

Book forum

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On Mark Johnson, *The aesthetics of meaning and thought. The bodily roots of philosophy, science, morality, and art*

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Précis of the book: The aesthetics of meaning

When I was a high-school senior in the American Midwest during the late 1960's, I met a mentor who changed my life and profoundly influenced my identity. Like most teenagers, I was trying to figure out who I was, how I should live, and what life was all about. The catalyst for my growth was the organist, choir director, and young adult teacher at my Lutheran church. He was also head of the Art & Music department of the public library. I was dumbfounded to learn that someone could spend four hour-long Sunday morning classes explaining the nature of faith, and then several more hours talking about the nature of love, which, at the time, struck me as just about the most important topic imaginable. He told us to read John Updike's *Rabbit, Run*, and then used that to talk about commitment, lust, and love. He gave me a copy of Thomas Merton's *No man is an island*, which led me to ponder how "love can be kept only by being given away". He introduced me to Bach's 2nd Brandenburg Concerto, took me to my first foreign film (*A man and a woman*), taught me to appreciate the paintings of Raoul Dufy, showed me Medieval illuminated manuscripts, and shared poems he clipped from the New Yorker and other magazines – poems that seemed to speak directly to my deepest existential concerns. New worlds opened before me, worlds that explored meanings I couldn't quite fathom at that age, even as I sensed their importance for my life.

Imagine my shock when, as an enthusiastic undergraduate attracted to philosophy as a quest for the meaning of life, I took my first course in the Philosophy of Art. Instead of explorations of art as a vehicle of profound human meaning, what I encountered were philosophical treatments of taste, the universality of aesthetic judgments, the “aesthetic attitude”, aesthetic disinterestedness, and the nature of the concept *art*. These are legitimate topics, but none of them seemed to me to capture the way art can reveal possibilities for meaning. In graduate school at the University of Chicago, these same issues predominated, approached with the tools of conceptual analysis characteristic of analytic philosophy. It was assumed that there were distinctly “aesthetic” types of experiences (as contrasted with those which were moral, political, scientific, religious, etc.), and such experiences were taken to be the basis for distinctly aesthetic judgments. The analytic aesthetics of the day was more interested in the *concept* of art than the *experience* of art. Aesthetics had been relegated to the margins of a philosophy concerned mostly with the origins, nature, and cognitive status of concepts, reasoning, and knowledge. Aesthetics was taken to be subjective, based primarily on feelings and emotions, which supposedly made it unfit as a bearer of meaning and truth. A cottage industry arose among aestheticians who tried to defend their sense of the importance of art by shoe-horning aesthetics into some corner of cognitive philosophy, in order to validate its worth as a cognitive process. Mostly, they failed.

My dissertation advisor, Ted Cohen, intuitively understood the key role of the arts in a meaningful human life, but he came at this topic somewhat constrained by contemporary analytic approaches concerned with the cognitive status of the arts. I remain indebted to him for his wise and probing treatments of literary fictions, music, and jokes, all of which he saw as speaking to our human need for meaning, understanding, and wisdom. However, it was not until I got my first job teaching philosophy that I found a way to break somewhat free of the constraints and blinders of mainstream analytic philosophy of art and aesthetic experience. The revelation came in a seminar on Dewey taught by my colleague Tom Alexander, focusing mostly on *Experience and nature*, but ranging widely over other seminal works. There, for the first time, I came to appreciate Dewey’s insight that philosophy was the search for meaning, and that this quest had to start from, and transform, experience in its most aesthetically rich sense.

Around that time, I had another major intellectual revelation while I was co-authoring the book *Metaphors we live by* (1980) with the distin-

guished linguist George Lakoff. George introduced me to need for an empirically responsible, scientifically supported approach to meaning, cognition, and language. With the emergence of the field of cognitive science in the 1970's, that meant that an appropriate philosophic account of mind, thought, and language had to develop hand in hand with the newly emerging sciences of mind. Up through the 1960's, cognitive science was mostly a formal language enterprise grounded in computer science, artificial intelligence, Chomskyan generative grammar, information-processing psychology, and analytic philosophy. Thought was taken to be a series of formal operations performed on meaningless symbols (e.g., a computer language), and so there was no mention of any role for emotions, feelings, qualities, or anything one might regard as aesthetic dimensions.

Things changed dramatically in the 1970's with the emergence of a new second-generation cognitive science that took seriously the bodily basis of meaning and thought (known as Embodied Cognition Theory) and drew on the rapidly developing sciences of mind. Thought was no longer regarded as formal manipulations of intrinsically meaningless symbols, and came to be seen as profoundly rooted in our bodily makeup and our visceral engagement with other people and our world. Instead of formal language models that had little to do with how humans actually think, there was a dawning awareness that all our meaning, thought, values, and actions were the result of the specific nature of our human brains, operating a distinctive human body – a body interacting continuously with physical, interpersonal, and cultural environments. This new, second-generation approach to mind is what I call embodied cognitive science. It took its resources from cognitive linguistics, evolutionary theory, developmental psychology, computational neural modeling, phenomenology, and embodied cognition theory.

Now, you might think that aesthetics has always appreciated the role of the body. If aesthetics is based on feelings and emotions, and these are perturbations of our bodies, then obviously aesthetics recognizes embodiment. The problem, however, is that the received view tends to see this embodiment as a problem, rather than as the key to an understanding of meaning-making. Art and aesthetic experience were seen as problematic precisely because they depend so much on our embodiment. If you assume a mind-body split, and you take the challenge of a philosophy of art to be explaining how a subjective, feeling-based judgment can have some sort of cognitive status, where the cognitive is thought of as a product of conceptualization and reasoning, then you will see our embodiment as something to be overcome, rather than cherished. It was this “problem”

of how feeling-based judgments of taste could nevertheless claim universal validity that occupied the first half of Kant's celebrated *Critique of Judgment*.

Taking the body seriously – as the locus of everything we experience and do – changes everything. Instead of being banished to the wilderness of subjective (and non-cognitive) feelings, aesthetics becomes the source for all our experience, meaning, thought, values, and actions. You come to appreciate Dewey's founding claim that organism-environment transactions, which he called "experience", are the origin of all the meaning and values we have, and shape the nature of our conceptualization and reasoning. The sensing, desiring, acting animate body becomes the locus of who we are and can become. Mind is in the body, and the body permeates mind.

What does it mean to adopt a body-based aesthetics of life processes? It means that what we are, what we can experience, how we experience anything, and what we can become are all rooted in and shaped by our animal nature. Our brains and bodies are the result of evolutionary processes that establish our current shared neural (and bodily) architecture, which is then fine-tuned by our developmental experiences over the course of our lives. Mind and meaning-making are always in process – emergent functions rooted in our capacities for perception, bodily movement, and feeling. To capture the appropriate levels of emergent functional organization requires multiple methods and forms of explanation. Therefore, to understand mind, thought, and action, you need a pluralistic understanding of how perception works, where our values come from, how consciousness emerges, what role feelings play in thinking and knowing, how actions are generated, how shared meanings are possible, and what art is and does, to name just a few emergent processes. You need a pragmatist embodied aesthetics.

In my own work, that has meant always starting my investigations by examining how experience arises from, and is continuously transformed by, our perceptual, motor, and affective interface with our environment. That interface is not merely sensory-motor interactions. It also includes the working of emotions and feelings, as well as our social transactions with other people. It is our social engagement that makes possible our higher-order shared systems of meaning and value. There are multiple dimensions of this experience-based approach. One component is the recurrent, intrinsically meaningful patterns that emerge, non-reflectively, from our ongoing bodily engagement with our surroundings. Given our evolved functional (perceptual and motor) capacities, our bodily consti-

tution and size, and the nature of the environments we routinely inhabit, our surroundings will offer recurring affordances (to use J.J. Gibson's apt term) for experiences we have had, are now having, or might have in the future. In separate books published in 1987, George Lakoff and I named these affordance patterns *image schemas*. They include spatial relations schemas (e.g., up/down, above/below, front/back, center/periphery, near/far), object manipulation schemas (e.g., object, grasp, throw, lift, push, pull, catch, punch, kick, etc.), action, or bodily movement, schemas (e.g., walk, run, trot, prance, locomotion, source-path-goal, etc.), and schemas involving qualitative and quantitative change (e.g., scalar intensity schemas such as more/less, hot/cold, wet/dry, crescendo/decrescendo, etc.). You can divide these schemas into various types, if this serves some explanatory purpose, but they are all recurring patterns of our body-environment interactions that operate automatically and mostly beneath the level of consciousness, to structure our meaningful experience. And they are all primitive aesthetic components of our lived experience, stemming from the nature of our bodies and their surroundings.

Another second source of meaning is our evolved capacities for emotions and feelings. In contrast with intellectualist approaches that deny such feeling states any cognitive validity, neuropsychological research reveals the pervasive influence of affective processes in all experience – in what and how we experience, think about, and act on aspects of our world. Emotions developed in animals as mechanisms for maintaining the homeostatic processes necessary for survival and enhanced quality of life. Emotions are thus patterns of bodily response arising from changes in bodily states resulting from interactions with our surroundings. These bodily responses (in breathing, muscular tone and readiness, hormone secretions, energy maintenance) are geared toward our well-being and well-doing. On some occasions, we actually feel these changes in our bodily states in the form of pain, pleasure, energy, lethargy, attentiveness, distraction, elation, anxiety, and so forth. Emotions and feelings are thus primordial processes for preserving and recovering the dynamic equilibrium of our organic selves necessary for survival and flourishing. That is why emotions and feelings can be profoundly meaningful. Felt emotions alert us to the meaning of what is happening to us.

A third critical aesthetic component is the qualitative character of experience. This includes the more obvious perceived visual, tactile, olfactory, gustatory, and auditory qualities that make our experience meaningful and attract our attention and energy. What is the meaning of the red of a strawberry, the fading sunlight on an early winter's day, the

sound of wind through the trees, the taste of a ripe peach, or the smell of baking bread? An adequate aesthetics of everyday life would need to explore how these qualities, arising in various perceptual modalities, are meaningful to us. But, beyond these particular qualities, there is also what Dewey called the qualitative unity of a whole situation. Dewey described this phenomenologically as the felt unifying sense of a situation as meaningful. Today we have detailed neuroscience accounts of how this qualitative process underlies our more conscious cognitive acts of conceptualization and reasoning. In perception, for example, there are cortico-limbic pathways that generate a holistic, diffuse, and affect-rich sense of spatial and temporal context. It is this processing pathway that underlies Dewey's notion of a pervasive qualitative unity of a situation. Then, relative to this sense of one's situation, there is a different neural pathway that generates a more focused anxious attentiveness to an object located within that context. So, objects of focal awareness arise from a qualitative contextual background that situates and gives significance to those objects. The point, as Dewey presciently recognized, is that we are first in a qualitatively unified situation, within which we then select objects for attention and projected action. This felt sense of a meaningful experience is the basis for all subsequent aesthetic discriminations.

These three briefly described components are representative, but far from exhaustive, of the aesthetic dimensions shared by nearly all people, by virtue of their biological and social make-up. All three of these dimensions, rooted in our bodies and brains, provide shared aesthetic sensibilities that have led many philosophers of art to claim universal validity for aesthetic judgments, and to claim that great works of painting, music, dance, literature, architecture, and film speak a universal language of feelings and emotions – a shared aesthetic sensibility.

Any naturalistic account of aesthetic dimensions of experience is thus faced with the fundamental question of how mostly unconscious bodily processes involving image schemas, feelings, emotions, and qualities can be the basis of celebrated works of art. The answer is that, from an evolutionary and developmental perspective, the higher capacities, functions, and modes of meaning-making operate through recruitment of ordinary structures, capacities, and processes common to all experiences. These higher emergent levels of functional organization make possible new insights, meanings, and values, but they are all rooted in, and are continuous with, our primordial sensory, motor, and affective processes. The aesthetics of everyday bodily existence can sometimes move, thrill, or sadden us in our daily lives, but in species with language and other

forms of symbolic communication, meaning becomes expanded, deepened, and enhanced, giving rise to intensified and enriched significance. This gives us our sense that great artworks are purveyors of complex, emotionally-charged, universal meanings.

One of Dewey's central claims was that what we call works of art are simply exemplary cases of enhanced experience – harmonized, intensified, and enriched experiences resulting from the same aesthetic dimensions that make up any ordinary meaningful experience. The arts are heightened experiences that reveal the rich possibilities for meaning available to us. They invite us to inhabit the world realized in the artwork.

According to this perspective, we value the arts because they are exemplary modes of experience, opening up possible meanings that suggest new ways of living and being. Although there are representational aspects of various arts, art is not necessarily representational. It is not principally a matter of re-presenting something previously experienced or something outside the artwork. Arts do not *re-present* meanings. Rather, they *enact* meanings, both actual and potential. They reveal worlds we can inhabit, and show us ways we can dwell in and experience them meaningfully. In so doing, they transform who we are and how we reach out to the world.

My project, then, in *The aesthetics of meaning and thought*, is to explore the bodily basis of our aesthetic sensibilities, and then to indicate some of the many ways that *all* our cognitive achievements, not just those in the arts, are possible only insofar as they are grounded in the aesthetic dimensions of common experience. An aesthetics of meaning is just as central for science, philosophy, morality, and law, as it is in the arts.

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Making sense

Mark Johnson's latest book, *The aesthetics of meaning and thought: the bodily roots of philosophy, science, morality, and art* (2018 [= AMT]) is a new milestone in Johnson's unremitting quest to elucidate the ways in which meaning becomes *meaningful* to us. The book is so rich and many-faceted that it is impossible to do full justice to it within the limits of this short contribution to the book symposium. Thus, I have chosen to concentrate on perspectives from the book that are especially relevant to my

own work as a musicologist, where Mark Johnson's philosophy has played a central role in my understanding of musical meaning.

A major tenet of Johnson's philosophy is that all meaning is embodied, whether we are dealing with meaning as it emerges in everyday life (Lakoff, Johnson 1980) or meaning and thought in philosophy, science, morality, and art. Lakoff and Johnson's analysis of conceptual metaphors – "in terms of which we both think and act" – (1980: 3) was a seminal contribution to the emerging field of cognitive semantics. Mark Johnson has not been content just to analyze the workings of the conceptual system, however; *The aesthetics of meaning and thought* has taken on the colossal philosophical project of accounting for the implications our embodiment has for "all the processes by which we enact meaning through perception, bodily movement, feeling, and imagination" (AMT: 2). Following John Dewey's *Art as experience* (1934), Johnson subsumes these processes under the term *aesthetic experience*, adding that "*all meaningful experience is aesthetic experience*". His application of Varela, Thompson, Rosch's notion of enaction (see Varela, Thompson, Rosch 1991) to the problem of *meaning*, is in my view one of Johnson's most important contributions to philosophy, and a central part of his argument in *The aesthetics of meaning and thought*.

Johnson's philosophy of experience focuses on "the aesthetics of embodied life" (the title of the introductory chapter), a project that aligns not only with pragmatism, but also with central concerns within phenomenology, hermeneutics, and existentialism. However, Johnson's highly interdisciplinary account goes far beyond the reaches of philosophy, as it also includes insights from cognitive semantics, cognitive psychology, cognitive neuroscience, developmental psychology, and art criticism. Johnson places himself within the relatively new field of *neuropragmatism*, which is founded on a number of key shared themes of pragmatism and neuroscience, identified as: "organism-environment transaction as the locus of activity", "the continuity of experience", "antidualism", "the intertwining of reason and emotion", and "nonreductionism that involves multiple levels of explanation" (AMT: 98-108).

Understanding aesthetics in the broad sense that is advocated in *The aesthetics of meaning and thought*, in every sense of the word *sense*, stands in strong opposition to the dualism inherent in the work of the founding father of modern aesthetics, Alexander Baumgarten. He coined the term "Ästhetik" in *Reflections on poetry* from 1735 (from Greek *aistha-*

nesthai “perceive [by the senses or by the mind], feel”¹) to describe a science of sensory perception, as opposed to logic, the science of intellect². Baumgarten’s treatise *Aesthetica* (1750-1758) established aesthetics as a branch of philosophy devoted to art, our sense (feeling) of beauty, and taste; an understanding of aesthetics that is prevalent still today, at least within Anglo-American philosophy³. Johnson argues that the separation between sensory perception and thought (or intellect), feeling and reason that is a legacy of Enlightenment philosophy, has led to a marginalization of aesthetics, and a disengagement of art from life, as discussed by Dewey in *Art as experience* (AMT: 13). Johnson’s antidualist alternative recognizes perception, feeling, thought, and reason as inextricably intertwined aspects of our “deep visceral, emotional, and qualitative relation to our world” (AMT: 1), which underlies not only artistic experience but *all thought*.

The aesthetics of meaning and thought consists of three parts. Part I, “Philosophy and science”, focuses not only on the aesthetics but also the *metaphoricity* of meaning and thought in philosophy and science. Chapter 2, titled “Philosophy’s debt to metaphor”, draws both upon the influential cognitive metaphor theory Johnson developed together with George Lakoff, and upon Johnson’s comprehensive (45 pages) introductory chapter titled “Metaphor in the philosophical tradition” in Johnson (1981), which demonstrates the historical depth and contextual breadth of his horizon from the very beginning of his production.

Part II of *The aesthetics of meaning and thought*, titled “Morality and law” argues against what Johnson calls “the moral law folk theory” founded on Kant’s rationalist moral philosophy, which views morality as “purely” rule-governed. Johnson transcends the dichotomy between reason and feeling that underlies Kant’s philosophy, and argues that morality should instead be regarded “as a system of rationally derived moral laws and moral deliberation *as a process of imaginative projection*” (AMT: 163; emphasis added). According to Johnson, the quality of our moral thinking depends on much more than a knowledge of rules; it is dependent on “(1) the depth and breadth of our knowledge of the physical and social worlds we inhabit, (2) our understanding of human motivation and cognitive/affective development, (3) our perceptiveness of which factors are most

¹ Online Etymology Dictionary, https://www.etymonline.com/word/aesthetic?ref=etymonline_crossreference

² See Walton et al., <https://www.oxfordartonline-com>.

³ See Scruton, Munro, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/aesthetics>

relevant in a particular situation, and (4) our ability to simulate the experiences and responses of other people with whom we are interacting⁴. It is thus as much an affair of imagination as it is an appropriation of prior knowledge” (AMT: 171).

And now, finally, we have come to my favorite part of the book, Part III, “Art and the aesthetics of life”, which is both about art and about what Johnson calls “Dewey’s big idea for aesthetics” (the title of chapter 10), defined by Johnson as: “Every relatively meaningful and fulfilled experience is individuated by a pervasive unifying quality” (AMT: 226). Johnson points out three convictions underlying Dewey’s philosophical orientation: “(1) *Philosophy should begin and end with experience, taken in the richest, deepest sense*; (2) *aesthetic dimensions are what constitute the character of any fully developed and meaningful experience*; and (3) *attention to the qualitative aspects of experience is the key to an understanding of human mind, thought, language, and value*” (AMT: 225-6). This brings Johnson to the conclusion that “the test of a philosophy is its ability to deepen, expand, enrich, and liberate our experience, and this requires that we begin and end our philosophical inquiries in the qualitative depths of experience” (loc. cit.).

But where, then, does *art* come in? Johnson appropriates Dewey’s view of fulfilled experience as “art in germ”, regarding art as “experience in its consummatory, eminent sense” (AMT: 232). He continues: “Art reveals, through immediate presentation of qualities unified in a comprehensive whole, the meaning and significance of some aspect of our world, either as it was, is, or might be. At its best, art shows us the meaningful possibilities of our world”⁵ (loc. cit.). Johnson does not only discuss art in general, however, but also specific literary, musical, and visual artworks, and the meanings he enacts in these interpretations – sensitive *sensings*, in every sense of the word *sense* – is for me among the ultimate highlights of *The aesthetics of meaning and thought*. I will now make a short digression into music therapy in order to argue for my view that Mark Johnson is not only an eminent philosopher, but also an *artist*. In a recent article (see Aksnes 2017) I have applied perspectives from pragmatism and Johnson’s philosophy to a discussion of my Norwegian colleague Even Ruud’s

⁴ On AMT: 166 Johnson characterizes this ability as empathetic imagination.

⁵ Dewey’s insight that the work of art “presents the world in a new experience”, is one of many interesting parallels between Dewey and hermeneutic philosophers like Martin Heidegger (1936) and Paul Ricœur (1975; 1983). Incidentally, Ricœur was Mark Johnson’s doctoral advisor together with Ted Cohen at the University of Chicago.

notion of “acting together” (“samhandling”) in music therapy. Here I argue that so-called *receptive* music therapy (i.e. music therapy that takes music listening as its point of departure) is not at all passively receptive, as is implied when we use the term “reception” for the appropriation of artworks’ meanings; but rather “actively acting” (“aktivt handlende”), as we say in Norwegian – or *enactive*, as I will say from now on, following Johnson. In this light, enacting meaning through the “reception” of an artwork is not only receptive, but also constitutive – we *create art* when we enact meaning in and through art, adding our own meanings, and thus contributing to the artworks’ *play* of meaning and *history of effect*, as Gadamer (1960) notes.

In chapter 9, “Identity, bodily meaning, and art”, Johnson writes about embodied schemas and feeling contours in music, discussing the philosopher Susanne Langer and her description of music as the “tonal analogue of emotive life” (Langer 1953: 27). He also refers to the developmental psychologist Daniel Stern’s notion of vitality affects (see Stern 1985); basic, amodal activation contours, which as both Stern and Johnson note, “are most evident in temporal arts, such as music and dance, in which there is some kind of actual or virtual movement” (AMT: 219). Other references in Johnson’s account of embodied schemas and feeling contours in music, are in Johnson, Larson (2003) as well a list of other musical metaphor theorists who have applied cognitive metaphor theory to their work: Lawrence Zbikowski, Janna Saslaw, Michael Spitzer, Juha Ojala, Arnie Cox, and myself. I find that he is mistaken, however, when he states that we have given “much more profound and sophisticated treatments of embodied musical meaning” than himself (AMT: 220). Johnson’s beautifully sensitive sensings of *Somewhere over the rainbow* (2007), and not least *Singin’ in the rain* in the introductory chapter of *The aesthetics of meaning and thought* (see AMT: 23-4), are to me among the very most profound and sophisticated enactments of embodied musical meaning because they demonstrate so fully the *felt sense, pervasive qualitative unity, emotions and feelings, embodied schemas and feeling contours* of musical experience – all of the embodied dimensions of experience that Johnson lists in “Identity, bodily meaning, and art” (AMT: 211).

What is it about *Singin’ in the rain* that is so *moving*? Johnson discusses how art “presents or enacts the very patterning of our waxing and waning feelings as they change in quality, force, directedness, or manner of movement. Music famously accomplishes this latter task, because musical experience is a form of metaphorical motion” (AMT: 23). He draws upon the work of the phenomenologist of dance Maxine Sheets-John-

stone (see Sheets-Johnstone 1999), remarking: “Put music and dance together in a musical, and you have a powerful visceral enactment of the complex and nuanced emotional dimensions of meaning” (loc. cit.). Johnson then writes with empathetic enthusiasm about Gene Kelly and Debbie Reynolds’ goodnight kiss on the doorstep, Kelly’s big smile, and his merrily strolling doo-dloo-doo-doo-ing. He continues: “The arch up from ‘I’m’ to ‘si-i-ing’ is a felt rush of positive emotional tension – a surging up of sheer joy – mirrored in his floating walk, his upturned face, and his open posture. [...] The effect is the felt swelling of positive feeling gushing up and dropping down slightly as it pours out” (AMT: 24). What beautiful poetry! As a musicologist specializing in the impossible task of describing music in words, I feel compelled to add: ...and the *sweet* orchestral harmonies, the *yearning* effect of the long dominant stretch and *drawn out*⁶ cadence accompanying the two loved ones’ final kiss – a harmonic incorporation of the ATTRACTION schema. Not to mention Kelly’s infatuated echolalia, where Reynolds’ “California *dew*” is transformed into a repetitive, rhythmically entraining “doo-dloo-doo-*doing*...” (Not very surprisingly, when we are in love, the same areas of the brain light up as in OCD.) And the orchestra’s swelling *crescendo*⁷ – nothing but a heart in love can surge⁸ like the swelling crescendo of an orchestra! As well as the perfect synchrony between Kelly’s elated movements – his playful strumming on the umbrella, tap dancing, swirling, leaping, bounding, skipping up and down the sidewalks, silly swooshing and splashing with his feet – and the *sounding music*; the man and the music mirroring each other perfectly... Such a perfect exemplification of the psychologist Charlotte Wolff’s description of elation in Wolff (1945): “Elation is shown by a wealth of unnecessary movement, fast motor speeds, exhibitionist behaviour, spontaneous, emphatic and rhythmical gesture and self-assertiveness”.

We could go on forever, the experience of *Singin’ in the rain* being so rich, heterogeneous and multi-faceted that describing it is an “infinite task” (as Edmund Husserl admitted towards the end of his life). The point is not to *replicate* the magnificently multimodal experience of *Singin’ in the rain*. This would be a futile task, anyway, as many aspects of this experience are sensory, and thus not accessible to language – words can never completely capture the richness of the *felt sense* of our experiences. However, philosophers and art critics can describe *aspects* of artistic

⁶ “Drawn out” is one of the vitality affects Stern lists in Stern 1985: 54.

⁷ Also on Stern’s list (loc. cit.)

⁸ Also on Stern’s list (loc. cit.)

experience. For instance, we have all *felt* the rush of joy of being in love (our hearts leaping with joy, analogous to Gene Kelly's octave-leaping "I'm si-i-ing"); we have *expressed* love and joy through rushes of movement and playfully skipping steps, not least during childhood; and we empathetically and imaginatively *identify* both with the emotional expressions of other people (Gene Kelly's happy smile, happy voice, and elated movements), as well as with perceived emotions "in" the music. Musical joy, like a smiling face, happy voice, and silly swooshing splash, is *contagious* – even more contagious than the Coronavirus! That is why people are rushing to their balconies all over the world to play with, and for, each other these days; to share empathetic humanity and contagious musical joy during the Coronavirus crisis. Thank you, Italy, birthplace of opera, for this splendid idea!

Music, which "presents or enacts the very patterning of our waxing and waning feelings as they change in quality, force, directedness, or manner of movement", is especially apt for affect attunement and health promotion, whether it is enacted within a therapeutic context or as mental hygiene out on the balconies. The etymology of health, "whole", hints at the existential promise that lies in paying more heed to the important aesthetic dimensions of meaning and thought, which *integrate* our body-minds. This can also explain the great popularity of techniques like mindfulness and yoga in our disembodied Western cultures, where we need to relearn to pay attention to the bodies we are taught to ignore. We need more than just music, art, mindfulness, and yoga, however – we also need Mark Johnson, to tell us *why*.

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Mark Johnson's aesthetic revolution in philosophy

Alfred North Whitehead notes that one of the fundamental tasks of philosophy is to reveal the “tacit presuppositions” permeating the thought of an era (see, for example, Whitehead 1929: III, 67). He goes on to note that because they are tacit in no way diminishes their influence. On the contrary, they often are highly determinative of the salient and conscious concepts of a given worldview. A philosophy that can reveal some of these submerged features is therefore extremely valuable for doing just that. If it happens to offer a deeper, truer, and more wholesome approach to the central concerns of life – let us just say “wisdom” – it is more valuable by far. Such, I believe, is the legacy of the body of work

Mark Johnson has accomplished. His work not only reveals operative inherited assumptions in Anglophone philosophy, but effectively calls them into question while offering an alternative path, a *via imaginativa*, worthy for future philosophical inquiry. I wish here to examine the implications of “aesthetics” as Johnson conceives it for the exploration of cultural self-understanding, an *aesthetics of existence*. Specifically, I wish to extend Johnson’s idea of imagination and metaphor in the genesis of cultural symbols, especially those core cultural themes that function in constituting a “world”. Such tropes and symbols that lie at the core of cultural webs are articulated as “mythoi”, accounts that reveal *important* meanings and values in that world¹. Thus, my aim here is to point out an application of Johnson’s philosophy of embodiment toward an “aesthetics” of culture.

Johnson’s work began with a focus on the neglected subject of metaphor, not only defending it as a form of rational meaning but as offering insight into the ways in which the living body and its various structures shapes the very intelligibility of our understanding of the world. Though beginning as a reconstruction of Kant, the project was significantly recast with Johnson’s “Deweyan turn”. This would eventually lead toward a more ecological theory of experience and meaning, where the dualism of subject and object was overcome for an interactive involvement between living human beings and the world. The topic of imagination, the reconstruction of Kant, and the turn toward a more robust ecological view of experience led him to discern the tacit presuppositions that had dominated modern philosophy, variously described as “Objectivism”, “the Enlightenment view”, and the “Folk theory”. In other words, Johnson’s project began with a direct challenge to the presuppositions of the Enlightenment’s views of reason, imagination, mind, body, concept, meaning, and feeling. This is clear in the very first bold lines of *The body in the mind*:

Without imagination, nothing in the world could be meaningful. Without imagination, we could never make sense of our experience. Without imagination, we could never reason toward knowledge of reality. (Johnson 1987: ix)

This flies in the face of the view, which Johnson sums up in that inaugural book under the term “Objectivism”, the assumption that the world

¹ Since the term “myth” now inevitably refers to false stories, I have designated the term “mythos” to stand for any important story or narrative structure that reveals a key aspect of the identity of a person, group, or world.

is a totality of “objects” awaiting description in propositional form². The truth of this world of objects, i.e., “facts”, is a literal truth that is capable of purely formal expression. “Reason” here is not grounded in human embodiment, but aspires to a God’s eye view, the world as a system of facts. Objects have properties and relations; concepts refer to such entities; categories give an overview or meta-description of these concepts. The purpose of philosophy since the advent of the modern period has been understood as the quest for knowledge. The “problem of knowledge” has been considered as *the* central concern, and philosophy is understood to be in partnership with the sciences as “grounding” or “clarifying” them³. Philosophy is epistemology. This is perhaps one of the most pervasive, unquestioned tacit presuppositions in contemporary Anglophone thought. A review of the specializations of faculty in philosophy departments in the Anglophone world drives this truth home. Those who do question it are dismissed as “not philosophers”.

What happens when imagination is put at the heart of human understanding? First the meaning of imagination changes. It is not the random, inexplicable, arbitrary faculty. This interpretation was the mirror image of the Objectivist account of reason⁴. Rather, Johnson proposed, imagination is the way human beings mean, the way we engage a qualitative, moving world in terms of its possibilities, as process, not a completed system of facts. We grasp the world in terms of its possibilities, not just its actualities. Early on, Johnson focused on what he and linguist George Lakoff call “image schemata”⁵. An image schema, Johnson says “is a recurring, dynamic pattern of our perceptual interactions and motor programs that gives coherence and structure to our experience” (Johnson 1987: xiv). They are ways experience is organized – not from “behind” the phenomena like Kantian categories, but as projections of the human lived body as means of making sense of our environment. Metaphor is a key way such projections are made. A range of meanings clusters about the fact we are upright beings: we crawl and learn to stand and walk; to do these we must balance ourselves. Thus we describe someone as an upright or balanced person, as fallen or unstable, as coming to “stand on his

² To be precise, Johnson 1987 was Johnson’s first book as solo author; it had been preceded by the co-authored book Johnson, Lakoff 1980.

³ This assumption, by the way, is a prime example of what I mean by “mythos”.

⁴ Richard Rorty can be considered an exemplar of this “ironist” relativism.

⁵ This was a term borrowed from Kant’s first and third Critiques and an attempt to give some substance to the idea. troubling accounts. See Johnson (156 f.).

own two feet”, and so on⁶. These various patterns do not fit in a “core concept”; they radiate in complex and surprising ways⁷. It is important to note that these schemata are so pervasive as often to pass by conscious notice. Many defenses of “literalism” are laced with such metaphors unwittingly. They are also creative and active in organizing experience, making them a primary way we “have a world” at all⁸.

In Kuhnian fashion, *The body in the mind*, by detecting and trying to solve an anomaly, led to a general paradigm shift in the conception of meaning and so of philosophy. In subsequent books and papers, Johnson made his “Deweyan turn”. *The aesthetics of meaning and thought* is the mature fruit of this transformation. The struggles to help Kant overcome himself are gone and a robust Deweyan naturalism is in place⁹. In particular this shift involves (1) a recognition of the role of what Dewey calls “the felt pervasive quality” of a situation as providing a determination of the discrete, focal and conscious features of experience and (2) a refusal to treat the mind, brain, or nervous system as a “thing” on its own, separate from the ecological perspective of the whole organism-in-its-environment. Johnson is fond of Dewey’s admonition: “To see the organism in nature, the nervous system in the organism, the brain in the nervous system, the cortex in the brain is the answer to the problems that haunt philosophy” (Dewey 1925: 224)¹⁰. While the first leads toward a view of experience as pervaded by aesthetic quality capable of being intensified and made conscious (the task of art), the second leads to a boldly ecological and non-reductionistic view of nature. The idea that all experience is an instance of “knowing” is given up as is the idea that “naturalism” aspires to physics or neurology and not also – maybe more so – to ecology, anthropology, and art¹¹.

Aesthetics, on Johnson’s view, is no longer a neglected corner of the project of epistemology, concerned with a special “attitude” or limited to the themes of art and beauty and how judgments about them are possible. It now has central import as dealing with the creation of meaning and

⁶ See Johnson (71 f.).

⁷ See Lakoff 1987, especially chapter 6.

⁸ See Johnson 1987: 98, 171-2.

⁹ See Johnson’s final judgment on Kant in Johnson 2018 [= AMT]: 9-10.

¹⁰ For Johnson’s account of the role of quality as a pervasive feature of situations, see AMT: 224-41, chapter 10, “Dewey’s big idea for aesthetics”.

¹¹ The idea that any experience is ultimately an instance of “knowing” is perhaps one of the most tenacious “tacit presuppositions” of contemporary philosophy. Dewey had rejected it by the late 1890s.

value in human existence. “I contend”, says Johnson, “that [...] 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” (Johnson 2018 [= AMT]: 2). This is an “aesthetics of our bodily, worldly existence” (AMT: 13-4; see: 24-5). Aesthetics is an exploration of the way we engage both the actualities and possibilities of the world, the “affordances” of the world (AMT: 11)¹².

Johnson’s view of aesthetic meaning, then, is the basis of a general theory of meaning, rooted in our bodily existence deep below the cognitive and propositional level. And it becomes most fully realized in conscious experiences that are qualitative intensifications of our general experience¹³. Johnson has developed the implications of this theory for ethics as well as art. I would like in the space left to connect it with some ideas of my own on the philosophy of civilization. I agree with Johnson that human beings are makers of meaning. In fact, I believe human existence has a drive toward the experience of embodied meaning which I have termed “the Human Eros”¹⁴. Not only do we make meaning but when meaning is stripped from our lives, we suffer and even die¹⁵. One of the functions of culture is to provide the Human Eros with an environment of experienceable meanings and values, a cosmos, as it were.

Cultures exist as ways of sustaining the Human Eros, which is why cultural heritages are tended, protected, and passed down. We need to have a sense not just of the meaning of the world capable of symbolic articulation and aesthetic encounter but of our identities, who we are, as well. This organization of meanings and values into a system I call a “spiritual ecology”¹⁶. So: the Human Eros seeks to create and sustain spiritual ecologies, cultural worlds within which we can encounter meanings and values and have a sense of who we are. All sorts of cultural practices and objects contain core cultural meanings that help refresh and strengthen the central tropes that define a group or an individual. A trope is like an image schemata: it is a structure capable of a variety of forms of embodi-

¹² The term “affordances” comes from psychologist J.J. Gibson and denotes the specific ways animals relate to their environments in terms of coordinating specific actions and definite possibilities. See Gibson 1986.

¹³ This is Dewey’s famous thesis in *Art as experience*. See especially chapter 3, “Having an experience”.

¹⁴ See the title essay in Alexander 2013.

¹⁵ The basic idea for this comes from Frankl 1986.

¹⁶ See Alexander 2013: chapter 14, “Eros and spirit”.

ment within a culture. The tropes of “freedom” or “individualism” in American culture can be embodied in paintings, movies, ceremonies, legal entities (like the Constitution), intellectual works and so on. Tropes function as ways in which a culture continues to recognize its meaning in the world in various embodiments.

The articulation of a trope, to repeat, is often through “mythos”. A mythos is any story (or implicit narrative structure) that conveys a sense of identity of self or important features of the world; it is an important story which if lost or changed would significantly alter the meaning and possibly the value of that which it is about¹⁷. We all have central stories that concern our core identities: where we are from, our childhood, our communities, nationalities and so on. Should any of these core stories be modified or lost we ourselves would undergo change. A mythos, then, is an *important* story in the sense it has to do with the articulation of the meaning of existence. It involves tropes as schemata that compose the central meanings for the identity of an individual, a group, or a culture. Mythoi provide the concrete ways of embodied meaning. Insofar as a range of tropes may come into play and so have mutual proximity and relevance to each other with explicit and implicit mutual implications, they need to have these relationships exposed and explored. Thus, many cultural works, especially artworks, are concerned with disclosing and trying to resolve these tensions. As the Hebrew idea of God evolved from that of a merely *powerful* being to that of a *moral* one, it became necessary to explore the problem of evil. This has been a persistent theme in western culture from *The book of job* on.

Aesthetics, then, in Mark Johnson’s view, is the study of embodied meaning. My extension of embodiment aims toward a study of culture, especially in terms of central tropes and mythoi. They can reveal “tacit presuppositions” that are highly operative if largely unconscious. For four hundred years western philosophy has operated its own tropes and mythoi focused around the project of science. In believing itself to be “rational” and “scientific”, philosophy lost touch with its history and the importance of imagination and aesthetic experience. Mark Johnson’s aesthetic revolution opens up a way of recovery of these suppressed dimensions of meaning and a creative field for as yet only barely tried adventures in ideas. As Johnson has often said, “the stone that was cast away

¹⁷ A mythos need not be linguistic; a temple, dance, musical piece, ceremony, etc. all have syntactic structures.

shall be the cornerstone" (AMT: 224; after Matthew 21.42 and Ps. 118, 22).

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How many experiences for an extended mind?

My task here is particularly difficult. The ideas laid out by Johnson in *The aesthetics of meaning and thought* (2018 [= AMT]) and some of the ideas I have tried to justify also recently (Matteucci 2019) seem to strongly converge. In order to play my role as discussant I must therefore enter into technical issues concerning the subtle fine-tuning of the same frame of reference. At the same time, I would not want my arguments to be seen as completely captious. It seems to me that the overall tonality of the shared frame of reference is played out on these details, as when the variation of a single note in a melody succeeds in giving the latter an unexpected colour.

1. As far as the general project of a philosophical aesthetics is concerned, the core of Johnson's stance can be 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*. (AMT: 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. (AMT: 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. (AMT: 51)

I have no objection to the critique of traditional aesthetics as a philosophy of art that has segregated the aesthetic into a sphere that is as autonomous as irrelevant for what instead would be the "really meaningful" experience. Accordingly, I agree with Johnson that Dewey, and in particular his 1934 masterpiece *Art as experience*, can be a strategic reference point. Redeeming the aesthetic from its segregation, however, 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.

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 it 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 both reducing one thing to the other and defining different types or kinds to which the square would belong or, even less so, different ontological regions to which it would pertain.

Within experience in general Dewey distinguishes what he calls “an” experience, i.e. the experience whose peculiar character becomes a prominent aesthetic dimension (see *Art as experience’s* chapter 3). In other terms, according to Dewey not all experience is aesthetic. On the other hand, the spectrum of the dimensions of experience that Dewey illustrates in *Experience and nature* certainly cannot be reduced to the aesthetic. Aesthetic is (only) “an” experience (or rather: experience when it is “an” experience), not “the” experience. The latter is mere *experience-of* something (when, for instance, a subject faces an opposed object for exclusively cognitive purposes), i.e. the generic interaction between organism and environment. However, 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 also included. When I’m simply feeding myself, my experience is *of* the food; I face the food as a means of 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, “col-luded”, 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 value we will have when we remember or tell someone about that meal. This shows how each *experience-of* is a (potentially) partial manifestation of “an” *experience-with*. 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.

2. 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 is that of the experience *of* it or, as Dewey says, that of *assertion*.

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 assertion 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).

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. And given this collusive-expressive character of the whole field involving the organism *with* his/her environment, a sort of aesthetic foundation 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).

3. In this horizon, it is necessary to clarify in what sense a conception of the mind as embodied is able to really preserve also its own extended nature. Neglecting the latter could have consequences that risk deeply impacting on the way we consider the aesthetic in general.

When we speak of an extended mind, the idea that a mind which is intracranial first and only then “gets extended” in order to include portions of the outer world is misleading. Once again we could use Dewey and his conception of the verbal character of the mind to underline how the extended mind coincides with the very organism-environment interaction in its various modalities (as the manifold articulations of the verb “to mind” show). In this sense I would say that extended mind means first of all *experience-with*: it cannot be conceived not only beyond embodiment (as Johnson points out; AMT: 55), but also regardless of its aesthetic connotation, i.e. its intrinsically immersive nature (on the link between aesthetic and immersive, AMT: 247-8), where however (and on this, perhaps, I disagree with Johnson) the body in which it is embodied is not a subject, but a vector of the field itself. To speak of an extended mind 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, of an osmotic border

on which something like a Self (a tendency towards the first person perspective) and something like a world (a tendency towards objectivity) emerges. Understood otherwise, that is, 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 as an interaction to a mind as a mere neurological system).

Thus, it is true that Johnson notes that “meaning arises in the processes of organism-environment interaction that mutually define ourselves and our world” (AMT: 14), or also that “subjectivity and objectivity are thus two aspects of one and the same experiential process” (AMT: 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) (see, for instance, AMT: 14).

This is also confirmed by Johnson’s non-critical reference to Barsalou and his “simulation semantics” theory (see also AMT: 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.

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 “enters the scene” in its full meaning. When we read a poem, we do not simulate events (as Johnson seems to suggest when he writes: “Our understanding of the poem operates partly through our sensory and motor simulation of the events presented therein”; AMT: 16). Properly, these events enter the scene (as, again, Johnson suggests when he rightly states: “That felt qualitative unity is not re-presented by the poem; rather, it *enacted in and realized through* the continuous process of the unfolding of the poem”; AMT: 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*.

“Simulation” can apply in an empiricist perspective that emphasizes the ontological impoverishment, of true reality in the simulation: 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).

The question can also be addressed with respect to ordinary experience. As far as Johnson’s observations on the “meaning of a bowl” (AMT: 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” (AMT: 244) 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 AMT: 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, which by definition is such because it manifests itself without any previous acquisition.

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 way (the way in which materials, even liquid ones, are contained and made transportable, for instance: a “bowl-ish” 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, aesthetics is, prior to being the experience *of* the possible (see AMT: 248), an experience *with* possibility.

And it is to this “how” that the various perceptual or imaginative acquisitions also hold on in the course of our lives. Indeed, it constitutes the radically extra-linguistic component of meaning on which Johnson himself insists several times (see for instance, directly linked to the aesthetic, AMT: 209 ff., and especially 211-2) (without, however, clarifying in what terms this is compatible with the regressive vision mentioned above). 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 in an experience, whatever side (subjective or objective) one wants to consider.

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The primacy of the aesthetic. A discussion on Professor Mark Johnson's book *The aesthetics of meaning and thought*

Return to me often and take me,
beloved sensation, return to me and take me –
when the body's memory awakens,
and old desire seeps again into the blood;
when the lips and the skin remember,
and the hands feel as if touching anew.

Return to me often and take me in the night,
when the lips and the skin remember. (Kavafis 1912)

Konstantinos Kavafis' poem, *Return to me*, is a celebration of the body's potential to create meaning in sensing. The artistically rendered meaning reveals the significance of the sensuous body, a field of deep experience. What Aristotle wrote more than two thousand years ago in *Physics* resonates with Kavafis' poem: "Art¹ completes what nature cannot bring to a finish. The artist gives us knowledge of nature's unrealized ends". Nature

¹ Aristotle used the Greek word *techné* which translates not only to "art", but also "craft".

realized anew: this Kavafis achieves through an intensification of meaning. Implicit in Aristotle's statement, and exemplified by Kavafis, is that art can complete or give form to experience, and at its root lies the body and its ways of being in the world. Art is an exemplary form for expressing intensified meaning, and all meaningful experiences are aesthetic. This is the crux of Professor Johnson's *The aesthetics of meaning and thought* (2018 [= AMT]). He shows that aesthetics is the foundation experience and that meaning is rooted in our bodily ways of being in the world. Meaning is experienced through sensed "patterns, images, concepts, qualities, emotions and feelings" (AMT: 2), which are the origin for both subjectivity and intersubjectivity – in other words, the foundation of all experience. Aesthetics is that which reveals meaning, a meaning that is first and foremost bodily and sensate, but at the same time the bedrock of law, morality, philosophy, thought, and reason. Because of this bodily continuity in meaning, experience should not be distinguished as different kinds or varieties. Experiences are alike in their bodily foundation. They are more similar than they are different, as all experience is intimately connected.

Aristotle argued that thoughts and feelings are connected. Both take part in forming an experiential whole; they are mutually constitutive. So too argues Johnson, through a reading of John Dewey, among others. But even if some of these thoughts have been known for a long time, Professor Johnson's work is revolutionary. He blends these ancient insights with cognitive science and neuroscience and (humorously) shows us a way toward philosophical and scientific progress. The value of his scholarship cannot be overestimated. As one of the most important philosophers of our time, Johnson, in collaboration with George Lakoff in their seminal work on metaphors, has fundamentally altered the way we understand the relationship between our bodily experiences and language. In the current collection of essays, Johnson expands on this earlier work by showing how meaningful experience is aesthetic. His far-reaching claim is that "it is ultimately the aesthetic dimensions of experience that underlie and make possible philosophy and all other modes of thinking" (AMT: 200).

Aesthetics has for centuries been viewed as subordinate to logic and epistemology – a common prejudice since Kant, whose project of critique, Johnson points out, granted aesthetics a particular epistemic function. One of the results was that feelings were viewed as a result of, not the basis for, judgement (of beauty on art and nature). Feelings were "secondary" (AMT: 9). Johnson turns such reasoning on its head, showing that what was regarded as superior is in fact dependent upon what was

regarded as inferior for its existence – reason is dependent upon the aesthetic dimension, and with it, feelings. Johnson does so in a balanced way, as reason and logic are certainly important for democracy, morality, ethics, etc. He dissolves the rigid boundaries between the various fields and the various aspects of subjectivity by focusing on their common ground. This is a particularly important focus given how powerful a grip the natural sciences have on research, where the importance of theory and qualitative research is generally downplayed. Particularly in this context, Johnson's contributions continue to be revolutionary. One could say that pragmatism has been cutting-edge for a long time, its full impact yet to be experienced. One of the ways this impact is to be experienced is through focusing on the more anti-reductionistic questions regarding how experience – and, with it, activity, affectivity, and meaning – develops. By answering some of the big (or hard) conundrums of philosophy, Johnson provides us with an answer to the question: How does the aesthetic provide the foundation for meaning and thought?

Aesthetics comes from the Greek word “aisthesis” and Aristotle used it to refer to sense experience. Dorthe Jørgensen, in her comprehensive work on the history of aesthetic ideas (see for instance Jørgensen 2003), divides the history of aesthetics into two broad streams: one concerned with processes of sensing, the other with art. Johnson is concerned with both and shows how they are continuous with each other. Aesthetics, Johnson argues, is about how we acquire meaning in a world of sensing that forms understanding: “*All meaningful experience is aesthetic experience*” (AMT: 2). This is a profoundly powerful statement. It does not mean that all experiences are aesthetic, as *meaningful* experience is endowed with a “unifying, qualitative whole” (AMT: 214)². This was, Johnson stresses, Dewey's grand idea for aesthetics. Not all experience, he continues, has this characteristic, as most of the time experience is fragmented and not well defined – “slack”, in other words. But when experience is meaningful, it has the characteristic of being unified. Art, Johnson argues, is the epitome of such experience, because art has a unique capacity to express meaning that cannot be adequately captured by formal language.

² This is an important distinction today as there is a tendency to see all experience as sense experience, that is, meaningful experience. Within the enactivist tradition, sense-making is meaning-making, and when conscious, we are in a continuous process of sensing. The differentiation of experience into “unifying qualitative wholes” reveals that some experiences stand out in contrast to others. Not all experiences are meaningful.

Art is the consequence of intense activity manifesting “depth, intensity, focus” (AMT: 210); a rich variety of meaning related to the everyday. When art is meaningful it is because it relates to common experience.

Therefore, to single out aesthetic experience as unique experience is about the worst you can do, according to Johnson: “One of the biggest errors we can make in aesthetic theory is the fetishizing of ‘the aesthetic’, as if only certain very special kinds of experience are aesthetic. That road wrongly leads to the separation of art from life (as if ordinary living was not an aesthetic undertaking), and robs us of the means to explain the power of artworks to matter to us and to change us” (AMT: 240). What concerns me, however, is whether such a claim leads us to ignore important qualitative differences between art and other forms of activities, e.g. crafts. When artists give form to their work, this is (most of the time) a daunting, all-encompassing task. For example, psychologist Bjarne Sode Funch has shown in Funch (1997) how the artist often gives form to emotional life. When we experience these works, they give form to our emotions. We know from qualitative research that experiences with art can make your life meaningful in a new way. From a psychological point of view, it is unproblematic to state that aesthetic experience can be special, yet related to the everyday. Certainly, there is common ground to be found between meaning-making (Johnson’s aesthetic dimension) and art, but there are important qualitative differences too. I will not attempt to give a definition of art, but one characteristic is that it reveals new expression (and thereby new meaning). Without recognizing some special characteristics of art, are we not in danger of reducing the rich variety of meaning and experience? This risk is exemplified by Dewey, who even regarded “habits as art” (AMT: 37). What we regard as art is certainly not a unitary phenomenon; it is also, as Johnson stresses, steeped in morality, economics, and politics. But is it not, nevertheless, characterized by rather unique objects that may lead to qualitatively unique experiences?

The question then becomes: How can we maintain continuity without losing sight of difference? An answer can be found in Professor Johnsons own work. Transferring his thoughts on the concept of “property” to “aesthetics” means that aesthetics is not characterized by necessary and sufficient features: “Instead the concept is a vast radially structured category with a small number of central members or prototypical cases surrounded at various distances by noncentral members, according to principles of extension such as conceptual metaphor and metonymy” (AMT: 195). In this way, experiences can be related, yet qualitatively different.

Experiences with art can resemble other experiences, yet endow us with unique possibilities for affective meaning.

This reduction of difference in regards to art may resemble a reduction of difference with regard to subjectivity where “pragmatism denies mind/body dualism” (AMT: 45). Johnson also refers to a “non-dualist conception of experience” (e.g. AMT: 108). Since Descartes, this has been a necessary and important challenge, but the phenomenological fact remains that not all experience is expressed, and there is an experiential difference – or a duality – represented in the metaphors “inner” and “outer”. In other words, there is a necessary distinction revealed in “inner” and “outer”, and also in “body” and “mind”. We know today that the “inner” is constitutively dependent upon the “outer”, and that the body gives form to thought and has its own “*tacit cogito*” (see Merleau-Ponty 1945). How can we avoid the radical duality of Descartes and maintain a continuity between “inner” and “outer” without losing sight of their difference?

One of Professor Johnson’s solutions or goals is for cognitive science to adapt to the insights of pragmatism. Succeeding in this would indeed be a small revolution. Although he argues for a plurality of approaches and methods for science and philosophy (AMT: 112-3), he also claims that “cognitive neuroscience is now (and will remain into the distant future) the principle mode of insight into mind, thought, language, and values” (AMT: 114). Johnson enters into dialogue with second-generation cognitive neuroscience, which takes seriously the bodily aspects of thought, meaning, and reason. I would like to question whether this tradition, nonetheless, necessarily should be supplemented and challenged by the rich insights of phenomenological, psychodynamic, and cultural-historical analyses of subjectivity, which take seriously the flux and flow of “inner” and “outer”. Cognitive neuroscience is certainly dominant in academia today, but is it not, for instance, dependent on phenomenology to provide a clarification of the nature of the phenomena in question?

Continuing this line of thought, with reference to William James’s notions of “thought-feeling” and “feeling of thinking” (AMT: 105), Johnson argues that emotions and feelings are essential to all experience: “Emotions lie at the heart of our ability to grasp the meaning of any situation in which we find ourselves” (AMT: 20), and emotion is “at the heart of cognitive processes” (AMT: 21). In other words, he does not give priority to cognition as compared to affect. The priority of reason or cognition over affect is a remnant of the Enlightenment. Since Johnson has shown

us that language and metaphors matter, how should we rethink and re-name cognitive science?

These are only minor contentions or points for discussion, for at the heart of all these approaches and at the depth of all experience lies bodily, sensuous, and thereby aesthetic understanding, which reveals itself in language through metaphor. Professor Johnson has provided us with insight into the basis of all experience, which unites us beyond our philosophical, psychological, and scientific differences.

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Mark Johnson

Responses

I want to begin by expressing my gratitude to my commentators, for their willingness to read *Aesthetics of meaning and thought* and then provide constructive critical observations on my general philosophical orientation. I greatly appreciate their commitment of considerable time and energy, and their insightful comments have helped me better understand and articulate my own perspective. When astute readers raise concerns about something you've said, this can provide a much-needed occasion for recognizing lack of clarity in expression, confusion about one's own view, or downright error.

In courses I teach on the philosophy of John Dewey, I often begin with the warning that Dewey takes virtually every philosophical term (e.g., experience, nature, art, mind, thought, knowing, feeling, value) and reinter-

prets that term in the context of a radically non-dualistic and process-oriented account of mind, thought, and language. Consequently, terms like “experience” and “aesthetics” are used in ways that challenge our commonsense conceptions, and even mainstream philosophical conceptions. In my work, a primary example of this reinterpretation is my claim that “all meaningful experience is aesthetic experience” (Johnson 2018 [= AMT: 2]). Giovanni Matteucci is concerned that, in recognizing the central role of aesthetic elements in everyday experience, I may have failed to appreciate the possibility and importance of a distinctly “aesthetic experience”. Thus, he suggests 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” (AMT: x). He concludes, “I do not believe, indeed, that it is legitimate to argue that every experience as such should be characterized as aesthetic”.

Professor Matteucci and I are in general agreement, along Deweyan lines, that not everything we experience has an aesthetic character. The point here, as Tone Roald observes, is that much of what we call experience is slack, incoherent, underdeveloped, and not particularly meaningful. This so-called experience has to be distinguished from what happens when the materials and processes of life achieve a meaningful organization that marks that experience off from the more mundane lackluster occurrences that make up our ordinary undergoings and doings. Dewey called such an event “*an experience*”, to indicate its consummatory character. So, when, at the beginning of the book, I said that I would be arguing that “*all meaningful experience is aesthetic experience*”, the word “meaningful” is crucial, insofar as it indicates *an experience*. We call an experience “aesthetic” and we call certain objects “art” to mark them as exemplary instances where meanings are especially harmonized, intensified, and enriched. They reveal possible meanings of an object or event. These are not distinct “types” of experience, but rather represent a continuum of experiences ranging from barely coherent mundane happenings all the way up to celebrated enactments of meaning in the arts and sciences. So, I suspect that Professor Matteucci actually agrees that none of this requires the postulation of distinct types of experiences having unique ontological or epistemological characteristics, even though we can still speak of “aesthetic” experiences of enriched and heightened meaning that play a special role in our lives.

However, I take issue with Professor Matteucci’s interpretation of my position on two important points. The first is his claim that, in emphasizing

ing the primordial role of organism-environment interactions, I may have turned the “self” into an object and thereby simply reinforced the Cartesian mind-body dualism I am claiming to overthrow. He says “the radical mediation that should precede the reality of a Self and of a world is instead expressed [by Johnson] 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)”. Against this reading, I would simply point out that throughout the book I have argued that self and world are emergent patterns of experience, and not separate or separable entities of any sort. What we call the self is, indeed, an intermingling of habits of perception, thought, feeling, and responsive action, but it is never a static object, nor merely the sum of past experiences, insofar as it is always moving toward possibilities for future experiences.

Regarding this issue of the nature of selfhood, Professor Matteucci warns that the term “simulation semantics” might tend to reinforce the mistaken notion that there is a pre-given, fixed self that simulates observed perceptions and actions. To counteract this reading, I have interpreted simulation, not as copying, but instead as activating some of the same sensory, motor, and affective processes in reading or hearing a description of some experience as would operate in actually having that experience. Professor Matteucci correctly notes my insistence that poems and other artworks do not *re-present* pre-existing meanings, but rather *enact* possibilities of meaningful experience in a continuously unfolding process. He then asks whether this enactive view is best captured by the term “simulation”, a term that “does not seem to me entirely compatible with this performative enactment”. I agree with this important point. Let me therefore say that the “simulation semantics” of which I spoke, is not that of a fixed, pre-existing, self that then represents perceptions and actions; rather, it is an enactive growth of a self-in-process as it encounters the meaningful affordances available in its present context. I suspect that Professor Matteucci and I agree that what I’m calling simulation is an active, constituting, and ever-developing process through which the self is continuously re-made.

The second significant point of disagreement stems from Professor Matteucci’s insistence that my account of meaning-making is based solely on past experiences, and does not embrace the enactment of new possibilities for meaning and value. If this were true, it would be a most non-Deweyan and woefully inadequate account of experience. He says, “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*" [italics added]. He calls this a "regressive analysis of meaning". To the contrary, I had hoped it was evident that the meaning of a situation is just as much a matter of the possibilities for *future* meaningful experiences it affords, as it is a matter of past sedimented experiences. One of my recurrent mantras about the temporality of processes of meaning is that the meaning of an object or event is the experiences (past, present, and future) it affords a creature of a certain physical make-up, interacting with its social others, and projecting into possibilities for future experiences. So, I trust it is clear that, far from being a merely regressive (past oriented) process, human meaning-making is equally progressive, reaching out toward the future possibilities it can envision and enact. Art, I have claimed, is an exemplary instance of this temporal process of expanding and deepening meaning.

Tone Roald appreciates my expanded conception of aesthetics as pertaining to all dimensions of *meaningful* experience. Her opening paragraph is a clear, concise, and incisive summary of the structure of my argument: "He shows that aesthetics is the foundation of meaningful experience and that meaning is rooted in our bodily ways of being in the world. Meaning is experienced through sense 'patterns, images, concepts, qualities, emotions and feelings', which are the foundation for both subjectivity and intersubjectivity – in other words, the foundation of all experience. Aesthetics is that which reveals meaning, a meaning that is first and foremost bodily and sensate, but at the same time the foundation of law, morality, philosophy, thought, and reason". Tracing key implications of this embodied aesthetics, Professor Roald anticipates my response to Professor Matteucci's concern about over-generalizing the scope of the aesthetic. She observes that my central claim that all meaningful experience is aesthetic experience "does not mean that all experiences are aesthetic, as *meaningful* experience is endowed with a 'unifying, qualitative whole'. [...] [M]ost of the time experience is fragmented and not well defined – 'slack', in other words. But when experience is meaningful, it has the characteristic of being unified [...] and art is the epitome of such experience, because art has a unique capacity to express meaning that cannot be adequately captured by formal language".

Professor Roald is a world expert on the phenomenology of aesthetic experience, so her major concern with my view is whether it can do justice to those events in experience that we tend to mark off as especially

aesthetic. “What concerns me” she says, “is whether such a claim (that all meaningful experience is aesthetic experience) leads us to ignore important qualitative differences between art and other forms of activities, e.g., crafts. [...] When we experience these works, they give form to our emotions. We know from qualitative research that experiences with art can make your life meaningful in a new way” [parentheses added]. With this point, I completely agree. However, following Dewey, I am regarding the aesthetic dimensions of meaningful experience as forming a continuity that runs from “*an* experience” in daily life (i.e., one that is qualitatively unified and stands out as meaningful) up to those works of art that we value for their rich enactment of emotions, values, and possibilities for meaningful experience. So, I agree with Professor Roald that there is value in studying how we experience what we call “works of art” and heightened “aesthetic experiences”, just as long as we do not hypostatize such experiences into unique, discrete kinds. The phenomenological analyses she and her colleagues in Copenhagen are developing have an important role to play in gaining a deeper understanding of the pervasive workings of aesthetic dimensions in all aspects of our lives.

This brings us to an important methodological point. I have touted the importance of recent “second-generation” cognitive science in helping us understand the workings of aesthetics in meaningful experience. One reason for emphasizing the contributions of what I call *embodied cognitive science* is that the vast majority of our cognitive and affective processes operate unconsciously, and are not directly available to conscious introspection. Therefore, we need to employ all of the empirical methods of inquiry available to us, if we hope to understand the breadth and depths of human experience. We cannot rely only on introspective reflections. That said, there is nonetheless a significant role for just the kind of phenomenological analyses Professor Roald and her co-workers are exploring. I am suggesting that phenomenological reflection can provide only part of an adequate account, and it must be integrated with other empirical approaches from the various mind sciences that allow us to probe unconscious processes. Therefore, when Professor Roald ends by asking “whether this tradition (of second-generation [embodied] cognitive science), nonetheless, necessarily should be supplemented and challenged by the rich insights of phenomenological, psychodynamic, and cultural-historical analyses of subjectivity” I respond with a resounding “Yes!” [parenthesis added].

The need for a suitably rich and non-reductive phenomenology of aesthetic dimensions of experience is beautifully elaborated by Hallgjerd

Aksnes, a professor of musicology at the University of Oslo. Over the past two decades, she has explored what it means to have an embodied aesthetics – an aesthetics rooted in our sensory, motor, and affective engagement with our world. This entails that aesthetics cannot be, in its first instance, an intellectual conceptual enterprise. Instead, it must focus primarily on the perceptual, qualitative, emotional, feeling-based, and action-oriented dimensions of meaning. Consequently, Professor Aksnes drives home the necessity of starting with a phenomenological account of musical phenomena that is descriptively rich and nuanced, and thereby that has at least some chance of capturing the aesthetic workings of musical meaning, which can be gestured at, but never completely described in language. For, without a rich and thick description of musical experience, we would have no idea how to employ embodied cognitive science for the elucidation of musical processes. You have to circumscribe and describe musical events and experiences before you can explain how they work.

Musical experience is an enactment of qualities and emotional (and feeling) contours in a process of metaphorical musical motion. Therefore, a perceptive musical phenomenology can reconnect us to the power of the music to *move us* in our very core. So, picking up on my brief attempt to describe some of our experience as we see and hear Gene Kelly's famous *Singin' in the rain*, Professor Aksnes adds to and enriches my description, as indicative of what an embodied aesthetics would involve, and why it matters. In so doing, by further extending and deepening my account, she shows how an aesthetics of embodied meaning should proceed. Contrary to traditional aesthetic theory, we do not need an epistemology attempting to explain how music can achieve vaunted *cognitive status*; instead, we need an account of the simulative affective enactment of some of the musical forces, qualities, and contours of motion that make music so powerful and captivating for us. Why is it that most of us would trade a thousand philosophical or psychological essays on the pain of lost love, for one playing of the Beatles' *Yesterday*? It is because the Beatles enact the full felt sense of loss and anguish through the resources of musical timbre, melodic line, harmonies, and tempo. As Professor Aksnes illustrates, an embodied aesthetics has to immerse us in these enactive processes as best we can through the limited resources of conceptual language. In her own research on musical therapy, Professor Aksnes argues "that so-called *receptive* music therapy (i.e. music therapy that takes music listening as its point of departure) is not at all passively receptive, [...] but rather 'actively acting' ('aktivt handlende'), as we say in Norwegian – or *enactive*".

As a wonderful example of this power of music, Aksnes points to our musical outbursts in a time of global pandemic crisis: “Musical joy, like a smiling face, happy voice, and silly swooshing splash, is *contagious* – even more contagious than the Coronavirus! That is why people are rushing to their balconies all over the world to play with, and for, each other these days: to share empathetic humanity and contagious musical joy during the Coronavirus crisis”. As proof of the power of embodied aesthetic experience, one is almost tempted to add QED (i.e., that which was to be proved) after these sentences.

I very much appreciate Professor Aksnes’ insight that an aesthetics of the sort we are exploring here is itself an *art*. She points out that our phenomenological descriptions, when done well, are themselves poetry – not formal conceptual analyses, but artistic enactments of meaning. What better example could there be of how aesthetic considerations operate pervasively and profoundly at all levels of our experience, understanding, and reasoning, which is one of the central claims of my book.

The cultural realization of such an aesthetic undertaking provides an appropriate segue into Tom Alexander’s account of the cultural forms of meaning and symbolic interaction that develop in and through our body-based processes of meaning-making. Projects like mine, that focus mostly on the emergence of meaning in our sensory, motor, and affective processes, sometimes have a tendency to over-emphasize the embodied bases for meaning and thought, while not giving sufficient attention to the social and cultural dimensions of experience and cognition. In response, I have tried, over the past fifteen years (and especially in *The Meaning of the Body*), to be more attentive to the social construction of systems of meaning and value. Professor Alexander’s rich accounts of cultural meanings, in his lovely book *The human eros: eco-ontology and the aesthetics of existence*, provides a ground-map for exploring our definitive human need for meaning and value, as realized in our socio-cultural practices and institutions. In his commentary on my book, therefore, he focuses on how we can move from what might appear to be individual psychological processes and operations to large-scale cultural meanings and values.

I began my academic career working on the central role of conceptual metaphor in all aspects of conceptualization and reasoning, and so Alexander begins by observing how these systematic conventionalized metaphors are, in fact, repositories of shared cultural values and meanings that constitute habits that shape the way we experience, understand, think, and act. Alexander has a deep appreciation of the central role of imagination in human understanding and thought. He explains this new con-

ception of imagination as an expansive transformative process: “Imagination is the way human beings mean, the way we engage a qualitative, moving world in terms of its possibilities, as process, not a completed system of facts”. These cultural enactments of meaning are rooted in bodily-based image schemas that provide structure and direction for our developing processes of thinking and judging. The qualitative and imaginative dimensions of experience and understanding root our thinking and acting in our embodied, visceral engagement with our surroundings. There thus develops a continuity between our sensory and motor interface with our environment and our “higher” processes of meaning-making, conceptualization, and reasoning. All of these processes are aesthetic. “Aesthetics”, Alexander concludes, “is no longer a neglected corner of the project of epistemology, concerned with a special ‘attitude’ or limited to the themes of art and beauty and how judgments about them are possible. It now has central import as dealing with the creation of meaning and value in human existence” – processes that are at once embodied and socially shared.

Professor Alexander coined the term “the human eros” to indicate our human drive to experience meaning, value, and enhanced quality of life. We have both suggested that this erotic quest for meaning is a fundamentally aesthetic process that makes living a good life a profoundly artistic undertaking. Alexander summarizes: “The human eros seeks to create and sustain spiritual ecologies, cultural worlds within which we can encounter meanings and values and have a sense of who we are. All sorts of cultural practices and objects contain core cultural meanings that help refresh and strengthen the central tropes that define a group or an individual”.

Finally, just one further observation following on the heels of Professor Alexander’s cultural analysis. *The aesthetics of meaning and thought* is part of my attempt to show that aesthetics is the operative process underlying *all* forms of experience, understanding, and action. Because the commentators’ remarks are appearing in a journal of aesthetics, it is not surprising that their focus would center on works of art as exemplary of human meaning-making. However, if I am even roughly correct in seeing aesthetic dimensions *everywhere* in human cognitive activity, I would suggest that we need to explore the workings of these dimensions in areas traditionally regarded as exclusively cognitive and rational domains, such as science, philosophy, law, morality, and virtually any theoretical enterprise. That is why the bulk of the book is about just these practices and institutions, with their embodied aesthetic origins.