

ON THE NATURAL ROOTS OF THE “AESTHETIC” IN JOHN DEWEY AND WILLIAM JAMES

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ABSTRACT: This paper focuses on the peculiar meanings of the word “aesthetic” or “esthetic” in Dewey and James, highlighting the continuity between Dewey’s interpretation of the “esthetic” and James’s uses of the term. More importantly, the paper defends the claim that both philosophers attributed a basically naturalistic meaning to “aesthetic/esthetic”: Dewey saw experience as basically esthetically or qualitatively characterized, insofar it is connected to the biological conditions of life in an environment that directly affects the very existence of organisms. James primarily used the term “aesthetic” in connection to pain and pleasure, i.e., to refer to a living being’s physiological predisposition to feel and select certain features of the surrounding world, by assuming specific attitudes toward given situations. Moreover, both authors conceived of the aesthetic in a narrower sense, i.e., in relation to the arts, as the development, enhancement or refinement of the naturally aesthetic features of human experience, denying any a priori distinction between the two spheres.

After clarifying the meanings of the word “esthetic” in Dewey’s work in relation to his theory of experience and aesthetic qualities, the paper explores the uses of the word “aesthetic” in James’s texts, particularly with reference to his theory of temperament and his conception of emotions. The last section focuses on the influence exercised on James’s vocabulary by the work of Alexander Bain and suggests the risky yet plausible hypothesis that Edmund Burke’s physiological aesthetics may have played a role in the way James approached the word, although the term “aesthetic” is missing in Burke’s text.

Keywords: aesthetic (the meaning of), aesthetic qualities, temperament, physiological aesthetics, John Dewey, William James

A Prologue (of Sorts)

Throughout his philosophical career, John Ryder has been strongly committed to a form of pragmatic naturalism, whose centrality in his work can hardly be overestimated. In his book *The Things in Heaven and Earth*, he summarizes the main traits of the kind of naturalism he endorses as a pragmatist. Two of these aspects and one related specification are particularly relevant to the issue I am about to deal with in this paper, that is the natural roots of Dewey’s and James’s conception of the “aesthetic” in experience.

According to Ryder, one initial characterizing feature of pragmatic naturalism is its assumption that nature is rich and broad enough to include “whatever there is.” Therefore, “there is no philosophical need to posit anything outside nature” (Ryder 2013, 37), i.e., there is no need to presuppose any supernatural cause, substance, or philosophical entity whatsoever to explain natural things and events. Considering the consequences of treating nature as a comprehensive category, Ryder emphasizes that pragmatic naturalists are not materialists, in the sense that they do not consider nature to be “equivalent to the material word” (Ryder 2013, 38): emotions, meanings, and thoughts are naturally as much part of our world as rocks and tables. Nonetheless, Ryder points out that, if pressed, he would explain his preference for a form of (more liberal) materialism, involving the claim that “matter is the ontological *sine qua non* of everything else, but matter is not for that any ‘more real’ than other existences, and certainly not exclusively real” (Ryder 2013, 38). Therefore, a second characteristic feature of pragmatic naturalism is that it is non-reductionist: it assumes that whatever entities humans encounter in their experience are part of nature – not only physical events, but also events, relations, and their qualities.

My purpose in this paper is to pay tribute to John Ryder’s philosophical career by showing to what extent all of these traits were already part of the Classical Pragmatists’ conception of the “aesthetic,” or the “esthetic” to quote Dewey’s preferred term.¹ In the first section, I will clarify the meanings of the word “esthetic” in Dewey’s work. I will claim that the very idea of “esthetic qualities” – developed within Dewey’s theory of experience (Dewey 1981) and further defined in *Art as Experience* (Dewey 1989) – is crucial even beyond the two meanings of “aesthetic” famously emphasized by Dewey himself in response to Romanell (Romanell 1949), namely as a primary trait in experience – the consumma-

¹Dewey preferred the American English term “esthetic” both in *Experience and Nature* and in *Art as Experience*. In his reply to Romanell in 1950, he used the word “aesthetic,” probably to conform his lexicon to that used in the philosophical debate on this issue.

tory phase – and as a derived feature of artistic practice (Dewey 1950).

Considering that Dewey's use of the term "esthetic" largely relies on James's psychology, in the second section I will go back to William James and the uses he made of the word "aesthetic," partly on the basis of the previous inquiries by Francesca Bordogna (Bordogna 2001) and Richard Shusterman (Shusterman 2011).

The third section will focus on the influence exercised on James's vocabulary by the work of Alexander Bain, who explicitly connected the aesthetic with pleasure and pain. In this section, I will also suggest the risky yet plausible hypothesis that Edmund Burke's physiological aesthetics may have played a role in the way James approached the word, although the term "aesthetic" is missing in Burke's text (Burke 1823). In conclusion, my claim will be that Dewey's grounding of "esthetic" qualities in living beings' dependence on their environment and James's attempt to connect the "aesthetic" features of experience with the physiology of pain and pleasure, and with emotions, already corresponded to the picture of pragmatic naturalism traced by John Ryder, and involving the kind of non-reductive materialism mentioned above.

The Meanings of "Esthetic" in Dewey's Theory of Experience and Philosophy of the Arts

In a well-known article written in 1950 and responding to the objections raised by Patrick Romanell the previous year, Dewey uses the word "aesthetic" both as a character of primary experience and as a specific phase or development of experience, i.e., to explain the peculiarity of artistic practices – activities related to both the production and the fruition of art (Dewey 1950).² In this paper, I will not focus on Dewey's strategy in his response to Romanell's criticism, because this is not the

main aim of my essay. Instead, the basic feature I wish to highlight is the fact that both meanings of the word are grounded in Dewey's theory of experience as consisting in the co-constitutive interactions taking place between humans, conceived as living organisms, and their natural and naturally social environment (Alexander 1987, 135). Insofar as life is radically embedded in an environment, the connection with the biology of living beings is central for understanding the use of the word "aesthetic/esthetic" in Dewey and the Classical Pragmatists. It has been emphasized that, according to Dewey, an experience is esthetic "when the material experienced runs its course to fulfillment" (Dewey 1989, 42), i.e., when it comes to the consummatory phase within an organic-environmental interaction. This is the phase in which a rhythmical equilibrium is restored and can be enjoyed as such, consummation occurs, and the dynamic processes of mutual constitution between living beings and their environment undergo a transition from tension to satisfaction.³ The arts, in Dewey's view, are clearly an enhancement of these dynamics, as they re-establish a new equilibrium after a phase of tension. His emphasis on the importance of obstacles as a way to make artistic expression and aesthetic enjoyment more complete confirms this claim. This kind of interpretation is right, of course. However, I think it is somewhat partial and must be integrated by considering the conception of "esthetic qualities" that Dewey explicitly formulated in *Experience and Nature* and later developed in *Art as Experience*.⁴

² A similar distinction is pivotal in John Ryder's account of the aesthetic. See Ryder 2020, 117, where he claims that "the aesthetic is a definitive feature of the very fabric of experience" and that, following Dewey, we should approach art as an enhancement of aesthetic features that are already present within experience.

³ For example, Gotshalk remarked (in a critical vein) that for Dewey "the aesthetic exists whenever wholeness enters into experience." Thus, "scientific and intellectual activities, political ventures and moral actions all attain aesthetic stature when they are brought to successful completeness, and achieve an integration of means and ends, parts and whole, in a well-articulated organic unity" (Gotshalk 1964, 131). See Ryder, who affirms that "Because experience consists of an endless process of such assimilation and manipulation, of feeling and responding to imbalance and dissonance in our environment, the creation of harmony and unity is an inherent feature of experience and the root of the aesthetic" (Ryder 2020, 119).

⁴ For a similar emphasis on the aesthetic, qualitative, or affective characterization of experience, see Tiles 1988: 49 and ff., Eames 2003, 29 and ff., Johnson 2007, Dreon 2012, Dreon 2013, and Garrison 2015.

There is no doubt, according to Dewey, that things, persons, and events are first of all experienced as sweet or bitter, charming, awful, dangerous, beautiful, comfortable or menacing: in other words, they are primarily experienced in terms of how they directly affect one's own life (Dewey 1981, 82). Their meanings are "esthetic" in the sense that things, events, and other people are primarily perceived in terms of the impact they have on one's own life – Dewey says that they are felt or had, rather than known, in order to emphasize the primacy of life over cognition (Dewey 1981, 28). He uses the term "esthetic qualities" – but he also speaks of the "qualitative" or "affective" background of experience and thought (Dewey 1984 and Dewey 1988), from which reflective inquiring processes emerge. Incidentally, a brief yet important clarification must be added concerning the use of the word "quality," even if this is not the main topic of the present section. It is clear that, in speaking of "esthetic qualities," Dewey did not wish to introduce a special kind of entity, whose status would have been ambiguous; rather, he sought to focus on interactions as qualitatively characterized. So quality is to be understood as an adverb, characterizing the way in which organic-environmental interactions occur.⁵ To return now to the meaning of the adjective "esthetic" within the expression "esthetic qualities," Dewey emphasizes that, when experienced pre-reflectively, things tend to be overwhelming and to absorb our attention, as opposed to being assumed as instrumental to further experiences. In the case of humans, who are both moving and linguistic animals (Dewey 1988, 82), experience can become reflective because, through movement and language, humans can postpone suffering and enjoyment and consider things not in their immediate esthetic scope, but rather as functional to achieve a further goal. This happens when something does not work within one's primarily aesthetic, qualitative, or affective experience – that is, when obstacles hinder immediate pleas-

ure or one is trying to avoid pain. Indeed, impediments play a crucial role in letting reflective cognition rise from animals' primarily qualitative, esthetic, or affective experience of a precarious environment. Obstacles are also essential to enhance the consummatory phases of experience, because they elicit consciously controlled interactions – i.e., the arts in the broad sense of the term – to re-establish new forms of organic-environmental equilibrium that can be enjoyed as such.

In a nutshell, experience for Dewey amounts to a vital praxis and a function of life, rather than to mere recording cognition. Organic life is always biased and at stake, which is to say that it always unfolds through the process of making or destroying itself because of its dependence from an environment whose materials and energies are what constitute the living organism. Consequently, things and other individuals are primarily felt as welcoming or hostile, sweet or harsh, i.e., their primary perception is "esthetic," qualitative, or affectively shaped because perception has to do with the impact of the environment on living organisms, rather with the mere recording of sensorial data or grasping of internal states of the mind.

This is a particularly important point, considering its consequences for the history of aesthetics. The "esthetic," in Dewey's sense, is poles apart from disinterested contemplation; it has to do with sensibility, understood not as the pure perception of form independently of any praxis or concern for life, but rather as a process that involves feeling and being affected by the environmental circumstances one is embedded in (Dreon 2022, 62). Dewey (and James) could never concede that there is an *essential* distinction between the beautiful as grounded in allegedly pure, disinterested pleasure and the agreeable as something involving empirical pleasure – although, of course, other forms of discrimination between different pleasures and different sorts of interest could and should be considered.

Consequently, it becomes evident that Dewey uses the word "esthetic" in ways that are very different from the German tradition, especially the Kantian one, where

⁵ I have clarified this important point in Dreon 2013, as well as in Dreon 2012.

pure aesthetic judgment is taken to be grounded in a disinterested form of pleasure (see Johnson 2015 and Matteucci 2019).⁶

For sure, Darwin's theories played a decisive role in leading Dewey to consider the "esthetic" primarily from the point of view of living organisms in a hostile or favorable environment: given the biological commonplace (Dewey 1989, 20) that "life goes on in an environment; not merely in it, but because of it, through interaction with it" (Dewey 1989, 19), there cannot be any detached pleasure and aesthetic disinterestedness, because life is always radically embedded in an environment. Organic life is constituted through and through by the organism's continuous, active effort to maintain favorable relationships with surrounding circumstances and a dynamic equilibrium with a precarious world which is always in the making, through alternate phases of tension and fulfillment.

However, I would argue, there is also a continuity with the meanings that William James assigns to the word "aesthetic." James used this term to characterizing a component of experience strictly connected with the emotions, pleasure and pain, as well as with reference to artistic practices and the fruition of the arts.⁷ Richard Shusterman has claimed that *The Principles of Psychology* "contains all the essential themes of pragmatist aesthetics that Dewey will later formulate with much greater detail and argumentation in *Art as Experience*" (Shusterman

2011, 347). In this essay, my purpose is more specific, namely to suggest that Dewey's uses of the word "esthetic" and his conception of "esthetic qualities" are largely based on James's thought, particularly his psychology, theory of the emotions, and theory of temperaments and passions – which are all understood as being strictly rooted in "the physiological and organic constitution of the individual" (Bordogna 2001, 3).

In what follows, I will explore James's understanding of the word "aesthetic" in light of his texts; then I will briefly consider the possible influence exercised on his thought by previous physiological theories about human passions – those developed by Alexander Bain, on the one hand, and by Edmund Burke, on the other hand.

James's Uses of the Word "Aesthetic"

In James's writing the word "aesthetic" is basically connected with two semantic fields: on the one hand, it is related to the arts; on the other, it is associated with the field of passions, desires and refusals, the emotions, temperament, and selective interest in perception, which in turn are conceived as grounded in the physiology of the nervous system and the whole human body. As in Dewey's thought, these two fields are considered continuous: both James and Dewey are very far from Kant's idea of the need to introduce a gap between the beautiful and the agreeable, between allegedly pure pleasure and empirical likes and dislikes – ultimately, between the physiological constitution of human beings and the most refined cultural developments. Incidentally, I believe that James' rejection of any transcendental strategy in favor of a strong naturalistic and continuistic stance toward the aesthetic is why he so bluntly criticized Kant's aesthetics (Shusterman 2011, 350).⁸ I will return to this point in the next section. For the moment, some references to James's texts are needed within a general reading that sees his work as assuming a basic

⁶ Of course, there could be different readings of Kant's idea of the "feeling of pleasure," emphasizing that beauty has a revitalizing effect on the faculties of the soul (cf. Desideri 2013). However, here I am considering the main legacy of Kant's aesthetic thought. More precisely, I believe that more naturalistically oriented interpretations of Kant's feeling of pleasure tend to neglect his strongly transcendental strategy of stressing the difference between the beautiful and the agreeable as a matter of principle. On Dewey's criticism of Kantian aesthetics see Stroud 2020.

⁷ To be as clearer as possible, here I am claiming that James was the main influence on Dewey when it comes to the uses of the word "esthetic." However, I am not arguing that James was the *only* influence on Dewey in *Art as Experience*: his aesthetic naturalism owes a lot not only to James's psychology but also to Darwin's thought. An important role in the complex web of references shaping Dewey's aesthetics is also played by his original appropriation of Hegel's legacy in this field, as I have argued in Dreon 2020. The challenge is to explain how he was able to combine such different influences.

⁸ By contrast, Shusterman suggests that Kant's exclusion of any practical value from aesthetics might explain James's antipathy toward Kantian aesthetics (Shusterman 2011, 350).

continuity between his psychology, his later pragmatism, and his radically empiricist position (Siegfried 1990, Bordogna 2001).

Let's begin with James's theory of temperament, which runs through all his works, from *The Sentiment of Rationality*, first published in 1879 and then re-published in 1896, to *Pragmatism* and finally *A Pluralistic Universe*, his last published work, dating back to 1909. In *The Sentiment* James uses the word "aesthetic" to characterize two opposite passions that, according to him, constitute the criteria for selecting "the facts of the world" that are considered relevant in view of developing a philosophical conception of the world. The term "aesthetic" is clearly connected to the sphere of passions and the emotions and is already associated with a selective capacity grounded in feelings and orienting not only one's own common experience but even cognition and philosophical theorizing (see also Trigoni 2015). In the second edition, as noted by Bordogna (Bordogna 2001, 8), "aesthetic passions" become the "emotional constitution," which makes the connection between the aesthetic and the field of affective sensibility even more evident. Famously, an aesthetic passion for unity and simplicity will become the temperament of the tender-minded in *Pragmatism*, while the kind of emotional constitution pursuing distinction and clarity will become the tough-minded temperament. More importantly, as clearly stated by Francesca Bordogna, James's conception of temperament must be understood within the context of coeval physiological studies, which is to say that it is strictly connected to the organic structure of the body and the functioning of the nervous system. James, for example, emphasizes the continuity between unity and harmony in thought after the irritation of doubt and the easy flow of nervous energies following a period of tension and effort. Against this naturalistic background, temperament is claimed to operate as a kind of selective filter between sensory perception, on the one hand, and action and cognition, on the other. So, in James's case it becomes clear that this organic filter is considered to be aesthetic, i.e., based on a feel-

ing attitude or an emotional constitution. More particularly, James conceived of "aesthetic passions" against contemporary attempts to associate them with specific areas in the nervous system. In his view, temperament, namely "a congeries of emotional and aesthetic tendencies" (Bordogna 2001, 15) or, let's say, a kind of affect-based selectivity, cannot be grounded in the nervous activity occurring in fixed parts of the brain, because it is connected with processes that are diffused throughout the nervous system and tend to make the whole body resonate. Furthermore, I would add, James's theory of habits as nervous paths traced in the nervous system via interactions with the world during early infancy blurred the limits between temperament, conceived of as an innate endowment, and character, understood as set of habits acquired through will and education – an opposition that was dominant in his day.

Some of these points are confirmed by James's notes for a psychological seminar on "Aesthetics," held in 1891–1892 (James 1988). If only in their very concision, these notes support the interpretation I am endorsing here in at least three ways. First, the many names mentioned in the notes reflect James's attention toward and preference for the physiological aesthetics of his time, "which he regarded as incomparably preferable to philosophical esthetics" (Bordogna 2001, 19), especially the German tradition from Baumgarten to Kant. Second, James lists common pleasures and pains – mostly involving strongly organic reactions – such as "hunger and thirst," "colic," "nausea," alongside more culturally laden states of tension and ease, such as "apprehension," "bad success," and "the morbid fascination of the horrible" (James 1988, 206–207), as well as with the effects of music on the listener. Given James's general approach, it may be argued that his aim in this seminar was not to espouse a form of reductive materialism, but rather to endorse a continuity-approach between bodily based pleasures and pains, on the one hand, and their artistic development, on the other. As Shusterman claims, James was already supporting a form of somatic naturalism, according to which "[o]ur highest artistic expressions and most sublime aesthetic experiences, no matter how cultur-

ally mediated, are ultimately grounded (like our culture itself) on underlying aesthetic dispositions that have evolved in conjunction with the biological and experiential development of our bodies and our brains (which, of course, are part of our bodies)" (Shusterman 2011, 351–352). Third, James criticized neurological approaches to pleasure and pain involving "specific-nerve theories." Again, he considered common pains and pleasures entailing a strong bodily involvement – "the pain of craving or inhibition, and the pleasure of release" – alongside more properly artistic pleasures – "the pleasure of a gradual crescendo, say of sound," "the pleasure of regular rhythms" (James 1988, 209). His point here is that in all of these cases the champion of the thesis according to which specific nerves account for specific pleasures or pains would be compelled to demand "an overflow, from the nerves immediately involved" (James 1988, 209) to other nerves, from the closer to the more distant. Instead, James was already supporting the view that the physiology of pains, pleasures, and the emotions involve "diffused processes of some sort" (James 1988, 209), because they are felt through the whole nervous system and involve the entire body as a "sounding board" (James 1981, 1066, 1085).

With this last quote, the reader has been referred to James's *Principles of Psychology*, particularly to the famous chapter devoted to the emotions, derived from his article *What is an Emotion?*, published in 1884. Precisely in the first paragraph of this essay – which is not included in the book chapter – James employs the word "aesthetic" to characterize a dimension of life rather than a trait of specifically artistic practices and experiences. He refers to "the aesthetic sphere of the mind," once again associating it with "its longings, its pleasures and pains, and its emotions" (James 1884, 188). James complains that physiologists of the brain and empirical psychologists have failed to consider aesthetic/affective sensibility and propensities, by focusing exclusively on the perceptual, cognitive, and volitional parts of the mind. The implicit suggestion is that their search for the simplest elements – their passion for clarity and distinction, according to *The Sentiment of Rationality* – has

prevented them from seeing the aesthetic/affective temperament as the filter orienting human perception, volition, and cognition. In other words, this idea evokes James's emphasis on the emotional constitution of individuals as a means of selection in relation to the facts of the world. When speaking of the aesthetic sphere of the mind, James does not assign it a separate place and function (see Shusterman 2011, 357); on the contrary, he stresses that emotional and aesthetic tendencies play a crucial role within the unity of mental life. Immediately after this paragraph, James criticizes the search for special and separate centers in the brain for the emotions and introduces his idea that nervous processes are spread throughout the brain and resonate throughout the whole body.

The word "aesthetic" also appears in the chapter on emotions with reference to the arts, when James deals with so-called "subtler emotions," such as "moral, intellectual, and aesthetic feelings" (James 1981, 1082), which do not appear to entail strong bodily changes. James's conclusion, as is well known, is that "bodily reverberations" are always involved and that "[t]he bodily sounding-board is at work" even when we enjoy works of art (James 1981, 1085). Very briefly, in his treatment of the emotions James again uses the word "aesthetic" both in a broader sense, as an organically based selective tendency in human experience, and in a more limited sense, as related to the arts. Far from involving an opposition or a tension, these two uses of the words suggest a basic continuity between the aesthetic as a constitutive feature of life and the aesthetic feelings involved in experiencing works of art and in practicing music, painting, and the like.

To conclude this section, a final reference can be made to James's *Essays on Radical Empiricism*, particularly his article "The Place of Affective Facts in a World of Pure Experience." Here James criticizes the dualistic view of experience, grounded in the assumption of two distinct realms of being or substances – thoughts, on the one hand, and things, on the other. Against this conception of experience inherited from modern philosophy and still

common in popular psychology, James makes the case for so-called "affectual facts" – for example anger, love, and fear – that can be characterized either as affections of the mind or as neurophysiological processes located in the nervous system, depending on the context, relations, and functions at stake in each specific case. A similar ambiguity – James argues quoting Santayana (James 1976, 72) – is represented by beauty, which can be considered either an inner quality of subjective feelings or an outer property of things. Again, my aim is not to test the strength of James's claim. What is important for the purpose of this paper is that "affectual facts" is used as a synonym of "the aesthetic realm of the mind," consisting in "pleasures and pains, loves and fears and angers, in the beauty, comicality, importance or preciousness of certain objects and situations" (James 1976, 69–70).

This brief survey of the meanings of "aesthetics" in James's works clearly reveals its connection with Dewey's interpretation of experience as primarily aesthetically, qualitatively, or affectively characterized. The two philosophers also shared the idea of a basic continuity between the aesthetic/affective quality of ordinary organic-environmental interactions and their enhancement made possible in the arts by overcoming an obstacle and recovering a new dynamic equilibrium and rhythm.

James and Physiological Aesthetics

Given the divergence of James's conception of the "aesthetic" in both everyday experience and the arts from the Kantian tradition, what could be the source of his view? While James's irritation at Kant's aesthetics has long been known, Francesca Bordogna has clarified James's connection with the physiological aesthetics of his time (Bordogna 2001, 20). She has highlighted James's reading of Grant Allen's *Physiological Aesthetics* (1877), as well as Henry Rutgers Marshall's *Pain, Pleasure and Aesthetics* (1894), supporting a view of artistic creation and the experience of the arts as related to physiological and evolutionary factors. Pains and pleas-

ures are seen as forerunners of more refined aesthetic feelings; and although James criticized these researchers' associationist and brain-centered approaches, their views may have reinforced his idea of a basic continuity between the aesthetic features of ordinary experience and the experience of the arts. An exhaustive inquiry into James's connection with the field of late nineteenth-century physiological aesthetics lies beyond the scope of this paper. However, I wish to stress two sources of influence that, in my view, were important for James – or may have been important, as far as the second one is concerned. The first source of inspiration is represented by the work of the Scottish philosopher and pioneering psychologist Alexander Bain, particularly his volume *The Emotions and the Will*, published in 1865.⁹ The second likely source of influence is Edmund Burke, the author of *An Inquiry into the Origins of the Beautiful and the Sublime*, dating back to 1757, which is to say to the origins of philosophical aesthetics, although Burke himself never uses this word. The whole volume can be read as a treatise about the passions, based on a strong proto-physiological perspective. Burke's work contains a significant passage on Campanella that is quoted by William James within the chapter on the emotions in *Principles of Psychology* – a quotation that has been completely overlooked by scholars, at least to my knowledge, but which is worthy of attention.

As regards Alexander Bain, whose name is mentioned several times in the *Principles* as well as in James's aesthetic seminar,¹⁰ it is interesting to note, very briefly, a few ideas that may have influenced James with reference to the topic under discussion – considering that the two authors share a form of "somatic naturalism" (Shusterman 2011, 351), as well as the notion of a basic continuity between the "affectual facts" that are pervasive in our

⁹ I owe this idea to Francesca Bordogna, who pointed out this possible influence to me at a conference we both participated in Rome (however, she does not mention Alexander Bain in her article on temperament and its relationships with the aesthetic).

¹⁰ The Classical Pragmatists' interest in Bain is already well known, particularly when it comes to his influence on Peirce's idea of belief as habit within the pragmatic maxim. Cf. Fisch 1954, Engel 2005.

experience and more specifically aesthetic emotions. First of all, in *The Emotions and the Will*, Bain considers feelings to be grounded in the body: "no feeling, however tranquil, is possible without the full participation of the physical system" (Bain 1865, 5). Bain's approach to affective life is strongly embodied from the very beginning, even though he does not discuss the idea of the pre-existence of feelings with respect to their manifestation through the body, as instead James famously does in his treatment of the emotions (James 1884 and James 1981). Immediately after the words I have just quoted, Bain notes that in speaking of the embodiment of feelings he does not mean only the brain, but also the muscles and the viscera, because mental life – he contends – cannot be restricted to the brain. This is another point that may have significantly impressed James, as Bain was opposing a form of brain-centrism that was widespread among physiologists in his time – and which is still detectable in contemporary neuroaesthetic debate (cf. Zeki and Lamb 1994). More precisely, according to Bain pain and pleasure constitute the basic bodily components of feelings: their degree, continuance, and intensity make each feeling different. Moreover, Bain argues that feelings exercise an intellectual function in selecting and orienting human attention and cognition and he devotes many pages to intellectual emotions.¹¹ Both these points may have been significant for James, who was articulating his own theory of temperament as an implicit physiological and affective-based criterion of discrimination in relation to the chaos of experience, as already stated in the previous section.¹²

Second, Bain explicitly assumes a continuity between

more bodily feelings of pleasure and pain and "aesthetic emotions," understood as emotions that are connected with the creation and the experience of the arts. This was certainly an important point for James. However, he could not accept Bain's empiricist view of the emotions as secondary feelings – which is to say as complex feelings constituted through the association of primary feelings and resulting from the comparison of a present impression with previous ones (Bain 1865, 35) – given his criticism of the empiricists' tendency "to be acquainted with the parts rather than to comprehend the whole" (James 1879, 322). Furthermore, it must be said that Bain's treatment of aesthetic emotions remained basically tied to a Kantian framework, as can be seen from his treatment of the "Beautiful" (with a capital B), as opposed to the useful and the sensual (Bain 1865, 210), as well as from his insistence on disinterest that remained a core aspect for him (Bain 1865, 211). I cannot enter the details of Bain's treatment of aesthetic emotions here. I will only emphasize that characterizing allegedly pure aesthetic judgment as grounded in a disinterested form of pleasure was part of Kant's main strategy to make an essential distinction between the sensually agreeable and the beautiful. Disinterestedness, in other words, is the main tool adopted by Kant to introduce a sharp divide between sensual pleasures and pure pleasures, i.e., to break the continuity between empirical and transcendental treatments of beauty (Vandenabeele 2012).

I do not know to what extent James was conscious of this point when he strongly rejected Kant's aesthetics – for sure, James had little time for any form of *apriorism*. In any case, two important elements must be taken into account: on the one hand, James's belief in a basic continuity between the aesthetic as a pervasive feature in experience and the aesthetic as a character connected to artistic practices; on the other, his radically contingent approach to the human mind as rooted in the physiology of the body and its evolutionary history. Both of these aspects bring James close to Burke's aesthetic approach, even though James refers to his work through only one quotation in the *Principles*. The important aspect, from

¹¹ Bain's idea that emotions and feelings play an essential role with respect to knowledge clearly emerges from the very epigraph of the volume, where he quotes Alexander Pope's words "reason the card, but passion is the gale" (Bain 1865, 2). This view was very much in line with the spirit of the Classical Pragmatists (see Calcaterra 2003) – let us think not only of James's *The Sentiment of Rationality* but also of Dewey's essays on *Affective Thought* and *Qualitative Thought* (Dewey 1984 and Dewey 1988). Bain's interest in "intellectual emotions" could also be seen as anticipating the current debate on so-called "epistemic emotions" (Candiotta 2019).

¹² "[...] it is a property of feeling to attract and detain the observation upon certain objects by preference, the effects of which is to possess the mind with those objects, or to give them a prominent place among our acquisition" (Bain 1865, 23).

the point of view of philosophical aesthetics as a rising discipline in the Eighteenth Century, is that Kant's introduction of the notion of pure or disinterested pleasure can be considered a reaction to Burke's incapacity – obviously from Kant's own *aprioristic* perspective – to clearly distinguish between sensual pleasures and pains, on the one hand, and the beautiful as the pure feeling of pleasure one can legitimately expect from any subject, on the other hand (Vandenabeele 2012). Further important aspects characterizing Burke's approach appear consonant with James's conception of the aesthetic both within ordinary experience and in the arts: from the very first pages of his research, Burke endorsed a naturalistic conception of taste, i.e., an understanding of taste as grounded in human nature. Moreover, even though Burke did not use the words aesthetic/aesthetics, he set up his inquiry into the beautiful and the sublime as a treatise about the passions, which he regarded as being basically grounded in pleasures (both positive pleasures and delights deriving from the termination of previous suffering) and pains. All passions for him are clearly vital passions, connected as they are either with self-preservation or with the maintenance and reinforcement of society – as in the case of love, which is elicited in humans by certain bodily qualities (i.e., beautiful qualities).

Undoubtedly, the idea that James had an interest in Burke's approach is highly hypothetical, given that we only find one quotation from *An Inquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Beautiful and the Sublime* in the *Principles*. Besides, in a note here James states that he drew the quotation from Dugald Stewart – the Scottish philosopher quoted, in turn, by Alexander Bain in the epigraph of his volume on the emotions, along with the verse by Alexander Pope. In any case, even this single quotation is very significant within James's treatment of the emotions. The context of James's quotation from Burke's treatise (James 1981, 1078–1079) is his defense of the thesis that an emotion is basically the feeling of a bodily change and hence that it does not consist in a mental state preceding its exterior manifestation through the body. In his treatise, Burke tells a story drawn from Jacques Spon about Cam-

panella, who was able to feel his interlocutors' passions through the imitation of their gestures and actions: Campanella did not focus on the alleged mental states of others, but rather on their bodily gestures; by acting them out, he was able to experience the same passions as his interlocutors. Consequently, James claims that it is bodily changes that elicit feelings, not the other way round; and he quotes Burke to support his effort to overturn the traditional view of bodily changes as an external consequence of previous mental states. James's quotation from Burke ends here, but in the *Inquiry* Burke concludes his argument as follows: "Our minds and bodies are so closely and intimately connected that one is incapable of pain and pleasure without the other" (Burke 1823, 192). This sentence could not sound any more Jamesian – or any less Kantian – to our contemporary ears.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to show that there is a continuity between James's uses of the term "aesthetic" in his works and Dewey's conception of the "esthetic," particularly in his discussion of aesthetic qualities in experience. The two philosophers shared a basically naturalistic view of the aesthetic that set them poles apart from the Kantian tradition. In his theory of experience, Dewey understood the aesthetic as basically connected to the biological conditions of life in an environment that directly affects and concerns the very existence of an organism and its quality. The "esthetic" does not only refer to the consummatory phases of experience, when an organic-environmental interaction is realized and a new dynamic equilibrium is enjoyed, but also to the primarily affective or qualitative characterization of experience. In his theory of temperament, James used the word "aesthetic" in connection with pains, pleasures, and passions, insofar they are rooted in the physiology of the body, to refer to a living being's predisposition to select and prefer some features of the surrounding world and discard others, to privilege a specific attitude toward given situations over other ways of relating to them. Both authors conceived of

the aesthetic in the narrower sense, i.e., in relation to the arts, as the development, enhancement or refinement of the naturally aesthetic features of human experience, thereby denying – as I have argued – any a priori distinction à la Kant. Dewey was inspired by James's naturalistic view of the aesthetic in experience and, I believe, pushed to the extreme James's vague use of the term – freely oscillating between a broader meaning and a narrower one – by explicitly theorizing a basic continuity between the two meanings. On his part, James was influenced by the merging physiological aesthetics of his time and by Bain's theory of emotions, while rejecting the Kantian tradition in aesthetics. Certainly, James' radical empiricism contributed to his tendency to blur the distinctions between different forms of pleasure and to emphasize the role of the body as a constant component of human preferences and dislikes, wherever they occur – a tendency he shared with Edmund Burke's physiological theory of beauty and the passions, although it is unknown to what extent he was aware of this. One might say that it was James's own philosophical temperament that played a role in his choice to reject any transcendental option in aesthetics, i.e., to deny any *de jure* distinction between common bodily pleasures and artistic ones. Maybe, this choice was due to a sort of "emotional constitution" that can be (at least partly) perceived even today in John Ryder's pragmatic naturalism.

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