

## On Dewey's Trail

From Aesthetic Meaning to Aesthetic Meaningfulness

Giovanni Matteucci

---



### Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejpap/2291>

DOI: 10.4000/ejpap.2291

ISSN: 2036-4091

### Publisher

Associazione Pragma

### Electronic reference

Giovanni Matteucci, "On Dewey's Trail", *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy* [Online], XIII-1 | 2021, Online since 02 April 2021, connection on 04 April 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejpap/2291> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejpap.2291>

---

This text was automatically generated on 4 April 2021.



Author retains copyright and grants the *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy* right of first publication with the work simultaneously licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

---

# On Dewey's Trail

From Aesthetic Meaning to Aesthetic Meaningfulness

Giovanni Matteucci

---

## 1. Introduction

- 1 Like any masterpiece, Dewey's *Art as Experience* (LW.10) has been the object both of relevant interpretations and of original and varied revivals, according to perspectives that are each time specified in distinctive manners. This clearly established *Art as Experience* as an important legacy for the field of contemporary aesthetics, and here I will deal with one specific aspect of this wider legacy. In this paper I will suggest a way in which it seems useful to draw from Dewey's masterpiece while even going beyond the horizon of a fully developed aesthetic theory. The aim is therefore to underline the general theoretical scope of Dewey's specifically aesthetic perspective, in the conviction that it is not limited to aesthetics in the strict disciplinary sense, but that it has to do with philosophy in a general sense.
- 2 The unifying theme of this contribution will be the correlation between the problem of meaning and the description of the aesthetic in the framework of a specifically enactivist approach to the model of the extended mind. In order to introduce this issue I will establish a brief comparison between Dewey and Quine, i.e., a philosopher who certainly belongs to the analytic tradition. If one were to look exclusively at the way analytic philosophy has considered Dewey's thought in the field of aesthetics, this juxtaposition might appear no less than bizarre. In fact, one of the most prominent traits of analytic aesthetics until the late 1970s was a silence toward pragmatism that was broken only in very rare instances. Talking about the relationship between analytic philosophers and pragmatists in aesthetics would mean talking about a relationship that is indeed conflicting, at least as far as the decades in which analytic aesthetics has defined its tenets are concerned (cf. Shusterman 2001). Yet, we are going to see how starting with Quine (an analytic philosopher, but, significantly, not an aesthetician) helps to frame the question of meaning in its peculiar aesthetic characterization as provided by Dewey. My thesis is that this characterization has a general theoretical

import in that it makes it inappropriate to speak of “aesthetic meanings,” or even of “meanings of the aesthetic,” and it instead highlights the aesthetic character of meaning as such, that is, how an experiential phenomenon can be meaningful insofar as it is characterized in an aesthetic sense. Accordingly, we will speak here of “aesthetic meaningfulness.” To this extent, a dialogue will also be established with two more recent perspectives openly informed by Dewey’s work: Mark Johnson and Shaun Gallagher’s.

## 2. The Praxis of Meaning (Quine and Dewey)

- 3 It is well known that a decisive strategy in Dewey’s thought is the simultaneous double dismissal of subjectivism and objectivism. When analytic philosophy has embraced similar metaphysical conceptions, it has often taken as its point of reference, rather than pragmatism, post-*Tractatus* Wittgenstein’s thought. An exception, however, is at least Quine, who clearly observed, “Dewey long preceded Wittgenstein in insisting that there is no more to meaning than is to be found in the social use of linguistic forms” (Quine 1981: 37). In itself, this recognition does not allow Quine to be listed among the strictly Deweyan followers, even less so in aesthetics, despite the fact that he mentions having attended the lecture series on which *Art as Experience* is based (cf. Quine 1969: 26-7). What prevents this inclusion is the behaviorist bias that burdens Quine’s conception of meaning and that becomes explicit when he states: “There is nothing in linguistic meaning, then, beyond what is to be gleaned from overt behavior in observable circumstances” (Quine 1987: 5). Generally reduced to behavior, for Quine meaning is at the same time a cognitive acquisition. Indeed, in its elementary form it would be “what a sentence shares with its translation,” where at the lowest degree the translation “turns solely on correlations with non-verbal stimulation” (Quine 2013: 29). What looms as meaning is first and foremost the response to stimuli that can be identified as a nuclear content within behavior to the extent that it can be “translated” into linguistic configurations.
- 4 The link between meaning and behavior can also be found in Dewey, but in a more complex framework. Dewey, sharing the anti-mentalism that also inspires Quine, binds meaning to the interactive nexus with the environment, but also with what is objectively articulated in the course of an experience and therefore appears irreducible to a stimulus or a set of stimuli. It is worth recalling the passage in *Experience and Nature* in which Dewey reiterates the specificity of behavior of which meaning is a quality:
 

Take speech as behavioristically as you will, including the elimination of all private mental states, and it remains true that it is markedly distinguished from the signaling acts of animals. Meaning is not indeed a psychic existence; it is primarily a property of behavior, and secondarily a property of objects. But the behavior of which it is a quality is a distinctive behavior; cooperative, in that response to another’s act involves contemporaneous response to a thing as entering into the other’s behavior, and this upon both sides. (LW.1: 141)
- 5 One could also say that behavior hence does not constitute the cognitive foundation for meaning, but is an embodied accomplishment of it. Rather than a content that is enucleated within behavior and becomes translatable, it is a mode of interaction that *expresses itself* in “cooperative” or “collusive” behavior. As such, meaning is attributed to what, as an object, looms up in experience but precisely because of how it is capable of potentially enacting a correspondence in which those who agree on it take part:

“Originating as a concerted or combined method of using or enjoying things, [meaning] indicates a possible interaction, not a thing in separate singleness” (LW.1: 148). A radical feature of Dewey’s work is the withdrawal of meaning from the stimulus-response paradigm, which is replaced by an expressive nexus that has its own decisive movement in the embodiment of *aisthesis*, of perceptual praxis. Meaning articulates a qualitative difference in the correlation with the environment that acts differently from a factual stimulus. Against Quine’s cognitivist behaviorism, for Dewey meaning exhibits an aesthetic-expressive root that prevents its reduction to the cognitive level, exactly to the same extent in which it prevents its absorption within the linguistic horizon alone. It cannot be translated, but it is expressively liable to enactment. It consists of modalities of the sensible, of “*sensa*,” to which an analysis focused only on the internal contents of feeling, on “sensations” or on mere inputs of any kind would not do justice:

differences in qualities (feelings) of acts when employed as indications of acts performed and to be performed and as signs of their consequences, mean something. And they *mean* it directly; the meaning is had as their own character. Feelings make sense; as immediate meanings of events and objects, they are sensations, or, more properly, *sensa*. (LW.1: 198)

- 6 This does not, however, undermine the basis Quine shares with Dewey of a relationalism that refuses any *philosophia prima* by virtue of the inclusiveness that subsists between world and mind, world and knowledge, and world and meaning (cf. Quine 1969: 26). From here Quine elaborates his famous doctrine of *referential opacity*, in which he broadens to extensionality the inscrutable nature of meaning already ascribed to intensionality. If in the theory of meaning often supported in the analytical field the indeterminacy of intension is compensated by the determinacy of extension (since “extension has been the firm thing,” while “intension the infirm”), in Quine’s perspective of *radical translation* the indeterminacy “cuts across extension and intension alike” so that “reference itself proves behaviorally inscrutable” (*ibid.*: 35).
- 7 This confirms the weakness of the thesis of the absolute incompatibility between pragmatist and analytical approaches. Why, then, are the protagonists of analytical *aesthetics* mostly adhering to this oppositional scheme? This scheme actually emerges when analytic philosophy and aesthetics fall back – even against Quine – to a surreptitious empiricist matrix, thus relapsing into the modern dualist gnoseology against which Dewey repeatedly argues. Those who, instead, try to critically emancipate themselves from this matrix, follow paths intensely trodden by pragmatists. Thus, insofar as the doctrine of referential opacity is connected with Quine’s commitment to stigmatize the dogmas of empiricism, it substantiates Quine’s affinities with Dewey.
- 8 A specifically aesthetic difference resurfaces here as well, however. What Quine describes as something radically critical for meaning is for Dewey a moment that fosters a wider meaningfulness. If for Quine the opacity of the reference signals cognitive inscrutability, to be resolved by referring to the behavior of the speakers with respect to stimulations, in Dewey a similar observation occurs in the light of the dismissal of the myth of analyticity.
- 9 Meaning is pragmatistically grasped in the overall process of correspondence to an experiential problematicity, so much so that it assumes an unavoidably instrumental and at the same time performative connotation, which can be learned and revised as

well as developed serially and metamorphically. It is located within “the gray area” that Quine painstakingly conquers as a result of his critique of the dogmas of empiricism. The poignancy of Dewey’s writing fully comes to the fore in the following passage, when we read that “the meaning of a thing is the sense it makes” (LW.1: 144). This is because the term of referentiality, the “object,” turns out to be one of the vectors that are internal to the overall experiential field. It is not, cognitively, a stimulation; it is, aesthetically, one of the expressive “foci” that are embraced by the field itself. The latter appears as meaningful, if – as Dewey points out – even merely linguistic meaning “is something common between speaker, hearer and the thing to which speech refers” (LW.1: 147). Consequently, the “object” is denied the role of extra-semantic handle to which we can firmly hold on, so to speak. Hence the liberation from the constraint of any ontological commitment.

- 10 From Dewey’s point of view, the extensional reference is the result of partial dynamics within a wider area of meaningfulness, which in its expressive quality eludes any absolute determination in purely epistemological terms. Thus, no scientific debt (which instead persists in Quine) hinders the pragmatist project, which conceives the relationship between human organism and environment in a pluralistic sense, making the knowing subject an actor who carries out practices of interaction with the world as ways of acting within the expressive field that embody in turn this latter’s sense potentialities. And it is precisely from this point of view that the aesthetically qualified experience, which constitutes the specificity of Dewey’s perspective, becomes exemplary.

### 3. Dewey: The Aesthetic Embodiment of Meaning

- 11 This semantic-expressive dynamic is described in *Art as Experience* as the embodiment of meaning in an aesthetic device. Dewey’s assumption is the rejection of the scheme according to which meaning would be an additional endowment to a content that per se is acquired in a neutral manner. For this reason, the notion of association is considered insufficient to explain the meaning of even a work of art, making Dewey’s divergence from empiricism, both classical and analytical, even more accentuated. An analysis that equates aesthetic meanings with processes of association risks, in fact, to result in a positive psychology unable to recognize how “the suggesting and the suggested may interpenetrate and form a unity in which present sense quality confers vividness of realization while the material evoked supplies content and depth” (LW.10: 105).
- 12 Contrariwise, Dewey’s stance involves the restoration of the qualitative texture of the real. So it is not surprising that it is precisely in this aesthetic context that Dewey makes a move that could be defined – in Quinean terms – as being against another “dogma of empiricism,” by distancing himself from a hierarchical theory of properties. In fact, Dewey observes:

As long as “meaning” is a matter of association and suggestion, it falls apart from the qualities of the sensuous medium and form is disturbed. Sense qualities are the carriers of meanings, not as vehicles carry goods but as a mother carries a baby when the baby is part of her own organism. Works of art, like words, are literally pregnant with meaning. Meanings [...] are not added on by “association” but are either, and equally, the soul of which colors are the body or the body of which

colors are the soul – according as we happen to be concerned with the picture. (LW. 10: 122-3)

- 13 In the foreground stands thus the relational dimension, which is neither subjective nor objective despite being imbued with both subjective and objective features. Having gained the centrality of this dimension, it is unavoidable for Dewey to abandon the idea of experience as a mere linear sequence of responses to passively received stimuli. The aesthetic device best exemplifies the resulting performative character that permeates the entire experiential arc precisely because it is meaningful:

the meanings imaginatively summoned, assembled, and integrated are embodied in material existence that here and now interacts with the self. The work of art is thus a challenge to the performance of a like act of evocation and organization, through imagination, on the part of the one who experiences it. It is not just a stimulus to and means of an overt course of action. (LW.10: 278)

- 14 The perceptual act, as an articulation innervated by orientation and relevance, should thus be distinguished from the neutral passivity of factual recognition, which is merely scalar because it lacks the vectorial tension that informs instead the perceptual praxis. And such a performative receptivity, once distinguished from neutral passivity as a “process consisting of a series of responsive acts that accumulate toward objective fulfillment,” acquires in itself the expressive function that serves to discern perception from mere recognition (cf. LW.10: 58). Consequently, the realism that Dewey defends on the level of the theory of perception is, however direct, not at all naïve. The qualitative poignancy of the holistic and synaesthetic interaction between organism and environment is shown in the immediacy of perceptual experience. In it the fullness of things as focal centers rather than the symptomatological virtuality of sense data – in other words the experience of phenomena and not the empiricism of facts, *sensa* and non sensations or, again, the manifest dimension of correlation and not ontological regions definable as internal or external ones:

angles perceived are the result not just of switches in the eye-movements but are properties of books and boxes handled; curves are the arch of the sky, the dome of a building; horizontal lines are seen as the spread of the ground, the edges of things around us. This factor is so continually and so unfailingly involved in every use of the eyes that the visually experienced qualities of lines cannot possibly be referred to the action of the eyes alone. (LW.10: 106)

- 15 No longer functional with respect to recognition, and therefore no longer having an ancillary role with respect to knowledge, perceiving is an intrinsically semantic and expressive action, it is extraction and enactment of a meaningfulness or significance (cf. LW.10: 60) immanently underlying the concrete and corporeal experiential reality. These are potential nuclei that are expressed by an aesthetic device, insofar as “art operates by selecting those potencies in things by which an experience – any experience – has significance and value” (cf. LW.10: 189). Exemplary case is, more than the denotativity of verbal language, the connotativity of music, whose meaningfulness is in fact recognized by Dewey beyond the undecidable and sterile disputes between formalism and conceptualism (LW.10: 241).
- 16 The immanence of qualitativity, in addition to providing the justification for meaningfulness, renders the opposition between percept and concept futile. That is, it opens up the possibility of establishing a fruitful and reciprocal connection between the two relative orders, allowing for the explanation of how a description of factual elements facilitates perceptual access to so-called aesthetic properties. And such an

incorporation of the meaning into the work has no set limits per se (LW.10: 35-6). For, in this way, the equation of meaning with something that is stipulated in a merely cognitive or even epistemological way has completely been set aside. And this allows us to acknowledge the truly aesthetic import of meaningfulness, which indeed subsists only in its becoming concrete, and thus within the perimeter of *aisthesis* while being the punctuation of its rhythm and relevance. On this basis Dewey (LW.10: 313) examines, finally, the processes of attribution of aesthetic properties, attaining, beyond any empiricist misunderstanding, various elements then widely reconsidered in the course of the analytical debate.

- 17 The pregnant fusion of artwork and meaning, and more generally of consummated experience (i.e. “aesthetic” in Dewey’s sense) and meaningfulness, embodies the very character of the interactive threshold of a “natural” reality preceding modernity’s dualisms. This is why the retrieval of corporeality as a concrete form of mental functions becomes essential, before any hypostatization of corporeal matter and of mind. Holism and synesthesia, but also the interweaving of concept and percept, are the coordinates within which Dewey’s analysis is profiled as a study of the aesthetic roots of the “mind” as that “body of organized *meanings* by means of which events of the present have *significance* for us” (cf. LW.10: 277; *italics added*). The effects of a double collapse can be observed here. Both the collapse of the gnoseological object (ideal and independent) and that of the gnoseological subject (hypothetical source of the semantic connotation of the world). In this region, prior to definite ontological characterizations, that is, characterizations of particular entities, one encounters the dynamics in which reality each time is configured in particular ways. A relevant aesthetic implication of this approach is that the interactive threshold of experience, in which corporeality becomes crucial, opens up the dimension of the modalities of semblance. Ontological issues lose their importance and are replaced by a description of phenomenal modalities and manifestations.
- 18 From this point of view, the fundamental assumption of the whole research presented in *Art as Experience* is definitely significant. It concerns the distinction between artwork (as field of experience) and art object (as objective hypostasis) on the basis of the recognition of the attributive and not substantive dimension of art. As we can read in a rare passage in which Dewey almost seems to provide a definition: “Art is a quality of doing and of what is done. Only outwardly, then, can it be designated by a substantive noun. Since it adheres to the manner and content of doing, it is adjectival in nature” (LW.10: 218).

#### 4. The Aesthetics of Meaning and the Multi-dimensionality of Experience (a dialogue with Mark Johnson)

- 19 Based on these assumptions, Mark Johnson (2018) has carried out a thorough analysis of the perspective of an aesthetics of meaning compatible with an embodied and extended conception of the mind.<sup>1</sup> Johnson’s starting point is a stance toward aesthetic experience that is well summarized by the following quotations:

Aesthetics is not merely a matter of constructing theories of something called aesthetic experience, but instead extends broadly to encompass all the processes by which we enact meaning through perception, bodily movement, feeling, and

imagination. In other words, *all meaningful experience is aesthetic experience*. (Johnson 2018: 2)

Aesthetics has been conceived far too narrowly as concerned with something called “aesthetic experience,” which is then distinguished from other modes of experience and thought (e.g., theoretical, technical, and moral) that make up the fabric of our daily lives. (*Ibid.*: 225)

Any adequate theory of meaning will have to focus on those qualitative and affective dimensions of experience that have usually been regarded as operative mostly in our experience, appreciation, and creation of various arts, but are now recognized as lying at the heart of all our meaning-making. (*Ibid.*: 51)

- 20 Yet, following Dewey in redeeming the aesthetic from its segregation, to the extent of highlighting the interweaving between the aesthetic and meaning, perhaps does not mean denying the possibility, and even the opportunity, that it still makes sense to speak of aesthetic experience as distinct, in some dimension (without reference to types or kinds), from something else that is, although not aesthetic, yet still experience. I do not believe, indeed, that it is legitimate to argue that every experience as such should be characterized as aesthetic. And I think that this can be supported precisely by remaining faithful to Dewey.
- 21 On the one hand, it is true that in Dewey's perspective the aesthetic is transversal. It cannot be segregated into a cultural sphere such as that of the Fine Arts. Precisely because it embodies meanings, it eludes those who question the “meaning of the aesthetic” in order to succeed in the task of identifying a special field of exceptional meanings, perhaps endowed with their own peculiar logic. On the other hand, however, this does not imply that every experience insofar as it relates to a meaning is therefore aesthetically connoted. With Dewey, if it is right to deny the existence of different types or *kinds* of experience, it seems wrong not to recognize the opportunity of describing experience according to different *dimensions*. In the same way, it is by knowing the side of a square that we can determine both its surface area and its perimeter without either reducing one thing to the other or defining different types or kinds to which the square would belong or, even less so, different ontological regions to which it would pertain. Accordingly, if one should no longer speak of “aesthetic meanings” (as logical phenomena *sui generis*) one can still identify an “aesthetic meaningfulness” as a *primitive* modality, or dimension, of experience that is tacitly operating throughout experience (and capable of becoming intensely manifest, “perspicuous and conspicuous” in some circumstances; cf. Iannilli 2020: 74 and 134), but not, however, connoting or foundational with respect to other modalities or dimensions of experience.
- 22 From experience in general Dewey distinguishes what he calls “an” experience, i.e., the experience whose peculiar character becomes a prominent aesthetic dimension (see LW.10: 42 ff.). In other terms, according to Dewey not all experience is aesthetic, so much so that the spectrum of the dimensions of experience that Dewey illustrates, for instance, in *Experience and Nature* certainly cannot be reduced to the aesthetic. Aesthetic is (only) “an” experience, or rather: experience when it is “an” experience, and not “the” experience. We could say that the latter is mere *experience-of* something (when, for instance, a subject faces an opposed object for exclusively cognitive purposes); it is the generic interaction between organism and environment. And it reveals its inhering in the aesthetic dimension (only) when it appears as an aspect of a field relationship that is specific (or specifically pregnant) because the terms between which it is established are strongly corresponding to each other and primitively



included in this correspondence. When I'm simply feeding myself, my experience is *of* the food; I face the food as a means to my nutrition. But when I'm having "an" experience such as a great meal in Paris, what counts is the experience I have *with* the food that is served to me, *with* the company I'm having dinner with, etc. Here the terms involved, "colluded," are not opposed; they are not considered as facing each other, but as taking part in the course of the same interaction from which they emerge. Speaking of that meal in Paris as "an" experience, means that it is only within this experience that both I and the food are "defined" for what we "truly" are, that is, for the meaningfulness we will have also when we remember or tell someone about that meal. This shows how each *experience-of* is a (potentially) partial manifestation of "an" *experience-with* (cf. Matteucci 2018). It is thus still possible to discern between non-aesthetic experience and aesthetic experience, although not in terms of ontological regions but in terms of phenomenological dimensions.

- 23 This has directly to do with the relationship between experience and meaning, which similarly does not allow for a 0-1, off-on juxtaposition in Dewey's theory. We could use also here the same scheme that emerged previously. According to the aesthetic dimension, *expression* is performatively experience *with* meaning. When, on the other hand, this dimension is not pregnant, the relationship to meaning does not fade away but becomes that of the experience *of* it or, as Dewey says (LW.10: 92 ff.), that of *statement*.
- 24 In other words:
- in expression, meaning is experience, it consists in its very unfolding, in its articulation for how it is structured and configured in its peculiarity (as "an" experience *with* the meaning that is engaging us);
  - in statement, meaning is (not absent, but) *terminus ad quem* to which the sign of the assertion points, as experience to which it simply refers (in the ongoing progress of "the" experience *of* the meanings we face).
- 25 Expression as an experience *with* the meaning is the way how organisms feel themselves invited to take part in a certain interaction field thanks to the material qualities provided by a medium (in the "material collusion" that the aesthetic engagement defined by Johnson in several pages as "visceral" consists of). Therefore, it marks off the aesthetic dimension of experience as something meaningful. And given this collusive-expressive character of the whole field involving the organism *with* its environment, a sort of aesthetic justification for the conception of the "extended mind" surfaces, making the latter irreducible to the cognitive (as instead is the case in the discussion of the extended mind model in relation to aesthetics recently carried out by Nannicelli 2019).

## 5. Aspects of the Aesthetic Meaningfulness for an Extended Conception of the Mind

- 26 When we speak of an extended mind, the idea that a mind which is intracranial – or even intra-corporeal – first and only then "gets extended" outward in order to progressively include portions of the world extraneous to the self is misleading. Once again we could use Dewey to underline how the extended mind coincides with the very organism-environment interaction in its various modalities. In this sense I would say

that extended mind means first of all *experience-with*: it cannot be conceived not only beyond embodiment, but also regardless of its aesthetic connotation, i.e., its intrinsically immersive nature, where however the body in which it is embodied is not a subject, but a vector of the field itself. To speak of an extended mind on Dewey's trail therefore means at the same time to speak of an oxymoronically impersonal (not yet felt as personal) lived-living body. It is the active threshold of a perceiving that becomes feeling and vice versa, thus generating meaningfulness. And on this osmotic border something like a Self (a tendency towards the first person perspective) and something like a world (a tendency towards objectivity) emerge. Understood otherwise, for instance, starting from the body in the first person, the idea of embodiment would only replicate, with respect to the body, the same dualistic patterns of the modern and Cartesian mind, with the further drawback of being less armed against a brutal reductionism (moving from a mind meant as an interaction to a mind meant as a mere neurological system).

- 27 This seems partly to take place precisely in Johnson's research. It is true that he notes that "meaning arises in the processes of organism-environment interaction that mutually define ourselves and our world" (Johnson 2018: 14), or also that "subjectivity and objectivity are thus two aspects of one and the same experiential process" (*ibid.*: 204). However, in the description that he offers of this mutuality, the radical mediation that should precede the reality of a Self and of a world is instead expressed beginning from a Self (with its acquired contents, either perceptually or imaginatively, that is, with respect to a past currently deemed reactivable or with respect to a future currently deemed predictable) and a world (with its objective properties given as affordances).
- 28 This is also confirmed by Johnson's non-critical reference to Barsalou and his "simulation semantics" theory (see also Johnson 2018: 246). It is no coincidence that this account of nuclei of perceptual meaning is carried out according to the principle of "simulation," as if – empiristically – the "real" perception were another matter entirely.
- 29 This could be countered with a more markedly phenomenological interpretation of the above mentioned radical mediation. The experiential content, especially on the perceptual and aesthetic level, is anything but simulated: it appears in its full meaningfulness. When we read a poem, we do not simulate events. Properly, these events "enter the scene," as Johnson suggests when he states: "That felt qualitative unity is not re-presented by the poem; rather, it is *enacted in* and *realized through* the continuous process of the unfolding of the poem" (*ibid.*: 17). The term "simulation," with the halo of denigration of appearance it bears, does not seem to me entirely compatible with this performative enactment which consists in the entering into the scene of an experiential arc which even the organism that participates personally experiences *with*. A simulation can always be falsifying and fictitious and therefore it is intrinsically amendable. Instead, the overall aesthetic content of an experience is never, as such, amendable (at most, with the same vectors involved in an experiential arc one can always have a new experience, and not amend the previous one).
- 30 The question can also be addressed with respect to ordinary experience. As far as Johnson's observations on the "meaning of a bowl" (*ibid.*: 244-5) are concerned, the thesis that it "is not just some abstract concept specifying a defining set of features that jointly constitute it as a bowl" is certainly to be supported. What I find problematic,

however, is his further description, that seems to place the meaning exceeding any abstract definition in the set of perceptual or imaginative experiences that have been acquired previously with respect to the object (see also *ibid.*: 210 and 244 ff.). This description can at most corroborate a regressive analysis of meaning, which however does not explain either its emergence or the capacity of the generation of a “new” meaning as an articulation of its operative meaningfulness, which by definition is such because it manifests itself without any previous acquisition.

- 31 The point is that everything we are willing to call a “bowl” shares not objective traits or personal lived experiences, but the fact that it populates a field in which the experience *with* something unfolds itself in the same meaningful way (the way in which materials, even liquid ones, are contained and made transportable, for instance: a “bowl-lish” field, so to speak, which requires those who act personally to manage it accordingly, i.e., responding to the expressive appeal they feel drawn by), regardless of whatever we experience (whether it be artifacts made of ceramic or other materials, or even our own bowl-shaped hands). In short, the aesthetic is, prior to being the experience of the possible (see *ibid.*: 248), an experience *with* possibility, that is, it embodies meaning as that which is possible in the praxis and not as a target that is aimed at. It is a matter – like Dewey says – of “possibilities that are felt as a possession of what is now and here” (LW.10: 24), because the aesthetic is able to give “particularity of existence to the generality of potentiality” (LW.10: 247), to make “the what” “a how,” to shift from meaning to meaningfulness. A true aesthetic meaningfulness so emerges, which is at the same time transversal and not generic with respect to experience.
- 32 And it is to this “how” that the various perceptual or imaginative acquisitions also hold on in the course of our lives. It constitutes the radically extra-linguistic component of meaning. Indeed, the “how” is what language stages with words, and which thus always exceeds the propositional order of the latter, as much as any other given set of signs. And in order to capture this “how” one must rather insist on the relational dimension of experience outside of any ontological hypothesis about what is an experience, whatever side (subjective or objective) one wants to consider. Here the legacy of Dewey’s aesthetic reflection proves to be decisive. Not least because it turns out to be compatible with attempts to define non-Cartesian models of the mind, which therefore could draw a significant advantage from “hiking” precisely on Dewey’s trail starting from his analysis of what is called here aesthetic meaningfulness.

## 6. An Aesthetic Characterization of Gallagher’s Enactivist Approach to the Extended Mind

- 33 The understanding of the mind as a field of aesthetic meaningfulness owes much to Gallagher’s proposal to specify the model of the extended mind in an enactivist key by retrieving pragmatism, in order to avoid aporias which are instead unavoidable in a functionalist key (Gallagher 2017: 48-64). This strategy involves the retrieval of the notion of “situation” drawn from Dewey, which Gallagher presents very clearly as follows:

the situation is not equivalent to the environment. That is, it is not that the organism is placed in a situation. Rather the situation is constituted by organism-environment, which means that the situation already includes the agent or experiencing subject. In this regard, for example, if I am in a problematic situation,

I cannot strictly point to the situation because my pointing is part of the situation. I cannot speak of it as some kind of objective set of factors because my speaking is part of it. My movement is a movement of the situation. Accordingly, the trick to solving a problematic situation is not simply to rearrange objects in the environment, but to rearrange oneself as well – to make adjustments to one's own behaviors. Indeed, any adjustment one makes to objects, artifacts, tools, practices, social relations, or institutions is equally an adjustment of oneself. (*Ibid.*: 55-6)

34 Shortly afterwards Gallagher adds:

As extended and enactive, the mind is *situated* in the way that Dewey defines this notion. The situation includes not just our notebooks, computers, and other cognitive technologies, and not just the social and cultural practices and institutions that help us solve a variety of cognitive problems, it also includes *us*. We are *in the world* in a way that is not reducible to occupying an objective position in the geography of surrounding space, and in a way such that the world is irreducible to an abstraction of itself represented in one's brain. We, as minded beings, are definitively "out there," dynamically coupled to artifacts, tools, technologies, social practices, and institutions that extend our cognitive processes (*Ibid.*: 59-60)

35 Now, if it is true – as Gallagher (*ibid.*: 58) observes – that "in many regards much depends on how we understand the coupling relation between organism-environment," I believe that characterizing this relation in an aesthetic sense as meaningful is the most useful strategy to avoid functionalist representationalism. "Situation," indeed, is tantamount to what I have often called "field," to which we should attribute the ownership of the processes that take place in it. A situation does not depend on a foundation that is either subjective or objective and that would already presume a context within which the cognitive thematization takes place. In the field of experience-with, that is, of the aesthetic as described by Dewey, subject and object emerge by virtue of a correspondence that dynamically shapes each of its vectors, and therefore the two potential poles towards which it extends, through the ways of acting and operating of the vectors themselves, according to the basic principle of enactivism. And only this aesthetic primitiveness explains its potential criticality. A situation *manifests itself* as problematic, in the appearance that is carried out in it, according to a coupling that coincides with living in a network of plastic references that reveal the aspects of the dynamic field that is being inhabited. In its appearing under certain aspects, the situation is an expressive correspondence that underlies an extended mind.

36 Thus, the environment also manifests itself as an aspect of the situation, as a nature that becomes human. It operates as a relational vector and not as an entity looming over a subject. On the other hand, when the organism plays along with the situation, it finds itself established for how it manipulates expressive devices, according to a material collusion where (the practices with) the objects are what shapes the so-called subjects more than the other way around. Therefore each situation is more than merely biological. It implies a configurative artificiality; an expressiveness that, as such, is already cultural and social.

37 This also helps us highlight the enactive performance that occurs in aesthetic experience as a meaningful articulation. What one aims to get from an *aesthetic* experience as such is not the acquisition once and for all of the (knowledge of a) given. The overall content of the aesthetic experience is its own carrying itself out. Therefore, what captures us aesthetically never ceases to fascinate us and induces us to reiterate

experiences, in some cases even obsessively. The source of gratification is the way in which the collusion is realized each time, not the outcome to which it leads as a determination of an internal content. We listen to musical pieces of which we know every dynamic, we reread poems of which we know every syllable by heart, we look at paintings of which we could reproduce every square millimeter – just as we reactivate the same device to perform the same activity when we are gratified by performing it. The “playful” nature of the aesthetic lies not least in this intrinsic performativity, which stands for the enactment of a meaningfulness that makes the meanings that are recruited operative, as we have already seen with Dewey’s own words (LW.10: 277).

- 38 Therefore, the conception of the Extended Mind paradigm that (following Gallagher) can be derived from Dewey’s approach is enactivist, not functionalist, as it has often been instead the case, since the by now canonical proposal of Clark and Chalmers. Functionally, the mind “extends” itself because some of its functions are attributed to portions of the external world, i.e. to the scaffoldings or supports that we find in the external world (as in the famous example of Inga and Otto’s notebook). From an enactivist approach, instead, I would speak of extended mind as a specification of what Dewey meant when he recalled exactly in *Art as Experience* that “mind is primarily a verb” (LW.10: 258). Much debate on the notion of the mind starts from the neglect of this indication. Considering this verbality means – or at least it may mean – emphasizing the modality rather than the substantiality of the mind. Mind is the mode of operation that involves in its own field the expressive continuity that is a coupling of organism and environment rather than a substantial entity that acts on body and world. In this sense, it is primitively (also) a relationship of meaningful correspondence that is embodied in non-thematizing environmental explorations. Mind extends itself in enacting a potential meaningfulness, thus to the same extent as it is aesthetically operative. Consequently, the paradigm of the extended mind gets much more than a merely metaphorical meaning, given its ability to properly describe the collusive relationality onto which judicative and cognitive acts (i.e., acts of meaning) are grafted. Therefore, pursuing the description of what happens in an *aesthetic* experience is perhaps one of the most faithful and fruitful ways to keep proceeding on Dewey’s trail today also far beyond aesthetics.

---

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

DEWEY John, (1981), *Experience and Nature, The Later Works, 1925-1953*, vol. 1, Carbondale and Edwardsville, Southern Illinois University Press (LW.1).

DEWEY John, (1987), *Art as Experience, The Later Works, 1925-1953*, vol. 10, Carbondale and Edwardsville, Southern Illinois University Press (LW.10).

GALLAGHER Shaun, (2017), *Enactivist Interventions. Rethinking the Mind*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

IANNILLI Gioia Laura, (2020), *The Aesthetics of Experience Design. A Philosophical Essay*, Milano/Udine, Mimesis International.

JOHNSON Mark, (2018), *The Aesthetics of Meaning and Thought. The Bodily Roots of Philosophy, Science, Morality, and Art*, Chicago/London, The University of Chicago Press.

JOHNSON Mark, AKSNES Hallgjerd, ALEXANDER Thomas, MATTEUCCI Giovanni & Tone ROALD (2020), "On Mark Johnson, The Aesthetics of Meaning and Thought," *Studi di estetica*, 16, 293-330. Online: (<http://mimesisedizioni.it/journals/index.php/studi-di-estetica/article/view/869>).

MATTEUCCI Giovanni, (2018), "The (Aesthetic) Extended Mind: Aesthetics from Experience-of to Experience-with," *Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics*, 10, 400-29.

MATTEUCCI Giovanni, (2019), *Estetica e natura umana. La mente estesa tra percezione, emozione ed espressione*, Roma, Carocci.

NANNICELLI Ted, (2019), "Aesthetics and the Limits of the Extended Mind," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 59, 81-94.

QUINE Willard Van Orman, (1969), *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays*, New York, Columbia University Press.

QUINE Willard Van Orman, (1981), "The Pragmatists' Place in Empiricism," in R. J. Mulvaney & P. M. Zeitner (eds), *Pragmatism: Its Sources and Prospects*, Columbia, University of South Carolina Press, 23-39.

QUINE Willard Van Orman, (1987), "Indeterminacy of Translation Again," *Journal of Philosophy*, 84 (1), 5-10.

QUINE Willard Van Orman, (2013), *Word and Object*, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press.

SHUSTERMAN Richard, (2001), "Pragmatism," in B. Gaut & D. M. Lopes (eds), *The Routledge Companion of Aesthetics*, London/New York, Routledge, 121-31.

## NOTES

1. Within the framework of a general agreement, what I aim at highlighting here are yet some diverging elements of my perspective from Johnson's that I have outlined in a book forum that also includes Johnson's responses and counter-objections. See Johnson *et al.* 2020. For the distinction I will use below between "experience-of" and "experience-with," see Matteucci 2018 and 2019.

---

## ABSTRACTS

This paper aims at showing how Dewey's legacy can contribute to better understand the correlation between the problem of meaning and the description of the aesthetic in the framework of a specifically enactivist approach to the model of the extended mind. My thesis is that Dewey's characterization of this issue has a general theoretical import in that it makes it inappropriate to speak of "aesthetic meanings," or even of "meanings of the aesthetic." It instead

---

highlights the aesthetic character of meaning as such, that is, how an experiential phenomenon can be meaningful insofar as it is characterized in an aesthetic sense. Accordingly, we will speak here of “aesthetic meaningfulness.” To this extent, after a comparison between Dewey and Quine about the “praxis of meaning,” a dialogue will be established with two recent perspectives openly informed by Dewey’s work: Mark Johnson and Shaun Gallagher’s.

## AUTHOR

**GIOVANNI MATTEUCCI**

University of Bologna

giovanni.matteucci[at]unibo.it