

The Pragmatist Aesthetics of William James

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*Although William James wrote no philosophical treatise on aesthetics, he can be seen as an important source for pragmatist aesthetics. This paper reconstructs James's aesthetic views from his diverse writings that demonstrate a keen regard for the arts and for the central, pervasive importance of the aesthetic dimension of experience, a dimension he saw as closely linked to the rational and practical. Special attention is given to his path-blazing *The Principles of Psychology* which precedes James's explicit pragmatist stage but contains all the most essential themes of pragmatist aesthetics that Dewey would later formulate with much greater detail and argumentation in *Art as Experience*. This paper elucidates James's treatment of these themes, argues for his influence on Dewey's aesthetics, and suggests how the Jamesian approach exemplifies a promising convergence of aesthetics with philosophy of mind.*

I

The project of pragmatist aesthetics, along with its origin, is closely identified with John Dewey's masterpiece *Art as Experience*, though he never in fact used the term pragmatism in that book (for reasons I elsewhere explain).¹ Neither of classical pragmatism's two prior patriarchs, C. S. Peirce and William James, wrote even the briefest treatise on aesthetics, though both affirmed the importance of the aesthetic dimension. If Peirce insisted on the immediate felt quality of experience (so crucial to aesthetics) as his first category of consciousness (or Firstness), he also urged the importance of aesthetics in the ethical realm, even going so far as 'making Ethics dependent upon Esthetics' and treating 'the morally good as a particular species of the esthetically good'.² Yet his remarks on aesthetics are very brief, and he confessed his knowledge of the field was extremely limited. Peirce's most important contribution to aesthetics is clearly through his semiotics, which had considerable impact on certain twentieth-century theories of interpretation.

William James, however, presents an altogether different case, and this paper aims to illustrate the aesthetic richness of his thinking. Of all the classical pragmatists, James clearly had the most extensive education in the arts. He also displays the most refined aesthetic sensibility, not least in the superior quality of his prose. James indeed initially sought an

1 See Richard Shusterman, 'Dewey's *Art as Experience*: The Psychological Background', *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 44(1) (2010), 26–43.

2 C. S. Peirce, 'The Three Normative Sciences', in N. Hauser *et al.* (ed.), *The Essential Peirce*, 2 vols (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), vol. 2, 201. For more on Peirce's aesthetics, see Richard Shusterman, 'Somaesthetics and C. S. Peirce', *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 23(1) (2009), 8–27.

artistic career, though not in literature. As a young man, he desperately wanted to be a painter, studying this art with intense devotion. Compelled by his father to pursue a career in science, James fell into a depressive state that repeatedly disrupted his college education and that emerged in an expanding array of troubling psychosomatic symptoms (back pains, eye-strain, headaches, and diverse expressions of nervous fatigue) that haunted him for much of his life.³

During his student years, the disappointed and ailing James sought to cure himself by visiting various health spas in Europe, where he took full advantage of the rich artistic culture available there, frequenting museums, theatre, and concerts. He thus could nourish his frustrated aesthetic drive as well as improve his physical condition, but not enough to succeed in laboratory science. Forced to settle for a degree in medicine, he regarded that profession with contempt and never practised it. After further European efforts to improve his psychosomatic health, he returned to Harvard in 1872 for a teaching position in physiology. While in Europe, James combined aesthetic self-cultivation with edification in European philosophy, notably exploring new directions in philosophy of mind that would eventually generate, along with his help, the modern science of experimental psychology. His first book, *The Principles of Psychology*, was an important milestone in this field and also established the direction of his philosophical career.⁴

James's ardent, abundant aesthetic education left, I believe, an indelible and extremely fruitful (but much neglected) imprint on his masterpiece of psychology. Although this massive two-volume book contains no sustained formulation of aesthetic theory (whether of aesthetic experience or of art), it richly deploys aesthetic ideas and artistic examples to clarify and defend his psychological theories. Besides showing this, my paper has a more radical thesis. Although *The Principles of Psychology* precedes James's explicit pragmatist stage, it provides a wealth of penetrating insights for pragmatist aesthetics and indeed contains all the most essential themes that Dewey later formulates with much greater detail and argumentation in *Art as Experience*.⁵

Dewey dedicated this book to Albert C. Barnes, claiming Barnes as the primary inspiration for his aesthetics; but he elsewhere praised James's *Principles of Psychology* as the only book that truly transformed the direction of this thought, freeing him from Hegelian idealism toward a more naturalistic, embodied understanding of mind.⁶ This Jamesian influence, I believe, also holds true for Dewey's aesthetics, which is largely based on philosophy of mind. Dewey's *Art as Experience*, we should recall, originated from a series of lectures he was invited to give at Harvard to honour William James. The book's seminal theory that aesthetic experience is essentially constituted by a nameless, unifying quality owes a great deal to James's theory of the unity of consciousness. Having argued this point in a prior

3 For more details on these aspects of James's life, see Howard Feinstein, *Becoming William James* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984).

4 William James, *The Principles of Psychology* [1890] (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), hereafter abbreviated as *PP*.

5 See John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987), hereafter abbreviated as *AE*.

6 See Jane Dewey, 'Biography of John Dewey', in P. Schilpp and L. Hahn (eds), *The Philosophy of John Dewey* (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1989), 23.

paper, I return to elaborate it here after illustrating diverse aspects of James's aesthetic thought and exploring how his *Principles of Psychology* express other key doctrines of pragmatist aesthetics.⁷

II

A good way to introduce James's aesthetics is by noting why he never wrote a treatise in this field. He believed that the general formulae, abstract principles, and verbal criteria that philosophical aesthetics offers simply cannot do justice to the nameless qualities that make aesthetic experience so powerful and that make works of art so different in value and in spirit even if these works can be described in similar terms.

The difference between the first- and second-best things in art absolutely seems to escape verbal definition—it is a matter of a hair, a shade, an inward quiver of some kind—yet what miles away in point of preciousness! Absolutely the same verbal formula applies to the supreme success and the thing that just misses it, and yet verbal formulas are all your aesthetics will give.

If discursive formulae fail to capture what is aesthetically essential, the ineffable 'je ne sais quaw' [*sic*] of quality, James concludes that 'no good will ever come to Art as such from the analytic study of Aesthetics, harm rather, if the abstractions could in any way be made the basis of practice'. Convinced pragmatically that 'imitation in the concrete is better for results than any amount of gabble in the abstract', he not only eschewed the project of formulating a systematic aesthetic theory but also mocked the pretensions of philosophers who did.⁸

German philosophers, renowned for their conceptual systematizations, were singled out for special ridicule. 'Why does the *Aesthetik* of every German philosopher appear to the artist like the abomination of desolation?' he asks rhetorically, while suggesting that the problem is the lifelessly abstract conceptualizations of its 'system of categories' and 'the gray monotony' of its 'universal' essences.⁹ If this seems like a swipe at Hegel's conceptualism in contrast to the particularism of Kant's aesthetic, James shows equal antipathy to the latter, invoking it to complain of academic philosophy's dull obfuscations and stultifying jargon. 'Think of the German literature of aesthetics, with the preposterousness of such an unaesthetic personage as Immanuel Kant enthroned in its centre!'¹⁰

Kant's emphasis on the particularity of aesthetic judgement (that defies conceptual definition and generalization) and its essential ground in feelings of pleasure or displeasure should indeed appeal strongly to James who also insists on the ineffable particularity and affective dimension of aesthetic value. Kant's treatment of aesthetics in terms of the

7 See Shusterman, 'Dewey's *Art as Experience*'.

8 William James, *The Correspondence of William James*, vol. 8 (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2000), 475–476.

9 William James, 'The Sentiment of Rationality', in *Collected Essays and Reviews* (London: Longmans, 1920), 122–123.

10 William James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, in Bruce Kuklick (ed.), *William James: Writings 1902–1910* (New York: Viking, 1987), 638.

complex, co-operative workings of human perception as grounded in our diverse mental and affective powers (of imagination, understanding, reflective judgement, and feeling) should also find sympathy in James, who likewise viewed aesthetics as primarily a perceptual matter based in human psychology.¹¹ Could James's apparent antipathy to Kant's aesthetics then be due to the sharp Kantian opposition of the aesthetic to the practical, while a pragmatist aesthetic would want to have them more closely connected and reconciled? This seems likely, but a proper understanding of James's thinking on such matters requires a closer look at the key pragmatist themes expressed in his diverse remarks on aesthetics, especially in his *Principles of Psychology*, but also elsewhere.

III

We should begin, however, by showing how James pragmatically uses examples from aesthetics and art to formulate and defend his theories in other philosophical fields. One of James's central arguments in epistemology, ontology, and philosophy of mind is that the world we perceive or experience is not a fixed, independent, immutable given but rather a product of human selection in which the selective process involves different levels and can be likened to artistic creation, especially because the criteria for selection are in large part aesthetic. At the lowest level, says James, 'our very senses themselves [are] but organs of selection' (*PP* 273) that create 'a world' by receiving only certain ranges of stimuli and shaping them into sensory sensations. Attention then further shapes our experienced world by selecting which sensations it will notice. But what, then, governs attention's selection? James follows Helmholtz in maintaining 'that we notice only those sensations which are signs to us of *things*'; and things James in turn defines as 'special groups of sensible qualities, which happen practically or aesthetically to interest us, to which we therefore give substantive names, and which we exalt to this exclusive status of independence and dignity' (*PP* 274). In other words, if attention selects a group of sensations worth noting from the larger group of sensations that our sense organs have selected, then our mind makes a further selection. 'It chooses certain of the sensations to represent the thing most truly, and considers the rest as its appearances, modified by the conditions of the moment' (*PP* 274).

Thus, James maintains 'the mind is at every stage a theatre of possibilities', creating 'mental products' by selecting, shaping, and combining 'data chosen' from the lower levels (*PP* 277). 'The mind, in short, works on the data it receives very much as a sculptor works on his block of stone . . . and the sculptor is alone to thank for having extricated this one' from the many other sculptural possibilities in that block of stone. 'Just so the world of each of us', James continues, 'howsoever different our several views of it may be, all lay embedded in the primordial chaos of sensations', from 'the mere *matter*' available to all.

11 I confess to having all too readily followed James (and Dewey) in being hypercritical of Kant, though my own pragmatist aesthetics shares with him (much more than with Hegel) an emphasis on pleasure, perception, and the experiential particularity of aesthetic reactions that cannot be reduced to the conceptual. See Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992). I owe this point to Hyijin Lee.

If this ‘black and jointless’ manifold of space and ‘swarming atoms’ is what ‘science calls the only real world’, James counters that ‘the world we feel and live in’ is instead ‘that which our ancestors and we, by slowly cumulative strokes of choice, have extricated out of this, like sculptors, by simply rejecting certain portions of the given stuff. . . . How different’, James concludes, must be the ‘[experienced] worlds . . . of ant, cuttle-fish, or crab!’ (PP 277)

Aesthetic examples from other arts are likewise deployed when James argues for the essential contextuality of sensory perception. ‘In the senses’, James explains, ‘an impression feels very differently according to what has preceded it; as one color succeeding another is modified by the contrast, silence sounds delicious after noise, and a note, when the scale is sung up, sounds unlike itself when the scale is sung down.’ In the same way, just as ‘the presence of certain lines in a figure changes the apparent form of the other lines, and as in music the whole aesthetic effect comes from the manner in which one set of sounds alters our feeling of another’, so all our perceptions depend on the contexts in which they are situated (PP 228).

Moreover, when James argues that the perception of felt time—its sense of haste, slowness, or rhythm of intervals—‘is a qualitative, not a quantitative judgment’, he highlights the point by describing it as ‘an aesthetic judgment, in fact’ (PP 583). In advocating his famous theory of emotion, James looks to the arts for evidence of ‘widespread bodily effects by a sort of immediate physical influence, antecedent to the arousal of an . . . emotional idea’, and claims:

In listening to poetry, drama, or heroic narrative, we are often surprised at the cutaneous shiver which like a sudden wave flows over us, and at the heart-swelling and the lachrymal effusion that unexpectedly catch us at intervals. In listening to music, the same is even more strikingly true.¹²

IV

I now turn from James’s use of aesthetic examples to his articulation of four key themes in pragmatist aesthetics, themes that resurface with Dewey in more explicit form and sustained argument.¹³

1. The first theme could be called somatic naturalism. Art and aesthetic experience are not otherworldly emanations from a divine ethereal Muse but rather embodied expressions of natural energies engaged in our living interaction with our natural and cultural contexts, but also mediated and refined through these contexts. That art and aesthetic experience are often self-consciously cultivated through the most sophisticated and intellectual cultural forms does not belie their roots in more basic somatic feelings, forms, and pleasures based on our evolutionary heritage. Our highest artistic expressions and most sublime aesthetic experiences, no matter how culturally mediated, are ultimately grounded (like our culture itself)

12 William James, ‘What Is an Emotion?’ *Mind*, 9 (1884), 188–205, quotation 196. This passage is repeated with only very minimal stylistic variations in PP 1072.

13 I individuate and discuss these four key themes in ‘Dewey’s *Art as Experience*’.

on underlying aesthetic dispositions that have evolved in conjunction with the biological and experiential development of our bodies and our brains (which, of course, are part of our bodies). Thus an ant, crab, or cuttlefish cannot have the aesthetic experience and aesthetic tastes that we do since their somatic make-up and basic instincts are very different to ours.

For James, aesthetic judgement is most fundamentally about perceptual feelings that give pleasure or displeasure, and all perceptual feelings are essentially somatic. Not only do they require bodily organs for sensing and bodily actions for attention, our perceptions also come ‘invariably’ with ‘some awareness’ of ‘our own bodily position, attitude, condition’ (PP 234–235). Our embodied perceptual feelings of pleasure are thus linked to somatic instincts and appetites that are shaped by our evolutionary and personal history. James’s somatic pragmatism, then, does not reject the appetitive from the aesthetic domain. There is continuity between more basic, appetitive pleasures and more abstract and refined forms. The sensuous pleasures of taste in food thus have an aesthetic character in essentially the same way as the formal harmonies of music. As James puts it: ‘Aesthetic principles are at bottom such axioms as that a note sounds good with its third and fifth, or that potatoes need salt’ (PP 1264).

Insisting that emotions are essentially bodily, James notes that much of art’s aesthetic appeal is due to the pleasing emotions it engenders through its wide-ranging excitement of ‘the bodily sounding board’ that the perception of beauty can produce: ‘A glow, a pang in the breast, a shudder, a fulness of the breathing, a flutter of the heart, a shiver down the back, a moistening of the eyes, . . . and a thousand unnamable symptoms besides, may be felt the moment the beauty *excites* us’ and fills us with pleasure (PP 1084). James calls these ‘secondary pleasures’ (PP 1083) because he recognizes a more subtle primary aesthetic emotion that does not rely on the reverberations of other body parts but only on the pleasure received through the specific teleceptors and the brain that grasp the artwork’s design: ‘[T]he pleasure given us by certain lines and masses, and combinations of colors and sounds, is an absolutely sensational experience, an optical or auricular feeling that is primary, and not due to the repercussion backwards of other sensations elsewhere consecutively aroused’ (PP 1082). Yet even an optical or auricular feeling is a bodily feeling, involving the body’s active attention. Moreover, James insists that in most cases, ‘this simple primary and immediate pleasure in certain pure sensations and harmonious combinations of them’ is considerably enriched by ‘added secondary pleasures; and in the practical enjoyment of works of art by the masses of mankind these secondary pleasures play a great part’ (PP 1083).

James is far from disdaining this enjoyment, which he links to romantic taste in contrast to classic taste that tends to see these secondary pleasures as gratuitous, distracting ornaments. His democratic pragmatist spirit is likewise far from disdaining the aesthetic needs of the masses, and he further insists that even very refined aesthetes include such secondary somatic enjoyment in their aesthetic appreciation, though they may be unaware of it.¹⁴ A philosopher of pluralistic continuities rather than exclusive, rigid dualisms, James affirms not only a continuum of taste between the extreme poles of romanticism and classicism in

14 James notes that ‘The more *classic* one’s taste is, however, the less relatively important are the secondary pleasures felt to be in comparison with those of the primary sensation as it comes in’ (PP 1083–1084).

which individuals can express their own aesthetic preferences, but also a continuum of aesthetic forms from the most simple to the most refined. This idea of a continuum, where the more primitive forms are not condemned or relegated to non-aesthetic status, expresses the pluralistic democratic theme of pragmatist aesthetics and its affirmation of popular art.

Before turning to this theme, I should note two further points about James's somatic naturalism. First, it includes a strong appreciation of the human body as muscular and dynamic. James would not 'be satisfied with a more delicate and intellectual type of beauty' that has no place for 'well-developed muscles' and physical fitness. He 'cannot believe that muscular vigor will ever be a superfluity' in our evolutionary future because somatic fitness provides one's 'indwelling soul' with experiential aesthetic 'satisfaction' of 'sanity, serenity, and cheerfulness'. Thus, 'quite apart from every consideration of its mechanical utility', it is 'an element of spiritual hygiene of supreme significance'.¹⁵ Second, James's aesthetic of evolutionary somatic naturalism is not a crude instrumentalism according to which our aesthetic drives, tastes, and artworks are direct, explicit adaptations in the struggle for survival. They are instead the complexly indirect results of other somatic adaptations that may have had survival value. Our basic aesthetic reactions, says James, are in this sense 'accidental' in origin though apparently 'permanent in us now'.

In fact, in an organism as complex as the nervous system there *must* be many such reactions, incidental to others evolved for utility's sake, but which would never themselves have been evolved independently, for any utility they might possess. Sea-sickness, the love of music, of the various intoxicants, nay, the entire aesthetic life of man, we shall have to trace to this accidental origin. (*PP* 1097)¹⁶

2. Affirming that our aesthetic pleasures and artistic drives are grounded in instincts of our somatic evolutionary heritage but also shaped by our sociocultural environment and personal experience, James recognizes a plurality of legitimate aesthetic satisfactions and artistic forms in which the more refined rest on the more primitive. Beyond the aesthetic harmony of salt with potatoes, he notes the instinctive aesthetic satisfactions of mimicry, which 'gives to both bystanders and mimic a peculiar kind of aesthetic pleasure' that underlies the appeal of dramatic art, whose appeal James also traces to the empowering pleasure of 'stretching one's personality' beyond its conventional limits (*PP* 1027–1028). James regards play as a basic impulse and a legitimate aesthetic form that is both grounded in 'the excitement yielded by certain [other] primitive instincts' and provides the basis for higher forms of play, including those that we regard as highest and ultimately accord the status of

15 William James, 'The Gospel of Relaxation', in *Talks to Teachers on Psychology and to Students on Some of Life's Ideals* (New York: Dover, 1962), 102–103. James's somaesthetic taste was equally devoted to clothing, and he once suggests that their aesthetic qualities count more for us than the body's. 'We so appropriate our clothes and identify ourselves with them that there are few of us who, if asked to choose between having a beautiful body clad in raiment perpetually shabby and unclean, and having an ugly and blemished form always spotlessly attired, would not hesitate a moment before making a decisive reply' (*PP* 280).

16 One might challenge James here by arguing that aesthetic pleasures themselves have some survival value because they make life worth living. Moreover, the communicative pleasures of art that James insists upon can also be seen as promoting survival by raising group consciousness, solidarity, and communicative skills.

fine art. James underlines the very broad and diverse ‘sort of human play into which higher aesthetic feelings enter’, referring ‘to that love of festivities, ceremonies, ordeals, etc., which seems to be universal in our species.’ (PP 1044–1045)

‘The lowest savages have their dances, more or less formally conducted. The various religions have their solemn rites and exercises, and civic and military power symbolize their grandeur by processions and celebrations of divers sorts. We have our operas and parties and masquerades’ (PP 1045). James notes that ‘An element common to all these ceremonial games, as they may be called, is the excitement of concerted action as one of an organized crowd. The same acts, performed with a crowd, seem to mean vastly more than when performed alone.’ We feel ‘a distinct stimulation at feeling our share in . . . collective life.’ (PP 1045)

Thus James, like Dewey, insists on the important social dimension of aesthetic experience and art’s communicative power, grounding it in basic social instincts that form ‘a primitive element of our nature’. James, moreover, cautions how the power of this collective aesthetic feeling has its stubbornly problematic expressions. ‘The formation of armies and the undertaking of military expeditions would be among its fruits’ (PP 1045); and he elsewhere explicitly argues that one of the prime reasons for resistance to the end of war is essentially

aesthetic, . . . [an] unwillingness to envisage a future in which army-life, with its many elements of charm shall be forever impossible, and in which the destinies of peoples shall nevermore be decided quickly, thrillingly, and tragically by force, but only gradually and insipidly by ‘evolution’.¹⁷

2b. The democratic pluralism of James’s aesthetics is combined with a distinct meliorism. First, James urges a meliorism of perception, the need to liberate ourselves from ‘a certain blindness’ we have concerning the tastes and feelings of ‘people different from ourselves’. To make this point, James invokes ‘a personal example’ of his own blindness to the rustic charm and homey meaning of some settlement clearings in the North Carolina woods that initially struck him as ‘hideous, a sort of ulcer, without a single element of artificial grace to make up for the loss of Nature’s beauty’ in the previously pristine forests, until he looked at it through the perspective of his local guide who appreciatively had such a dwelling for his home. More broadly, James notes, ‘we grow stone-blind and insensible to life’s more elementary and general goods and joys’, including the simple somaesthetic satisfactions of ‘seeing, smelling, tasting, sleeping, and daring and doing with one’s body’, and we need to emancipate ourselves from such blindness by heightened perception of the diverse possibilities of vital joy and meaning that surround us.¹⁸ Still more broadly, we need to develop a greater sensitivity to the aesthetic joys and moral ideals of other people different from us and whom we snobbishly

17 William James, ‘The Moral Equivalent of War’, in John McDermott (ed.) *The Writings of William James* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 666.

18 William James, ‘On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings’, in *Talks to Teachers*, 114–115, 126–127. This criticism of blindness is linked to the democratic thrust of James’s aesthetic. ‘We are trained to seek the choice, the rare, the exquisite exclusive, and to overlook the common. We are stuffed with abstract conceptions, and glib with verbalities and verbosity; and in the culture of these higher functions the peculiar sources of joy connected with our simpler functions often dry up’ (*ibid.*, 126).

regard as beneath us because of our entrenched ‘ancestral blindness’ or inherited ‘ancestral intolerances’. We need a ‘widening of vision’ to ‘wean us away from that spurious literary romanticism on which our wretched culture . . . is fed’. For beauty, nobility, and divinity lie ‘all about us, and culture is too hidebound to even suspect the fact’.¹⁹

This leads to a second dimension of James’s aesthetic meliorism. If our aesthetic pleasures and artistic forms are in large part evolutionary products of the world we inhabit and the experiences we have had, they are not, however, narrowly limited by that world and its established order of things. Although our perceptions and actions are guided by entrenched habits, although our tastes and pleasures are also shaped by habitual experiences (and resultant expectations) in our material and social worlds, what we seek to create and enjoy aesthetically through imagination and art are instead *better* worlds of experience. As James puts it,

although the elements [in works of art] are matters of experience, the peculiar forms of relation into which they are woven are incongruent with the order of passively received experience. The world of æsthetics and ethics is an ideal world, a Utopia, a world which the outer relations persist in contradicting, but which we as stubbornly persist in striving to make actual. (*PP* 1235)

James admits, of course, ‘that habitual arrangements may also become agreeable’ by the power of familiarity. ‘But’, he adds, ‘this agreeableness of the merely habitual is felt to be a mere ape and counterfeit’ of the superior harmonies and stimulations that aesthetic and ethical imagination can give us, and that we idealists can then try to actualize in the real world (*PP* 1235). As Emerson potently put it, ‘There is higher work for Art than the arts. . . . Nothing less than the creation of man and nature is its end.’²⁰

3. A key theme of pragmatist aesthetics is the continuity and combination of the aesthetic with the practical, a theme expressed in the integration of art and life, the recognition that bodily appetites and desires can also be aesthetic, and the appreciation of the functionality of art and aesthetic experience. If Kant defined the aesthetic by its opposition to the practical, the appetitive, and the merely agreeable in sensation, he also defined it by opposition to cognitive, conceptual judgements of truth. Kant’s tripartite division of the aesthetic from the practical and from conceptual truth is reflected (and symbolically reinforced) through his three famous critical masterpieces: *The Critique of Pure Reason*, *The Critique of Practical Reason*, and finally *The Critique of Judgment*, which treats the aesthetic. Thereafter the aesthetic has often been contrasted not only with the practical but also with the rational (and thus sometimes even portrayed as ‘reason’s absolute other’).²¹ In 1884, James initially deployed a similar tripartite distinction, at least for rhetorical purposes, to urge the study of emotions as a necessary complement to the study of ‘cognitive

19 William James, ‘What Makes a Life Significant?’, in *Talks to Teachers*, 135, 131.

20 Ralph Waldo Emerson, ‘Art’, in Brooks Atkinson (ed.), *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: The Modern Library, 2000), 280. Emerson also prefigured all the central themes of pragmatist aesthetics that Dewey later formulated systematically without acknowledging their Emersonian source. See Richard Shusterman, ‘Emerson’s Pragmatist Aesthetics’, *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, 207 (1999), 87–99.

21 See Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourses of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), 94; and Richard Shusterman, *Practicing Philosophy: Pragmatism and the Philosophical Life* (New York: Routledge, 1997), ch. 4.

and volitional performances' through the 'sensorial and motor centres' of the brain. For in contrast to 'the perceptive and volitional parts of the mind', James complains, 'the *aesthetic* sphere of the mind, its longings, its pleasures, and pains, and its emotions, have been . . . ignored'.²² But distinctions do not necessarily imply oppositions, and a key theme in the *Principles of Psychology* is the close co-ordination and overlap of the aesthetic with the rational and practical.

James argues that our knowledge and rational thinking rely most heavily on aesthetic and practical considerations. We have already noted his view that aesthetic selective shaping explains the transformation of sensations into perceptions and then of perceptions into things. But he goes further in affirming that aesthetic and practical factors are what determine for us the *real* properties of things. For instance, from among '*all the visual magnitudes of each known object we have selected one as the REAL one to think of and degraded all the others to serve as its signs*. This "real" magnitude', claims James, 'is determined by aesthetic and practical interests. It is that which we get when the object is at the distance most propitious for exact visual discrimination of its details' (PP 817). In the same way, '*when two sensorial sense-impressions, believed to come from the same object, differ, then THE ONE MOST INTERESTING, practically or æsthetically, Is JUDGED TO BE THE TRUE ONE*' (PP 818, italics and capitals in all the James quotes are in the original).²³ Thus, for example, 'The real color of a thing is that one color-sensation which it gives us when most favorably lighted for vision.' The case is similar, he continues, for 'its real size, its real shape, etc.—these are but optical sensations selected out of thousands of others, because they have aesthetic characteristics which appeal to our convenience or delight' (PP 934).

Although James typically gives equal mention to aesthetic and practical factors in determining what we take as the true properties of things and thus the objects of our knowledge, this last example implies the priority of the aesthetic because the practical—what will 'appeal to our convenience'—is explained in terms of 'aesthetic characteristics'. The point is that certain aesthetic qualities (e.g. clearness or vividness) are what render those sensory properties practical or convenient (and hence worth selecting) for our use in treating those things of which they are perceptual properties.

Beyond the cognitive question of the true properties of things, James also explains the whole practice of conceptual classifications as emerging from aesthetic gratification.

It is, for some unknown reason, a great æsthetic delight for the mind to break the order of experience, and class its materials in serial orders, proceeding from step to step of difference, and to contemplate untiringly the crossings and inoculations of the series among themselves. The first steps in most sciences are purely classificatory. (PP 1242)

Moreover, James argues, beyond this initial stage of classification, aesthetic factors continue to function in our choice of scientific theories. '*That theory will be most generally believed which, besides offering us objects able to account satisfactorily for our sensible experience, also offers*

22 James, 'What Is an Emotion?', 188.

23 More generally with respect to sensations, James claims 'the more practically important ones, the more permanent ones, and the more aesthetically apprehensible ones are selected from the mass, to be believed in most of all' (PP 934).

those which are most interesting, those which appeal most urgently to our aesthetic, emotional, and active needs.' (PP 940)

Thus, James continues, 'The two great aesthetic principles, of richness and of ease, dominate our intellectual as well as our sensuous life' (PP 943). What we want are theories that are 'rich, simple, and harmonious', which sounds like the classic definition of beauty as unity in variety. 'The richness', James argues, 'is got by including all the facts of sense in the scheme; the simplicity, by deducing them out of the smallest possible number of . . . primordial entities.' Simplicity provides the aesthetic sense of ease because it tends to make things clearer and more 'definite', while complexity strains our limited powers of attention and memory (PP 943–944). But we can once again see the aesthetic as underlying (or pervading) also practical considerations about choice of theory, since James describes the simplicity criterion in terms of the 'law of least effort', which (like simplicity) constitutes a powerfully practical consideration.

Far broader than most ordinary theories are the general philosophies through which we view the world. James here insists on the fundamental primacy of aesthetics for choice of theory, explaining (in his book *A Pluralistic Universe*) the different philosophical worldviews as expressing different 'tastes in language' or in personality. Agreeing with Hegel that philosophy's aim is to render the world less strange and 'make us more at home in it', James realized that different men feel at home in different ways with different visions of life, declaring 'it would be pitiful if [such] small aesthetic discords were to keep honest men asunder.'²⁴ Philosophy moreover arises, says James, from an essentially aesthetic drive of 'scientific curiosity' or 'metaphysical wonder' with which 'the practical. . . has probably nothing to do. . . The philosophic brain responds to an inconsistency or a gap in its knowledge, just as the musical brain responds to a discord in what it hears.' The urge and satisfactions of philosophical thinking are in this sense like 'many other aesthetic manifestations, sensitive and motor' (PP 1046).

If aesthetic factors thus underlie much of our rational thinking, even underpinning key practical interests on which our cognitive life also relies, then Jamesian pragmatism would have to reject a strict Kantian compartmentalization of the aesthetic as opposed to the practical. James, moreover, sometimes explains our positions on practical issues of ethics in terms of aesthetic factors. If war is one example, then cleanliness and chastity provide others. Finally, given the Jamesian view that all voluntary actions are implicitly guided by kinaesthetic ideas based on felt movement, then all practical actions, for him, would involve (at least implicit) aesthetic feelings of whether these actions are smoothly or effectively performed or instead frustrated. Smooth performance not only gives pleasure but also tends to improve the efficacy of the action, whose overall practical value thus also includes those helpful, pleasurable feelings. Here aesthetic and practical interests so closely blend or overlap that they certainly cannot be separated in actual experience, even if we can intellectually try to distinguish them thereafter.

24 *A Pluralistic Universe*, 634–635. Cf. 'A philosophy is the expression of a man's intimate character, and all definitions of the universe are but the deliberately adopted reactions of human characters upon it' (James, *ibid.*, 639). Different characters have different aesthetic tastes or needs, so that James can recognize how some philosophers would see 'formal or aesthetic superiorities of monism to dualism' (*ibid.*, 643), while others will instead follow the dualistic 'philosophical faith, bred like most faiths from an aesthetic demand' (PP 138).

For James, then, aesthetic experience is not confined to a pure, disembodied, compartmentalized, formal appreciation of fine art or natural beauty. It finds expression in a broad spectrum of life experiences that not only display prominent aesthetic interests (of richness, vividness, harmony, unity, and pleasures of perception and feeling) but that also can contain strong practical and cognitive interests. The very same experience, for James, could be cognitive, practical, and aesthetic; and we variously label it one or the other according to which aspect seems most dominant or pertinent, according to our current perspectives, purposes, and contexts.

4. That the aesthetic is continuous with the practical and cognitive and that all these different factors or interests can be integrated in the unity of experience points to the final key theme of pragmatist aesthetics I will consider here: the centrality of aesthetic experience and its unifying power of nameless quality. This theme lies at the heart of Dewey's aesthetics, which first put pragmatist aesthetics on the philosophical map, and which I believe is deeply indebted to James. In defining art as experience, Dewey sought to remind us that art's ultimate value lies not in a collection of physical objects that we identify as artworks, but instead in the absorbingly vital aesthetic experiences that engage and reward us through the creation and appreciation of those objects and other elements of our experience. Dewey followed James in placing experience at the core of his entire philosophical project, since this rich notion can unify many of the divisive dualisms that thwart our thinking and our lives.

Dewey identified the core of aesthetic experience in a unifying, nameless quality that resists conceptual description or explicit foregrounded reference because it instead forms the necessary unifying background for the foregrounding of what can be explicitly noticed, distinguished, and named in experience. This unifying quality is what integrates the vastly different elements that combine to form one coherent experience in our consciousness. Dewey thus argued that this qualitative core of aesthetic experience must be present and necessary to all coherent experience, for it is what brings the diverse experiential elements together in a coherent form. In advocating the pervasive importance of aesthetic experience and its unifying power and richness, Dewey essentially borrowed from James's arguments for the unity of consciousness. I close this paper by showing how, thus demonstrating another way that Jamesian psychology provides a crucial source for pragmatist aesthetics.

In his famous chapter 'The Stream of Thought', James argues that a person's stream of thought has no abrupt 'breaks in quality'. Rather, 'Within each personal consciousness, thought is sensibly continuous.' This is why James describes consciousness as a 'river' or a 'stream' rather than a 'chain' or 'train' that instead imply linkage of discrete 'bits' rather than a full merging that flows (PP 231, 233). James emphasizes this full merging by choosing to 'define "continuous" as that which is without breach, crack, or division' (PP 231), and Dewey echoes this (in his most famous chapter of *Art as Experience*, 'Having an Experience') by defining aesthetic experience as a smoothly continuous flow 'without seam and without unfilled blanks', a 'continuous merging' with 'no holes, mechanical junctions, and dead centers.' (AE 43)

In 'The Stream of Thought', James distinguishes between 'flights' and 'perchings' in the flow of consciousness in order to show that what might seem to be sharp breaks in this

stream are not really violations of its continuity but rather the product of a conceptual ‘confusion’ and ‘a superficial introspective view’ (PP 233, 234, 236). The confusion is mistaking the subjective thought in consciousness for the discrete object of that thought in the world. ‘A silence may be broken by a thunder-clap’, James explains, but this shock forms precisely part of our continuous stream of conscious experience as a transitional ‘state that passes straight over from the silence to the sound’. It ‘is no more a break in the *thought* than a joint in a bamboo is a break in the wood’ (PP 233–234). We overlook the continuity because we typically focus on the ‘perchings’ (the salient, distinctive resting places) in the stream of consciousness, while not noticing the many things that connect them in our consciousness, including the contextual transitions and relations between them that form the background of our experience. Our consciousness of the thunder thus ‘is not thunder *pure*, but thunder-breaking-upon-silence-and-contrasting-with-it’, and is ‘quite different from what it would be were the thunder a continuation of a previous thunder’. Our ‘*feeling* of the thunder is also a feeling of the silence as just gone’ (PP 234), and thus is continuous with that silence though also quite different. We normally overlook this fundamental continuity because we fixate on the two perchings (the silence and thunder) rather than the transitive feelings (or flights) that link them.

Yet, for James, every feeling or content of consciousness is far more complex than the substantive image or perching by which we name it. Rather it also includes a whole contextual penumbra of ‘transitive states’, ‘*feelings of tendency*’, ‘feelings of relation’, or ‘other unnamed states or qualities’ (PP 239–240) that though nameless and unnoticed constitute a vague halo of context that helps constitute the meaning and quality of what we experience. ‘Every definite image in the mind’, writes James,

is steeped and dyed in the free water that flows round it. With it goes the sense of its relations, near and remote, the dying echo of whence it came to us, the dawning sense of whither it is to lead. The significance, the value, of the image is all in this halo or penumbra that surrounds and escorts it. (PP 246)

This ‘halo of felt relations’, James continues, forms a ‘*psychic overtone*’ or ‘*fringe*’ whose felt quality essentially guides our consciousness, selecting and organizing the elements and focus of our thought so as to render them coherently unified in terms of their felt ‘sense of affinity’ to that quality. ‘Any thought the quality of whose fringe lets us feel ourselves “all right” [may be considered] . . . a relevant and appropriate portion of our train of ideas.’ (PP 247, 249, 250)

Dewey explicitly cites this Jamesian theory when explaining the integrated unity of the different phases of aesthetic experience as a continuity of successive ‘flights and perching’ (AE 62). He likewise borrows the Jamesian distinction between the discrete physical things we experience and the actual contents of consciousness in our experiential stream that instead are vague, continuous, and essentially shaped by an indefinite ‘qualitative background’, ‘an indefinite total setting’, ‘an enveloping, undefined whole’ (AE 197, 199) whose felt unity determines the direction of our conscious experience and the focal elements, parts, or objects into which we carve up that experience, even though the experience itself is a continuous, unified, flow. Thus, even if aesthetic experience stands out as ‘*an experience*’ because of its distinctive quality, Dewey likens it to ‘a river’ versus a pond because of its directional flow (AE 43).

James argues that we fail to notice the transitive elements of qualitative background since they 'have no names' (*PP* 243). Our words name only the particular substantive objects, elements, or perchings in our stream of consciousness, but not the complex, indefinite background into which these elements or perchings merge, nor the nameless qualities or feelings of tendency through which the specified elements are united and guided into a directional flow. In the same way, Dewey insists that in aesthetic experience 'no verbal symbols can do justice to [its] fullness and richness of thought',²⁵ and 'there is no name' to specify its immediate quality (*AE* 197). Its unifying quality cannot be described nor even be specifically pointed out, Dewey argues; for if it could be specifically named and specified, it would then lose its flowing structuring immediacy and would instead turn into a foregrounded object of reflection. In James's more colourful language, 'As a snow flake crystal caught in a warm hand is no longer a crystal but a drop', so trying to 'arrest' the immediate transitive qualities of flow would amount to really annihilating them (*PP* 237).

If James's theory of the unity of consciousness provides the formative model for Dewey's notion of aesthetic experience, was James himself aware of the aesthetic import of his psychological views? He surely was when discussing the vague qualitative penumbra of nameless feelings of tendency that guide our aesthetic experience. 'What', James asks, 'is that shadowy scheme of the "form" of an opera, play, or book, which remains in our mind and on which we pass judgment when the actual thing is done?' His answer is 'the halo of felt relations' that constitutes the '*psychic overtone...or fringe*' of our experience of that aesthetic object (*PP* 246-247, 249). This shadowy, nameless but immediately felt quality organizes the elements of consciousness, determines the direction of its experiential flow, and underlies the specific properties we later articulate in our verbal descriptions of the work and our judgements of it. Dewey's theory of the immediate quality of aesthetic experience fulfills the same unifying, organizing, and directing function, and he indeed extends it beyond the field of art into a transcendental argument that such immediately felt quality is necessary for all coherent thought, an argument clearly inspired by James's phenomenological account of the unity of consciousness.

Although Dewey's argument can be challenged,²⁶ the debt of his pragmatist aesthetics to James cannot. Their evolutionary pragmatist approach of continuity is important not only for insisting on the pervasiveness of the aesthetic dimension in experience, and thus reconciling the aesthetic with the somatic and appetitive as well as with the practical and rational, but it also helps integrate art with life by connecting (and respecting) both high and popular culture. Their pragmatist direction is, moreover, crucial for reconnecting aesthetics to philosophy of mind, redirecting it to questions of perception and practical performance that were central to Alexander Baumgarten's founding project of aesthetics as a science of sensory

25 See John Dewey, 'Qualitative Thought', in *John Dewey: The Later Works*, vol. 5 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), 250. This paper was published in 1930 when Dewey was preparing for his 1931 William James lecture series on aesthetics, having received the lecture invitation in 1929.

26 See Richard Shusterman, *Practicing Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1997), 163-166."

perception. While Baumgarten neglected the bodily basis of perception, James and Dewey both emphasized it, inspiring my project of somaesthetics,²⁷ a wide-ranging aesthetics of perception, presentation, and performance.²⁸

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27 For a detailed account of somaesthetics, see my *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics* (Cambridge: CUP, 2008).

28 This paper is based on my opening lecture at the conference “William James – Philosophie und Leben,” held in June 2011 at the William James Center of Potsdam University, Germany. I thank its director Logi Gunnarsson for his invitation.