

## DEWEY ON FUNCTIONAL BEAUTY AND THE REALM OF THE AESTHETIC<sup>1</sup>

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In their recent book *Functional Beauty*, Glenn Parsons and Allen Carlson (henceforth P&C) offer an argument from linguistic practice that purports to establish a firm distinction between aesthetic and bodily pleasures, as against a Deweyan approach to aesthetics that draws no such distinction. In this essay, I shall criticize the linguistic practice argument and argue that the realm of the aesthetic includes bodily pleasures. After an introductory section, I highlight the similarities between Dewey and P&C, suggest some general worries for the linguistic practice argument, and finally argue that although Dewey is open to criticism in certain respects, his emphasis on the multi-modal nature of perception provides a strong reason to reject P&C's distinction.

### I.

The main purpose of P&C's work is to rehabilitate the notion that an object's looking fit for function can enhance our aesthetic appreciation of that object. Theirs is a 'cognitively rich' account, in which knowledge about an object, in this case knowledge of function, plays a role in our appreciation of that object. P&C mean something quite broad by 'functional beauty': the concept denotes all aesthetic appreciation that involves knowledge concerning function, not just appreciation of

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beauty. (The term ‘aesthetically pleasing’ captures their meaning more accurately than ‘beautiful’, but they prefer the pithier formulation.) P&C’s main thesis is that looking fit for function is one aesthetic quality among others: looking fit is sufficient for aesthetic quality.<sup>2</sup> Although their claim might initially seem almost *too* weak, when taken against the backdrop of ‘cognitively poor’ aesthetic theories and others that ignore function we can see that the thesis is still interesting enough to be worth defending. Indeed, acknowledging functional beauty requires widening the range of aesthetic appreciation: P&C do not treat ‘artworks’ as typically understood until the end of their book, focusing instead on nature, architecture, and everyday artefacts as paradigmatic realms of aesthetic appreciation.

John Dewey’s influential book *Art as Experience* shares a similar concern for widening the sphere of the aesthetic, although he means something different by the term. While P&C would agree with Dewey that “the thing most fundamental to esthetic [*sic*] experience [*is*] that it is perceptual,”<sup>3</sup> Dewey’s larger project is normative: he wishes to show us how to recover our sense of the aesthetic in everyday life. For Dewey, aesthetic experience defines what it is to be *an* experience by meeting the following two conditions on the flow of experience in general: 1) it is unified and complete, and 2) it involves the full engagement of our mental capacities.<sup>4</sup> Experience is active rather than contemplative: it always involves the interaction of a live organism with its environment, which includes not only its immediate surroundings but its culture and past as well. Often an experience is only inchoate: “things are experienced but not in such a way that they are composed into *an* experience.”<sup>5</sup> We actively define an experience, ordinary or extraordinary—such as an anniversary dinner or a religious ceremony—when it stands out as a paradigm example of its kind. Although we may fail to find the aesthetic in our quotidian lives, Dewey believes that aesthetic quality is implicit in every experience, including those experiences that primarily involve bodily sensations.

P&C, however, believe that Dewey goes too far in admitting bodily pleasures such as eating a meal or working with tools into the purview of aesthetic appreciation. In this respect, they are *demarcational* rather than *transformational*, to borrow a

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<sup>2</sup> In their discussion of historical views on functional beauty, it emerges that it is the *appearance* of function, rather than its actual presence, that matters to aesthetics. This still requires knowing *how* an object functions, however.

<sup>3</sup> Dewey (1934), p. 227. I leave Dewey’s spelling of ‘aesthetic’ unchanged throughout.

<sup>4</sup> Goldman (2005), p. 260.

<sup>5</sup> Dewey (1934), p. 36. All italics original.

distinction from Richard Shusterman. Transformational theories of aesthetic experience try to expand the aesthetic field beyond its established practices, while demarcational theories aim instead “to precisely define, explain, or justify the already established classifications” that separate art from non-art.<sup>6</sup> Dewey falls clearly on the transformational side of the distinction, since for him any experience has the potential to be aesthetic. But P&C are harder to classify. While they might appear to be transformational in arguing for the inclusion of a certain quality in the realm of the aesthetic, they become demarcational at precisely the point where functionality seems most evident. For everyday artifacts are patently functional, and yet insofar as our experience of everyday objects might involve ‘bodily pleasures’, P&C exclude that experience from aesthetic theory. If functional beauty is pervasive, it must not be allowed to pervade sensuous pleasures. Before turning to P&C’s argument, I shall discuss three major similarities between their account of aesthetic experience and Dewey’s. Emphasizing their commonalities will serve to highlight the advantage of Dewey’s account once the linguistic practice argument has been rebutted, in that he also provides for several of the salient points that P&C claim for their theory.

## II.

The first similarity lies in the notion of perception. Because of the importance of perception to aesthetic appreciation, P&C must argue that understanding how an object functions can translate non-metaphorically into an altered perceptual appearance of that object. For example, for something to look fit, we must know how it functions. Here P&C are following Kendall Walton, who argues that how we classify an art work affects the properties we perceive it to have: aesthetic properties “are not to be found in works themselves in the straightforward way that colors and shapes or pitches and rhythms are,” but this is *not* to deny that “we perceive aesthetic properties in works of art.”<sup>7</sup> Walton would agree with Dewey’s distinction of the physical product from the perceived aesthetic object, a distinction that follows from Dewey’s emphasis on aesthetic experience arising out of the interaction of the human organism with its environment. Indeed, Dewey gives an example reminiscent of (or rather foreshadowing) Walton: an object stands in a museum, believed to be a product of a primitive culture. Yet it is discovered that it is in fact a merely natural entity.

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<sup>6</sup> Shusterman (2006), p. 221.

<sup>7</sup> Walton (1970), p. 374-5.

Although it remains the same externally, our intellectual classification of it changes. But the difference is not solely intellectual; “a difference is made in appreciative perception and in a direct way.”<sup>8</sup> In sum, both accounts believe that perception is cognitively laden with what we bring to bear on it.<sup>9</sup>

The second similarity, closely related, is that both accounts of aesthetic appreciation are cognitively rich in holding that we also bring our knowledge to bear on aesthetic experience. P&C argue that the proper function of artworks might lie in our total aesthetic response to them, in evoking a set of perceptual, cognitive, and emotional responses. They locate the practical function of the Vietnam Memorial, for instance, in the *aesthetic* responses it produces, as opposed to the merely emotional, because our knowledge of what the memorial is for plays into our response to it. This is a very Deweyan move in that it broadens the realm of the aesthetic rather than separating it off. As Dewey puts it, “associated material [e.g., knowledge] and the immediate color or sound that evokes it”<sup>10</sup> do not remain separate from one another.

The third similarity, perhaps the most important, is that Dewey is also open to functional aesthetic appreciation. In a passage that comes strikingly close to endorsing a functional beauty account, Dewey notes that “adequate objective relationship of parts with respect to most efficient use at least brings about a condition that is *favorable* to esthetic enjoyment.”<sup>11</sup> In this passage, Dewey seems to be claiming that functional fitness alone does not suffice for aesthetic pleasure: interaction with the objects at hand is also necessary. This might initially sound more like the Humean account that P&C discuss, in which an object’s being functionally fit conveys the additional idea of utility or benefit to its user, but the Humean account is vulnerable to the objection that such appreciation is not aesthetic but utilitarian, whereas Dewey’s is not. For Dewey, something’s looking fit becomes an aesthetic quality only when “it serves immediately the enrichment of the immediate experience of the one whose attentive perception is directed to it.”<sup>12</sup> We can take pleasure in a thing’s looking fit even if we are unable to use it for our own benefit.

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<sup>8</sup> Dewey (1934), p. 50.

<sup>9</sup> I should note that both accounts, in emphasizing perception, might face problems with our aesthetic appreciation of mathematical proofs or the plots of novels, which are not perceptual objects. I cannot respond to this concern here but only protest that it would affect both Dewey and P&C.

<sup>10</sup> Dewey (1934), p. 103.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 335.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121.

Having discussed these three similarities, I shall argue in the next sections that the linguistic practice argument does not work and hence that we should uphold Dewey's broader scope of what counts as aesthetic.

### III.

P&C rely on an argument from linguistic practice in order to support their demarcational theory of the aesthetic. In their view, aestheticians have traditionally insisted upon a difference between aesthetic and bodily pleasures, a difference supposedly rooted in a fundamental phenomenological distinction between the distal senses of hearing and sight and the proximal senses of taste, touch, and smell: where the latter are felt as bodily sensations, the former are not. This difference, P&C claim, is enshrined in current linguistic usage, which does not class bodily pleasures with the 'higher' aesthetic pleasures of listening to Bach or seeing a painting by Titian. More specifically, we typically only apply the word 'beautiful' to sights and sounds, as opposed to tastes, smells, and tactile experiences. P&C claim that even phrases like 'aesthetically pleasing' do not apply to bodily pleasures: "It would be just as awkward to describe a warm bath or a sexual experience as 'aesthetically pleasing' as it would be to call it 'beautiful', if not more so."<sup>13</sup> P&C are not denying that we often take bodily pleasure in aesthetic objects, such as the feel of a sculpture or the smell of a pine forest. Rather, they claim that bodily sensations are mere *adjuncts* to aesthetic appreciation and not *elements* of it. Although they wish to broaden the realm of the aesthetic, there is still clearly a limit for P&C.

There are several problems that arise right away with such an argument, two of which I will discuss in this section. The first has to do with an appeal to usage. It is generally agreed by philosophers that our linguistic practices are messy and indeterminate, and that, as P&C themselves admit, philosophy "involves more than just the documenting of our conceptual framework."<sup>14</sup> In this instance, we must acknowledge that people use the word 'beautiful' in a variety of ways. Dewey himself recognizes this: as he says, "one significance of the term is the striking presence of decorative quality, of immediate charm for sense. The other meaning indicates the marked presence of relations of fitness and reciprocal adaptation among the members

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<sup>13</sup> Parsons and Carlson (2008), p. 182.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 183.

of the whole, whether it be object, situation, or deed.”<sup>15</sup> Besides providing further evidence that Dewey is open to functional beauty, this point might also remind us of the current practice some have of exclaiming ‘beautiful!’ to express gratitude for something done for us. Apart from this, we may wonder whether the ‘folk’ know what the term ‘aesthetic’ means. Even if they do, the term ‘aesthetically pleasing’ may simply be too precious to be used in common parlance, thus indicating nothing about what people actually find aesthetically pleasing.

The second worry has to do with P&C’s examples, which are meant to show that the aesthetic/bodily pleasure distinction does *not* arise merely in the West, with its corrupting philosophical tradition (as Dewey suggests at one point). P&C appeal to Chinese and Turkish—non-Western languages—to claim that the terms for beauty are different from the terms usually applied to pleasures. But data are available on both sides. Crispin Sartwell notes that etymologies of ‘beauty’ in ancient languages demonstrate the connection of aesthetic experience (taken in a narrow sense) with other kinds of appreciation. The Sanskrit root of ‘beauty’ apparently means both ‘whole’ and ‘holy’, linking to religious experience, while the Hebrew word *yapha* means ‘to shine’, “suggesting a perhaps more simple sensual pleasure.”<sup>16</sup> The point is not decisive. But I present these as *prima facie* general worries for P&C’s argument before turning to a rebuttal that draws more directly on Dewey’s aesthetics.

#### IV.

Although Dewey recognizes, at least on some level, the distinction between the senses, it is here that his account diverges significantly from P&C’s. Dewey makes an important phenomenological point, one which P&C do not acknowledge: our engagement with objects is always multi-modal insofar as all our senses are functioning normally. Even if one sense might be prominent in an experience (e.g., sight for paintings, hearing for music), Dewey claims that “a particular sense is simply the outpost of a total organic activity in which all organs, including the function of the autonomic system, participate.”<sup>17</sup> Although we might analytically focus on one sense modality after the fact, if we are to give a true characterization of aesthetic experience we must acknowledge the multi-sensory nature of our engagement with objects,

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<sup>15</sup> Dewey (1934), p. 135.

<sup>16</sup> Sartwell (2003), p. 764.

<sup>17</sup> Dewey (1934), p. 226.

something P&C wish to avoid. Dewey gives the example of being able to discriminate the surfaces of rock and tissue-paper through vision alone, an example which his cognitively laden view of perception can account for: over time, our experiences with rocks and tissue paper allow us to ‘see’ what they feel like.

Consider further the experience of going to a museum: although I may take great intellectual, cognitively rich pleasure in viewing the paintings, part of my aesthetic experience includes the frame of the painting, its location on the wall, the temperature in the room, and so on. Variations in any of the sense modalities could alter my experience: it might be too cold in the room, or there might be an offensive odour coming through the air ducts. These variations would alter the nature of my experience *qua* aesthetic experience and might prevent me from engaging fully with the artworks in the museum; conversely, a particular pleasant aroma in the gallery or a warm temperature after coming inside from the cold might enhance my engagement with the paintings on the wall. In brief, the fact that even these ‘narrow’ kinds of aesthetic experience (such as viewing paintings) involve other bodily sensations gives Dewey a reason to reject the rigid distinction between intellectual and sensuous pleasures.

The main objection P&C have to Dewey is the charge of relativism, but I believe that this objection also fails. For P&C, Deweyan accounts that extend the concept of the aesthetic “into a bodily, multi-sensory engagement with objects” thereby leave little place “for knowledge and criticism in the appreciation of the everyday.”<sup>18</sup> It appears that P&C believe that an overly expanded conception of the aesthetic would come at the cost of heightened subjectivity; criticism is an important mark of the aesthetic for them. But they need not worry: just consider the growing body of knowledge concerning the appreciation of wine. Such a ‘sensual’ area depends upon a highly descriptive vocabulary, a vast amount of knowledge concerning vintage and location, and incredible sensory discriminations of scent and palette which can require years of training to be acquired. Similar considerations apply to various culinary practices (consider the number of television shows based on food criticism) and possibly even sexual experiences (I understand that the US pornography industry hosts its own version of the Academy Awards each year). The point is that knowledge and criticism abound even in areas of ‘bodily pleasure’, and I suspect that such

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<sup>18</sup> Parsons and Carlson (2008), p. 194.

knowledge will only increase over time as cultures take more interest in these areas of aesthetic appreciation. But having a body of knowledge about some practice, it must be noted, is not a sufficient condition for engaging in aesthetic appreciation about the objects of that practice: for example, there is a large amount of knowledge about how to evaluate investment opportunities, but this does not yet make it an aesthetic practice.<sup>19</sup>

For Dewey, at least, the experience would still have to meet his two criteria—that it is unified and complete, and that it fully engages our mental faculties—in order to qualify as aesthetic, and indeed knowledge would only be necessary for aesthetic appreciation insofar as it engages our mental faculties. In general, because this full engagement can occur over a range of sensations, he is extremely wary of relegating anything to the non-aesthetic and prefers to speak of the implicitly aesthetic.

These criteria, however, are not themselves immune to criticism. What is clear is that there is room for P&C and others to object to Dewey's (admittedly rather obscure) characterization of experience as unified and complete. Some experiences, particularly of modern art, seem to be quite intentionally fragmentary and nonetheless aesthetic, such as T. S. Eliot's poem 'The Waste Land' or some cubist painting and sculpture. This criticism has been recognized even by proponents of Dewey's aesthetics: Richard Shusterman acknowledges that Dewey fails to discuss bad aesthetic experience, although he believes it displays "at least the integrity of standing out as a distinctly singular experience."<sup>20</sup> Alan Goldman, who is also sympathetic to Dewey, believes we should admit that not all aesthetic experience is well-described as unified or complete. But he notes that this doesn't tell against the second mark of the aesthetic: its "full engagement of our mental (perceptual, cognitive, affective) capacities."<sup>21</sup> This second criterion, with its emphasis on the multi-modal nature of our engagement with objects, is all we need to overcome P&C's objections to Dewey. We can take issue with the first criterion and still be entitled to argue against the linguistic practice argument.

In conclusion, I have attempted to establish that P&C have quite a lot in common with Dewey as regards perception, aesthetic appreciation, and functional beauty, that the linguistic practice argument is unsuccessful, and that while Dewey's first criterion

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<sup>19</sup> I am grateful to Berys Gaut for suggesting this objection and example.

<sup>20</sup> Shusterman (2006), p. 222.

<sup>21</sup> Goldman (2005), p. 262.



of the aesthetic is questionable, his emphasis on the multi-modal nature of our engagement with objects provides a strong reason to reject the distinction between aesthetic and bodily pleasures. It has not been my aim to defend his theory *tout court*; rather, I have employed an argument from Dewey in order to argue that the nature of the aesthetic should be thought of as including bodily sensations and thus allowing for more activities, including those from everyday life, to be considered as potentially aesthetic.

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