

THE NECESSITY OF SOMA
– THE MOTOR LINES OF OPERATION
IN JOHN DEWEY'S AESTHETICS

Ewa Chudoba

Poland

chudobae@gmail.com

In Dewey's thought all interactions are motor. Aesthetic experience wouldn't be emotional, expressive and fulfilling if not based on motor actions of a body. A human being can have an experience as well as aesthetic experience only through specific behaviors and/or habits. All chaotic actions are responsible for destroying every potentiality of aesthetic experience. Living in accordance with rhythms created and trained by individuals in their daily routine results in happiness and fulfillment of some aesthetic quality.

The main purpose of the paper is to show how the motor lines of operation are important in Dewey's aesthetic experience. In a broader perspective, I am going to defend the thesis that the body as a motor phenomenon is in the core of Dewey's aesthetics and as such is material for Shusterman's somaesthetics.

In the thought of an American pragmatist John Dewey (1859–1952) we can find two notions which encompass aesthetic experience. The first one is *an experience* and the other is aesthetic experience *per se*. The relations between them, I shall present below with a special reference to the motor lines of operation.

To clearly understand what aesthetic experience is it is worth contrasting the phenomenon with **anaesthetic** experience which Dewey describes a couple of times in his aesthetic *summa – Art as Experience* (1934). As the philosopher puts it less or more directly, anaesthetic experience leaves an individual in a profound state of emotional numbness and the connotations with an anaesthesia won't be out of place. So anaesthetic

experience is slack, discursive and unorganized and gives no satisfaction [Dewey, LW 10, 1981, pp.46–47]. On the other hand, such an experience might be mechanical which makes it devoid of meaning. Dewey gives an example of getting rid of a negative emotion (like anger) through putting things in order in the room [Dewey, LW 10, 1981, p.84]. If tidying is done exclusively on the purpose of diminishing anger, it will result in some kind of emotional fulfillment. On the contrary, if it is done on the basis of a mechanical routine it will lead to anaesthetic, non-meaningful and unemotional experiences [Dewey, LW10, 1981, pp.83–84]. To sum that up, both chaotic looseness and strict automatism destroy the aesthetic quality *in potentia* making aesthetic experience not to happen at all [Dewey, LW10, 1981, p.47].

What differentiates the aesthetic experience from the anaesthetic one is the intrinsic aesthetic quality which has the power to integrate chaotic slackness and can speed slowness of all accidental events in individuals' lives. The root of it is the harmonious interaction between doing and undergoing in experience.

The philosopher stresses: *The enemies of the esthetic are neither the practical nor the intellectual* [Dewey, LW10, 1981, p. 47]. These factors are indifferent, irrelevant for aesthetic quality in experience which is based on two main conditions. Firstly, as it was suggested earlier, there must be an interaction between an organism (a human being etc.) and its environment. Experience of aesthetic quality is born out of the context, it never happens in the void. Secondly, the two phases of experience, namely undergoing and doing, must be in balance. Every lack of stability between them prevents the experience from its proper growth and its culmination point (climax). Doing (all movements and actions) and undergoing (perception and all usage of senses) are expressive parts of all aesthetic experiences. *Expressive* in Dewey's vocabulary means full of meaning, important, developing [Dewey, LW10, 1981, p.67–68] for an individual involved in such an interaction. Doing and

undergoing are both active according to Dewey [Dewey, LW10, 1981, p.60].

The aesthetic quality of experience is an effect of these two factors (interaction as well as harmony between doing and undergoing), however, it is something which cannot be gained on purpose [Dewey, LW1, 1981, p.58]. One cannot get it intentionally. It simply appears under at least two conditions mentioned above. The experience of aesthetic quality is called **an experience** by Dewey. It is aesthetic experience in a broad sense as it may occur while doing some practical actions (like tidying the room), it can be emotional (Dewey gives example of an argument between two people) or it can arise during some intellectual work. So, an experience can be practical, emotional or intellectual. Probably it can happen in some other circumstances as people have at least eight types of intelligence including musical, visual, verbal, logical, bodily, interpersonal, intrapersonal, naturalistic, and use them in all kinds of environments¹. So when a biologist Jane Goodall describes the feeling of entity and peace in the jungle in Africa², it might be called *an experience* with a high probability.

While occurring, all these types of experience demand certain actions of the body – it is the core of the *doing* phase.

All aesthetic experiences: an experience with practical or intellectual or emotional quality	
doing	undergoing
motor lines of operation	perception

¹ It's a theory of multiple intelligences coined by Howard Gardner (in his book: *Frames of Mind: Theory of Multiple Intelligences*, 1983) and promoted by educators like Colin Rose; Howard Gardner, *Frames of Mind: Theory of Multiple Intelligences*, Basic Books, 1983; Howard Gardner, *Theory of Multiple Intelligences*, Basic Books, 1993.

² Jane Goodall, *Through a Window: My Thirty Years with the Chimpanzees of Gombe*, (Mariner Books, 2000), 23.

When one is tidying the room with the intention of getting rid of his/her anger, he or she is doing it in a proper way. To be more picturesque, when you want to clean the carpet you have to move your hands with a vacuum cleaner in them forward and backward for some period of time. Or if you want to wash the dishes you have to put them into water and press the sponge on them in rhythmical movements of your hands. If you want to feel *Waldeinsamkeit*³, you have to go to the woods and spend some time in there in solitude. So you have to get there by walking and your body has to be in some posture and awareness. All these actions and states need motor lines (or sets) of operation in the body. They don't appear out of nothingness but are consequences of our motor lines operating intentionally in the body to get what we want to get on the very certain purpose. To put it more bluntly, the purpose is specific but those actions are not specific although necessary. You can wash the dishes in many ways so you can clean the carpet and still have an experience while doing this housework. There is no one routine to do this.

However, if you want to get something more, namely some aesthetic experience in a narrow sense, your actions of your body have to be highly specific, but with no specific purpose because aesthetic experience *per se* has no purpose at all. One does it for pure enjoyment of doing it. Aesthetic quality, then, is somehow easier to appear as the other factors (practical, emotional) and the outer goal are not in existence. There is only a pure unintentional action of the body and the mind. Such an experience is called aesthetic experience as such, aesthetic experience *sensu stricto*. Mostly it happens in contact with pieces of art both while creating them and responding to them [Dewey, LW10, 1981, p.61].

The problem appears here because Dewey doesn't differentiate an experience and aesthetic experience in

³ *Waldeinsamkeit* – the feeling of being alone in the woods.

an analytical way being pedantic about the details when he writes about motor lines of operation. The rhetoric I used in a previous paragraph is only partly true. The way I put actions in opposition to goals is understood only to some extent – to the extent you want to differentiate an experience from pure aesthetic experience. But it is not necessary for understanding the importance of motor lines of operation in Dewey's aesthetics.

My main aim is only to stress that the specific motor lines of operations are far more powerful than unspecific ones. Trained and exercised motor sets of the body are responsible for having profound aesthetic experiences regardless of the main factors – practical, intellectual, emotional or aesthetic. Dewey writes:

A surgeon, golfer, ball player, as well as a dancer, a painter, or violin-player has at hand and under command certain sets of the body. Without them, no complex skilled act can be performed. An inexperienced huntsman has buck fever when he suddenly comes upon the game he has been pursuing. He does not have effective lines of motor response ready and waiting. His tendencies to action therefore conflict and get in the way of one another, and the result is confusion, a whirl and blur. The old hand at the game may be emotionally stirred also. But he works off his emotion by directing his response along channels prepared in advance: steady holding of eye and hand, sighting of rifle, etc. If we substitute a painter or a poet in the circumstances of suddenly coming upon a graceful deer in a green and sun-specked forest, there is also diversion of immediate response into collateral channels. He does not get ready to shoot, but neither does he permit his response to diffuse at random through his whole body. The motor coordinations that are ready because of prior experience at once render his perception of the situation more acute and intense and incorporate into it meanings that give it depth, while they also cause what is seen to fall into fittings rhythms [Dewey, LW10, 1981, p.103].

Specific sets of operations depend on a prior training. The more thorough and complex the training is, the more specific sets of operations are. That leads to more intense aesthetic experiences of all kinds. When a surgeon has an experience operating a patient, it is based on a very specific surgical training which has been lasting since it started one day in the operating room at hospital. The surgeon operating for the very first time has no chance of experiencing any kind of aesthetic quality due to his/her inexperience. He/she doesn't have any motor sets of operations at his/her disposal yet. The surgeon is working on learning them. However, having learnt them the surgeon can have a very profound aesthetic experience during an operation. Its depth as well as artistry depends on the intensity of the prior training [Dewey, LW10, 1981, p.101–102].

In the passage quoted above Dewey does not make a strict difference between artists and other professions. Later on in the text this mixture of the artistic-aesthetic [Dewey, LW10, 1981, p. 53] with the practical is even more blurred [Dewey, LW10, 1981, p.104]. It seems that for him appearance of aesthetic experience whatever it would be is strictly connected with **how** the body acts, not with **what** the body does. The core of aesthetic experience is hence not what, but how. For **how** the body matters. Body is responsible for how we do things, how we manage the phases of doing and undergoing because the body remembers all trained prior actions. When Dewey explains his concept of motor lines of operation, he writes both about a surgeon and a pianist making no differences in their aesthetic experiences. They both have them. They both have experiences of an aesthetic quality. So it seems like from the standpoint of body (that's where motor lines are living) it is irrelevant to differentiate aesthetic experience in a narrow sense from aesthetic experience in a broader sense. Both a surgeon and a pianist were taught how to behave, act and move while doing their job so both are having aesthetic experiences operating and playing respectively.

What is the other important aspect of the motor lines of operation it that they are inevitably folded with perception as the phase of doing comes together with the phase of undergoing. So to be a fulfilled musician or a fulfilled physician one also has to have trained ways of perceiving things and processes, especially those they are trained in. Perception is something that can be taught. Both motor and perceptive training are parts of esthetic education [Dewey, LW10, 1981, p.103].

A question arises at that point: is, for example, surgical training a part of aesthetic education if surgeons are taught motor sets of their bodies and in consequences they can have aesthetic experiences in the operating room? To avoid absurdity, the distinction between an experience and aesthetic experience in a narrow sense is useful now. In the case of non-artistic professions it seems that the aesthetic quality is a side effect of their trained actions. However, when artistic professions are discussed the aesthetic quality is in the heart of what they are doing. The purpose of an artist it to create something of the aesthetic quality but this purpose is not the same goal as having done the operation properly. It is not made out of intentions but it occurs as it happens, in the way an artist is doing his or her work. The aesthetic quality becomes present out of satisfaction from motor lines of operation in the body.

The solution, however, is not satisfying as from the point of view of motor sets in the body there is no material difference between aesthetic experience in operating and aesthetic experience in playing. At this point Shusterman's ideas are crucial to introduce. Somatic experience is the answer for the problems found in Dewey's aesthetics.

Having established somatic turn in philosophy [Shusterman, 2000, p.154–181], Shusterman started using the term somatic experience which describes all kinds of aesthetic experiences. What he wants to put stress on is that the presence and involvement of the body is crucial in developing and having all these experiences. After somatic turn, the attention of thinkers is paid both on motor and sensuous phases in experiences. Having accepted Shusterman's idea of somaesthetics, it can be said that all experiences had by people of all professions (surgeons, artists, hunters etc.) are somatic. From that standpoint no absurdity can be traced as both surgeon and artist's trainings are somatic ones and on the basis of that, somaesthetics makes it possible to find a good solution for the problem whether surgeon's training is a part of aesthetic education. It is obviously a part of somatic education which is always aesthetic.

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