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How Dewey's View on Aesthetics is Relevant to Philosophical Counseling

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Abstract

The object of this paper is to counter the misguided view on aesthetics as something superficial, residing at the top of a Maslowian pyramid of needs, and to point out that the aesthetic dimension is profound in human life. Here we follow John Dewey, who in *Art as Experience* provides a conceptual framework we find relevant to philosophical counseling. It highlights the aesthetical aspect of human conduct, which also exists outside the realm of artful performances, and it enhances our understanding of what constitutes an experience. This enables counselor and client to make sense of a past experience by jointly reconstructing it in hindsight. A sense of merely drifting might be overcome, and be replaced by a sense of meaning and autonomy. To a counselor, an awareness of life's aesthetic dimension is thus equally important as critical thinking and ethical reasoning. It may even be what is required to make sense of what the client's problem is all about.

Keywords: *aesthetic dimension, Maslowian hierarchy of needs, restoring continuity, aesthetic vs. anaesthetic experiences, environments, interaction with the world, equilibrium vs. tension, wholeness, organic whole, transactional, adaption, felt harmony, suffering, favorable outcome, hierarchical vs. dialectical, intrinsic, intention, meaning, impulsion, emotion, undergoing and doing, authenticity, the Peter Pan impulse, creating or reconstructing experiences, receptivity vs. recognition*

While Truth, Good, and Beauty are the three fundamental concepts in philosophy at large, philosophical counselors tend to focus on the Truth and the Good only. In contrast with the notions of critical inquiry and ethical considerations—of what is right or wrong, and good or bad—the aesthetical concepts of beauty and ugliness, and of what is delightful and repulsive, harmonic and upsetting, are considered less important, or even irrelevant, in a consultation setting. A counselor might of course encourage clients to pursue a career as an artist, or to attend evening classes on painting or poetry, if this might enhance their personal development, but unless an aesthetic point has an obvious bearing on the client's problem, considered to be a rare instance, the common wisdom is that such discussions should be left to the art schools and evening classes.

Such a view on aesthetics fails, however, to grasp what this domain really is about. It wrongly assumes that aesthetics is something quite superficial, and even extravagant, like an icing of the cake, and thus misses out on the significance the aesthetic dimension has in human life. One then misguidedly puts aesthetics on the very top of a Maslowian hierarchy of needs, even above the need of self-realization. And, as the usual interpretation of Maslow goes, such needs can be met only after the other, more basic needs of food, shelter, security and social belonging and so on, have been dealt with. To indulge in aesthetic experiences could then be regarded as a luxury, as a topic for the specially interested who have time, money and surplus energy to cultivate themselves by visiting art galleries, or going to the theater or opera house.

Dewey, not Maslow

If we are to counter the commonsensical and misguided icing of the cake view on aesthetics, we must let go of a Maslowian influenced, hierarchical thinking. The object of this paper is to do just that, and to show that life—or rather human experience—has a profound aesthetic dimension. It is important for philosophical counselors to realize this, and accordingly integrate considerations of an aesthetic kind in their practice. By stating this, we are not advocating any new and revolutionary stance. We have just rediscovered some eighty-year old insights of the well-known philosopher John Dewey, and interpreted them in a way to make them relevant for philosophical counseling. In our view, Dewey's aesthetic and epistemic theories in fact provide a conceptual scaffolding for practitioners to organize and interpret the thoughts the client puts forward.

In his book *Art as Experience*, first published in 1934 after previously given as a series of lectures at Harvard University¹, Dewey counters right from the start the widespread notion of “a separation of art from the objects and scenes of ordinary experience” (4)². Dewey's object is to provide a better understanding of what an aesthetic object or performance amounts to. In order to do this, he sets out to do no less than to “restore continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are the works of art and the everyday events, doings, and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience” (2). Dewey thus assumes that

a) there is a continuity, and not a rupture, between the world of fine arts (and craft) and everyday events, and that

b) this continuity has to be restored, in order to make it clear how significant the aesthetic dimension in fact is in human life.

Interestingly to us, Dewey “must arrive at the theory of art by means of a detour” (2), in order to get aesthetics down from the pedestal it misguidedly has been put on, and reintegrate it in our everyday events, doings and sufferings, where it just as much belong, and in fact has its origin. It is during this detour, before Dewey deals with art in particular, we realize how his understanding of aesthetics—or rather how an experience can have an aesthetic aspect, and how the aesthetic is intimately connected to experience—is relevant to philosophical counseling. Especially the first four chapters of *Art as Experience* are then recommended as well worth studying for philosophical counselors at large.

Aesthetic and Anaesthetic Experiences

As the title of his book implies, the notion of experience is pivotal in Dewey's discussion. He closely links the concepts of aesthetics and experience by way of making his detour into some very fundamental considerations. According to Dewey, experiences occur whenever a living organism interacts with its environments, which happens continuously in the process of living. As live creatures we struggle with our environments both internally and externally, in order to find balance and equilibrium. We often find ourselves, however, in a state of disequilibrium, since we constantly have to interact with environments that challenge us again and again. In order to cope with this hardship of life, our interaction is geared toward a specific end: to achieve a short-lived but none the less significant moment of balance and equilibrium, which facilitates growth or self cultivation. As Dewey states: “Equilibrium comes about not mechanically and inertly but out of, and because of, tension” (13).

This is an important point, given that the idea of equilibrium, which Dewey claims is what we all seek, is brought about by the tension stemming from our interaction with our environments. In light of this basic condition for human life (and for other creatures as well), Dewey sets out to show that our experiences can be grouped into four kinds. The lowest kind of experience that can be had is thus an *anaesthetic experience*, which is when our senses are numbed so that we cannot perceive the aesthetic qualities that exist in particular objects, people or environments. The next level up is *general experience*, which happens all the time. In both of these lower levels we tend not to appreciate the sounds and rhythms of brushing our teeth every morning or the kind of interplay and dance of cars in rush hour traffic. In much of our experience,

we are not concerned with the connection of one incident with what went before and what comes after. (...) Things happen, but they are neither definitely included nor definitely excluded; we drift. We yield according to external pressure, or evade and compromise. There are beginnings and cessations, but no genuine initiations and concluding. One thing replaces another, but does not absorb it and carry it on. There is experience, but so slack and discursive that it is not *an* experience. Needless to say, such experiences are anesthetic. (41)

After a training of our perceptual faculties we can come to have what Dewey depicts as *an* experience. This is when an event demarcates itself from other common ordinary experiences; it is when we can give the experience a name: *that* meal in Rome, *that* ball game, *that* plane ride, *that* sunset in Hawaii. As the pedagogue Philip W. Jackson points out in his book *John Dewey and the Lessons of Art* (Yale University Press, 1998), such an experience has three qualities: it has a unifying emotion associated with it, it possesses uniqueness, and it is rounded out in such a manner that it can be said to be complete. In Dewey's words, "The existence of this unity is constituted by a single *quality* that pervades the entire experience in spite of the variation of its constituent parts" (38).

The highest level of experience is an aesthetic experience. In addition to the three qualities of the an experience just mentioned, an aesthetic experience occurs when we are appreciative, perceiving, and enjoying what is being undergone.³ It is also important to recognize that experience exists in time and changes over time, it always has a history. An instantaneous experience is an impossibility, biologically and psychologically speaking. Experiences are then a product, one might almost say a by-product, of continuous and cumulative interaction of an organic self with the world.

The arts provide us with exemplary instances of an aesthetic experience. The true work of art is not, however, an object that sits in a museum, or a performance on a stage or captured on film or disc. Rather, it is the experience occasioned by the production, or the experience of appreciating objects or performances. For the artist, those two forms of experiencing are one. Within the field of philosophical counseling this amounts to identifying clients' experiences—more basically their engagements with their environment and the people in them—as more or less completed "works of art". By obtaining this point of view, the aesthetic qualities of the experience in question will both be relevant and revealing.

Experience is Transactional

As Dewey states, an aesthetic experience is always more than aesthetic. "In it a body of matters and meanings, not in themselves aesthetic, *become* aesthetic as they enter into an ordered rhythmic movement towards consummation" (339). Then the aesthetic cannot be regarded as a separate entity that can be identified in some "pure" form "in itself". It must instead emerge through an experience, along with this experience's non-aesthetic features. The wholeness of an experience, in terms of its having "its own individualizing quality and self-sufficiency" (37), where "its various parts are linked to one another, and do not

merely succeed one another" (57), is not strictly speaking an aesthetic feature; yet it obtains an aesthetic quality as those parts "through their experienced linkage move toward a consummation and close, not merely to cessation in time" (57).

It is also important to note that Dewey asks us to abandon the convention of looking upon experience as something that happens exclusively within us, that is, as an essentially psychological concept. In its place he would substitute a conception far more inclusive, one that embraces what is being experienced as well as the experiencer. Instead of signifying being shut up within ones own private feelings and sensations, experience "signifies complete interpenetration of self and the world of objects and events.

Thus, as Jackson states, experience is transactional. It is not just what registers on our consciousness as we make our way through the world, but includes the objects and events that compose that world. These objects and events are as much a part of an experience as we are ourselves. When we are fully immersed in an experience, its components interpenetrate one another so much that we lose all sense of separation between self, object, and event. It is when situations become problematic—when something goes wrong, or when for some other reason we pause to reflect upon the circumstances at hand—that such distinctions become evident. Then we start to isolate this or that element within experience in order to cope better with the situation as a whole.

Since the self constantly has to interact with some object outside of it, an experience must be regarded as a process which "continues until a mutual adaption of the self and the object emerges and that particular experience comes to a close" (45). The interaction of the two "constitutes the total experience that is had, and the close which completes it is the institution of a felt harmony" (45).

The notion "a felt harmony" has an unmistakably aesthetic, as well as experiential, streak. It is important to note that such a felt harmony does not only arise when we contemplate a piece of fine art, or read a novel or a poem, or watch a play or a ballet. We also get this sensation when we have an experience in "real life" that turns out well, since we then manage to adapt with the environment, or manage to cope with the situation in a favorable and even graceful way, to put it in less general terms. We then feel enriched and fulfilled in a profound sense which is hard to explain. This is a good indication that the aesthetic dimension of an experience is quite profound, just as Dewey states. Then we have moved as far away from the icing of the cake view on aesthetics as we can possibly get.

If the constant strife for adaption rewards us with a felt harmony when the outcome is favorable, it also is the case that experiences have "an element of undergoing, of suffering in its large sense" (42). If not, there "would be no taking in of what preceded" (42). It is in fact by way of outer resistance we become conscious of our self, and get the opportunity to develop. When we speak of a favorable outcome, we must speak of "favorable" in a wide sense. "Favorable" should then include instances where a person manages to reconcile with new and dire life prospects, as after having been physically impaired by some serious accident or disease, or after having lost someone near and dear, or when economical disaster strikes, or even a collective disaster as when the hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans.

The dignity and grace Nelson Mandela radiated in speech, deeds and attitude after decades of imprisonment was just as much of an aesthetic as of an ethical kind. He had obviously coped very well with dire circumstances, which is not just an ethical matter. We are, however, not very well aware of the aesthetical aspect of human conduct outside the realm of artful performances, and thus tend to overlook it. By contrast we are very preoccupied with ethics, and have accordingly developed an agile eye for this aspect in everyday life. We mainly become conscious of the aesthetical aspect in a situation when this is highlighted in an artwork. Then we fail to realize that not only art, but also instances in real life can have a significant aesthetic quality.

An Intricate Web of Concepts

As the aesthetic is not a distinct feature of its own, but emerges through other features of experience, Dewey has to explore the aesthetic by making a quite intricate web of different concepts. It is not possible to fully account for this web in a brief summary; here we must content ourselves with stating that a linkage of concepts into *an organic whole* is what the Deweyan approach to the aesthetic amounts to. Unlike a hierarchical view, where the different elements do not merge, but are conceived of as distinct layers on top of each others, the idea of an organic whole is far more difficult to grasp. Instead of regarding aesthetics as some separate spice that can be added to life in an external sense, as a herb can be added in a pot to give the dish an extra flavor, we have to realize that the aesthetic is intrinsic to experiences that have an aesthetic quality—while it at the same time takes part in turning these experiences into an organic whole. Such a dialectical interaction is surely harder to draw on the blackboard than a clear-cut pyramid of human needs.

To briefly mention some other core features of Dewey's web of concepts: In order to complete *an* experience, we must also have an *intention* with our effort to adapt with our environments. This presupposes an *understanding* of cause and effect in our doings, which implies the basic facts that *things have consequences*. Only then can we have intentions that are sufficiently clear to us. And only then do we get a sense of *meaning*. Our having intentions with our actions is the very condition for meaning; if there is no such intention, there is just chaos. As Dewey puts it: "The action and its consequence must be joined in perception. This relationship is what gives meaning; to grasp it is the objective of all intelligence" (46).

Dewey does not, however, employ the word "intentionality" in his discussion, maybe because of its strong associations with phenomenology, which is quite another matter than Dewey's pragmatism. Instead he prefers the far less common word "impulsion".⁴ While an impulse is specialized and rather particular, and can even be an instinctive mechanism to adapt with the environment, an impulsion "designates a movement outward and forward of the whole organism to which special impulses are auxiliary" (60). We become aware of the intent implicit in our impulsion; blind surge is then "changed into a purpose, instinctive tendencies are transformed into contrived undertakings. The attitudes of the self are informed with meaning" (62). The distinction between conscious intent—impulsion—and mere impulse is a useful tool for reflection on present or past doings that can help us to make sense of an experience, and give it meaning. This will certainly be the case in philosophical counseling.

The impulsion of getting from A to B might not be (or often is not) achieved in a straightforward way. If we are sailing, the direction of the wind often makes this impossible. Then we must adjust the sails and steer the boat in a way that gives it a zigzag course, but nevertheless makes us approach point B. The course will in most moments be towards other points than B, but our impulsion is all the same to get to B. Such a clear-cut impulsion will, together with skills in sailing, enable us to achieve just that. One must learn to not be afraid of taking a different tack, i.e. move the sails to catch the wind again, which is about decision making under changing conditions. To employ this nautical analogy in a philosophical counseling setting, the counselor should help clients to right their ship's course, in order to account for rough seas or whatever tension that exists in their transactional relationship with the environment.

Another useful distinction Dewey makes, is between *undergoing* and *doing*. While *undergoing* depicts a seemingly passive attitude like "everything happens to me!", *doing* depicts the impulse to deal with the situation. The attitude is then to alter the environments rather than oneself in order to adapt. In both cases there will be an unbalance which "blurs the perception of relations and leaves the experience partial and distorted, with scant or false meaning" (46). This tends to make the experience anaesthetic rather than aesthetic, as no experience has a chance to complete itself because something else is entered upon so

speedily. What is called experience becomes so dispersed and miscellaneous as hardly to deserve the name. Resistance is treated as an obstruction to be beaten down, not as an invitation to reflection. An individual comes to seek, unconsciously even more than by deliberate choice, situations in which he can do the most things in the shortest time (46).

A reconstruction of thought based on new experiences is difficult and causes us to resist. The challenge is then to unite the relation between doing and undergoing—which can also be viewed as outgoing and incoming energy. This is what turns an experience into *an* experience. As Dewey states: “The doing may be energetic, and the undergoing may be acute and intense. But unless they are related to each other to form a whole in perception, the thing done is not fully aesthetic” (52).

What Emotions and Aesthetics Have in Common

As intentions and resistance are closely linked together, so are intentions and emotions. We have earlier touched upon Dewey’s notion of “a felt harmony” which arises when we manage to cope favorably with a situation. In addition to its aesthetical streak, this notion has an emotional connotation that is just as obvious. The frustrations and sufferings that spring from the resistance our environments give us, and the tension that our interaction with these environments produces, surely cause an emotional response.

Here it must be noted that emotions are not, according to Dewey, simple and compact entities that can be labeled joy, sorrow, hope, fear, anger, etc., as is commonly believed. Nor are they mere eruptions and outbreaks, as in small children, or automatic reflexes like fright and shamed modesty. Dewey even says that “What is sometimes called an act of self-expression might better be termed one of self-exposure; it discloses character—or lack of character—to others. In itself, it is only a spewing forth” (64). By contrast, an artist “takes the indirect road of expression instead of the direct road of discharge” (81). Such an indirect road implies an element of reflection and deliberation that makes us conceive of emotions as qualities “of a complex experience that moves and changes” (43).

Emotions are thus not to be regarded as something extrinsic to an experience. This is a feature emotions and aesthetics has in common. When an experience is emotional, there are no separate things called emotions in it. Instead, the perceived object or issue “is emotionally pervaded throughout. When an aroused emotion does not permeate the material that is perceived or thought of, it is rather preliminary or pathological” (55). If a work of art, or an artistic performance, is not emotionally pervaded throughout, it is mere craftsmanship, but not art. The same goes with human experiences, as when we are welcomed by a host who expertly executes the rules of politeness, but nevertheless leaves us cold and uncomfortable. Then we do not feel welcome at all, since the host’s courtesy is not permeated by an emotion of joy or satisfaction that is called for in order to make us really feel welcome.

This also goes with stories we are told, both in private life and as counselors. When someone for instance tells us about an experience that sticks out to her, we accept, aesthetically, “any amount of moral content if it is held together by a sincere emotion that controls the material. A white flame of pity or indignation may find material that feeds it and it may fuse everything assembled into a vital whole” (71). Then, we might say, it “feels right”. We are, on the other hand, repulsed by a morality imposed on us (or on others) in an external sense - as when someone tries to manipulate us into having a specific emotion. A beggar who gives us a deliberately sad and pitiful glance, or a movie-maker who constructs a scene which shall make us cry, are two examples (ours, not Dewey’s).

Dewey might primarily have a novel or a stage play in mind when writing the statement just quoted. But these considerations are equally relevant to stories told by people we encounter. In a philosophical consultation the counselor would better be sensitive to “[t]he unique, unduplicated character of experienced events and situations [which] impregnates the emotion that is evoked” (70).

The Aesthetic of Authenticity

Dewey's notion of aesthetic versus anaesthetic experiences seems to converge with the dichotomy of authentic versus inauthentic experiences, which philosophical counselors are far more familiar with. We will in this paper not indulge in a discussion of what the difference between these two dichotomies might be, but content ourselves to point out how Dewey's notion can shed some extra light on what an authentic experience amounts to. To take an example of Dewey's as a starting point:

[If a person] puts his room to rights as a matter of routine he is anaesthetic. But if his original emotion of impatient irritation has been ordered and tranquillized by what he has done, the orderly room reflects back to him the change that has taken place in himself. He feels not that he has accomplished a needed chore but has done something emotionally fulfilling. His emotion as thus "objectified" is esthetic. (81)

In a philosophical counseling setting an awareness of the aesthetical–anaesthetical aspect of the two situations sketched might enhance the counselor's ability to reflect with the client on related examples. What is the difference between tidying one's room as a mere dull routine, and making such a chore emotionally fulfilling? How can we deal constructively with a troublesome emotion like irritation? How can we "objectify" emotions by performing specific deeds? Pondering on such questions might help the client to make sense of her experiences both past and present, and to deal with future chores in a more meaningful way.

Dewey also touches upon the quite frequent tendency people have to jump from one impulse to the next, without bothering to finish what they just started. This goes equally well for thoughts as for deeds. Then they deprive themselves of the chance to make sense of an experience, which has to stick out as a complete, as a whole, and not just as a fragment of what might have been *an* experience in full. As Dewey states,

The enemies of the esthetic are neither the practical nor the intellectual. They are the humdrum; slackness of loose ends; submission to convention in practice and intellectual procedure. Rigid abstinence, coerced submission, tightness on one side and dissipation, incoherence and aimless indulgence on the other, are deviations in opposite directions from the unity of an experience. (42)

An instance of such a humdrum, slackness of loose ends, and aimless indulgence is the tendency many people have to lose concentration after a short while, long before a task or a line of thought is completed. This urge to jump from impulse to impulse, or from digression to digression, might be called "the Peter Pan impulse", as it corresponds to Peter Pan's frantic ways of giving in to any distraction, instead of dwelling with a task or thinking anything through.⁵ Then one moves away from creating a unity of *an* experience, which is what makes such an urge an enemy of the aesthetic. We could also say that this urge prevents an experience from being authentic.

The wholeness of an experience, the linkage of events that comes to a close and induces a state of felt harmony, is, as we have seen, what constitutes *an* experience. An authentic experience must surely be *an* experience, with the aesthetic features that spring from the sense of meaning and emotional fulfillment stemming from its being a whole that sticks out both in the present and in memory. Dewey's emphasis on the aesthetic quality of *an* experience thus sheds light on why we so much long for, and cherish, experiences we call authentic. It makes us aware that authenticity can be achieved by focusing on the aesthetic aspect of a completed experience, and that our feeling very much alive when having an authentic experience has quite a lot to do with life's aesthetic dimension.

As with the notion of a favorable adaption to environments, “authentic experience” does not necessarily refer to pleasant incidents. Instead the intense feeling of being alive, of escaping the humdrum and habitual chores in a brief moment of bliss, is pivotal. To illustrate this with a true story, a philosophy professor in a Norwegian university once encountered a colleague who had broken her leg and staggered around on crutches. “How terrible!” the professor exclaimed, “I feel so sorry for you!” But the colleague just beamed and said: “It was an authentic moment!” That breaking a leg might have a beauty of its own, is thus a possibility to explore, not the least in a philosophical consultation. Might the break in a client’s bones correspond to a fissure, rupture, or demarcation from other experiences and thus provide new meaning in her life?

Creating—and Reconstructing—an Experience

In order to really perceive what is going on—and not only to see something in a superficial way, as when being dragged along on a hasty guided tour in a museum—a beholder must create his own experience. In line with the example above, Dewey points out that an act of abstraction, by way of extracting what is significant, must then take place. “The one who is too lazy, idle, or indurated in convention to perform this work will not see or hear” (56).

Such a work is highly relevant in philosophical counseling. By acknowledging the significant aesthetic aspect in a whole, fulfilled experience that gives us a sensation of felt harmony, the counselor will be even better enabled to guide the client in the important task of creating an experience. This also applies to past events that might trouble the client, as she cannot really make sense of them. The frustration stemming from this might even be a major reason for her wanting a consultation. Then the task is, as Dewey would have put it, to reconstruct the past experience, by viewing it afresh in light of what has happened later on, and of the present situation. Might it then be interpreted in a different and more constructive way? Might it then even get a beauty of its own? A philosophical counselor will be well suited to assist the client in such an endeavor, as exploring a topic from different angles is what is called for.

Should the client be afflicted by the Peter Pan impulse and jump from digression to digression, the counselor should, as a first step, act in the way Socrates did by saying: “Stop, not so fast, let us hold on to this thought and investigate it!” This often makes the client uneasy, as most people do not like to have their words examined thoroughly, but want to rush on to something else. There can be several reasons for why this is so. Might the client consciously or unconsciously try to hide some unpleasant truth a completed experience would reveal? Or does her impatience spring from an ingrained personality trait she is not aware of? The ancient Greeks pointed out the irony in a persons carrying a deamon on his back which was apparent to everyone but himself, and in line with this Dewey states that

It is not true that we “forget” or drop into unconsciousness only alien and disagreeable things. It is even more true that the things which we have most completely made a part of our personality and not merely retained as incidents, cease to have a separate conscious experience. (74)

Making the client aware of some personality trait that prevents her from making sense of experiences will then be a necessary first step. Then the work of creating, or reconstructing, experiences can start. By inducing such a reconstruction the counselor can enable the client to reflect on what actually happened during the incident she brought up. Even if she is not used to do this, as everyday life might look to her like a continuous and often senseless flow of one instance to the next one, the counselor must make her realize that *an* experience is, as Dewey puts it, an active flow from something to something: “As one part leads into another and as one part carries on what went before, each gains distinctness in itself” (38). Reflecting on past events is much about identifying such distinctions, in order to make the event in question stick out as a distinct experience. It is indeed possible to make sense of a past experience by reconstructing it in

hindsight. Then the client's sense of merely drifting might be overcome, and be replaced by a sense of meaning.

This requires patience and persistence on the counselor's behalf, as any temptation to solve the client's problem by suggesting practical solutions must be curbed. We must not understand the client's problem too quickly, as we might then jump to conclusions, and thus obscure what the issue is all about. At the same time we must not let the client drag us along on an aimless trip of digressions. It takes good craftsmanship to know when to listen and when to intervene. Knowing when to say "Stop, let us explore that line of thought further!", and refraining from suggesting practical solutions, even when counselor and client share an understanding of what the problem is about, are both prerequisites for reconstructing an experience.⁶ Then both counselor and client must dwell with the different parts of a linkage that may amount to a whole experience, in order to see what surfaces.

Here the counselor probably must challenge the client's conception of her problem by probing into further details or aspects in her narration. Why does she find these features significant, and others not? Could the emphasis be different? Would that alter the flavor, and even the sense, of the story? If the client tends to suppress some features, and enhance others, maybe because she has taught herself to tell the story in this specific way, or has for some reason imposed such a narration on herself, the counselor has every reason to challenge this in a not too confrontational way. By suggesting a different interpretation of what has happened, or a different emphasis on the events the client puts forward, the counselor might counter some bias spotted in the narration. In such a joint exploration of events that for some reason are significant to the client, an experience might indeed be reconstructed into forming a meaningful whole, even with a beauty of its own.

Here Dewey's notion of receptivity is another relevant concept. According to Dewey, receptivity is not passivity, as it then would be mere recognition. He finds the difference to be immense, as "Recognition is perception arrested before it has a chance to develop freely" (54). By contrast, perception "is an act of reconstructive doing, and consciousness becomes fresh and alive" (54). The counselor's efforts to widen the client's perspective, in order to make her realize that *how you see it is not the only possible way, one could have perceived things otherwise*, can very well be viewed as turning recognition into perception. To loosen up rigid assumptions by suggesting alternative possibilities is a way of reconstructing past events that surely is to be sought for. By bringing the client to perceive what happened with a fresh glance, a reconstructive line of thought that develops freely may occur.

When Beauty is Truth

Hopefully the client and the counselor might agree on what really happened, as this is now understood as a completed experience. Of course there is not only one possible answer to what "really happened", as this is a matter of interpretation, and of different points of view. It nevertheless is a matter of organizing events in a way which makes sense, and feels right, to the client, and which also withstands the scrutiny of a critical inquiry. When this is achieved, a moment of relief, and even bliss, may occur in the client, in addition to the sense of felt harmony that may be the lasting impact when remembering the now completed experience later on.

We should then appreciate that such a relief, and bliss and felt harmony, is primarily of an aesthetic kind. This gives us a clue to what poets like John Keats mean when they equal the aesthetic concept of beauty with truth. If such a truth is not of a Tarskian, logical kind, which is prosaic and anaesthetic, it is a truth that resides within the realm of meaning, which is quite another matter. The aesthetic aspect of life can only appear when meaning and emotions come into play, as they do in our constant efforts to adapt to our environments.

Pursuing such a line of thought, Dewey quotes Keats's famous lines that

“Beauty is truth, truth beauty – that is all
Ye know of earth, and all ye need to know.”

He also approvingly states that

It was in moments of most intense esthetic perception that Keats found his utmost solace and his deepest convictions. (...) Ultimately there are but two philosophies. One of them accepts life and experience in all its uncertainty, mystery, doubt, and half-knowledge and turns that experience upon itself to deepen and intensify its own qualities—to imagination and art. This is the philosophy of Shakespeare and Keats. (35)

As philosophical counseling is more like an art than a science, these reflections on Keats are relevant to our trade. We should then appreciate that the moments of truth that may arise in a consultation, have a beauty of their own that is not to be ignored, and this beauty reveals how important the aesthetic dimension is in human life. Scientifically-based truths and ethical considerations—which probably amounts to the other philosophy Dewey has in mind, but does not explicitly state—do not suffice when an experience is to be created or reconstructed. Then the Keatsian beauty-based truths are also needed. Far from being irrelevant or superficial, the aesthetic dimension thus proves to be just as important as critical thinking and ethical reasoning. It may even be what is required to make sense of what the client's problem is all about.

Notes

1. The lectures and the book is a product of Dewey's long collaboration with the pharmaceutical entrepreneur, art collector and progressive educator Albert C. Barnes, who established the Barnes Foundation in Merion, PA, now relocated to Philadelphia.
2. Throughout this paper the numbers within parentheses refer to pages in the Perigee paperback edition of *Art as Experience*, 2005.
3. This is according to Jackson's interpretation.
4. The word “impulsion” is elsewhere employed in the description of the movement of horses' legs, more specifically when the front and hind legs nearly meet during galloping. Dewey makes, however, no reference to this, so he probably did not have that in mind.
5. One of this paper's authors, Morten Fastvold, has discussed the Peter Pan impulse in the paper “Socrates versus Peter Pan: The Difficulties of Thinking Critically,” published on his website www.fastvold-filopraksis.com.
6. There is, however, one instance where suggesting practical solutions might be a good move, and that is when the client resists contemplating practical solutions that would be obvious to others. Then the suggestions serve as a provocation to highlight this resistance, which should be focused on.

References

- John Dewey: Art as Experience. Perigee, 2005*
Philip W. Jackson: John Dewey and the Lessons of Art. Yale University Press, 1998.

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PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTICE

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Philosophical Practice is a scholarly, peer-reviewed journal dedicated to the growing field of applied philosophy. The journal covers substantive issues in the areas of client counseling, group facilitation, and organizational consulting. It provides a forum for discussing professional, ethical, legal, sociological, and political aspects of philosophical practice, as well as juxtapositions of philosophical practice with other professions. Articles may address theories or methodologies of philosophical practice; present or critique case-studies; assess developmental frameworks or research programs; and offer commentary on previous publications. The journal also has an active book review and correspondence section.

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