a specific instance of Peirce’s definition (Määttänen, 2005a). To be conscious is to be aware of various courses of action that are available. At the level of tacit meanings this is, for example, anticipation of the consequences of using tools, chairs, doors and so on. Abstract thought with language and scientific theories shows connections that are not immediate and thus enables one to anticipate more sophisticated operations and to see further and deeper. Thinking with meanings (and beliefs) is basically anticipation of action that is based on earlier experience.

The simple definition of habit as an outcome of repeated similar behavior in similar circumstances may hide the fact that experience is a complex thing. Long experience during the whole biological evolution has equipped us with many skills and capacities for coping with the environment. Sense organs can be seen as crystallized habits of perceiving environmental cues relevant for action control. Most of these capabilities function subconsciously (Franks, 2010; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). The long history of cultural evolution has also accumulated social structures, cultural habits and practices. The relation between natural and cultural evolution is not simple because the social environment has existed long enough to have had an effect on our biological heritage. Other animals cannot become full-fledged members of human society. And this holds also for human infants if they grow outside human community. This is related to a phenomenon called the social brain (Donald, 2001; Franks, 2010). An infant’s brain gets wired for linguistic competence only in the context of a human linguistic community. This is the so-called Outside-Inside principle first suggested by L.S.Vygotsky. “The developmental rule is that symbolic thought first
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