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“Aesthetic Experience as the Phenomenology of Free Will”

The Aesthetic Experience of John Dewey is noted to be an important philosophical work that sets a comprehensive backdrop of art and more importantly, experiences. The underlying concepts and stipulations that Dewey invokes are also metaphysical in nature. Specifically, an aesthetic experience is a piece that can be viewed under the light of the free will v determinism debate. Examining it from this perspective will lead to conclude that the aesthetic experience fits in a compatibilist viewpoint of free will.

For Dewey, aesthetic experience is made of impulse, resistance, and satisfaction. Dewey believes that any experience is best reduced to the search of equilibrium between a person and their environment. When the environment imposes an imbalance, the person must act by necessity to establish equilibrium again. If one is thirsty, they by necessity go to drink. This concept is invoked by David Hume as necessity and liberty. Hume's final assertion is that no liberty can be acted if not out of necessity. He further categorizes the concept of liberty between the liberty of spontaneity and the liberty of indifference. The liberty of spontaneity is best understood as freedom acted without being coerced to do something. The opposite of this could be seen in the parent that desires meaningful time with their child and forces the child to be a part of the “moment”. Out of necessity imposed by the parent, the child has acted, but not in the spontaneous sense. Had the child also had the desire and decided to follow their own necessity, Hume would say that the child person acted in some spectrum of freedom. Dewey also believes that people cannot force an experience and have a meaningful one. One must

follow their impulse or emotion in a meaningful way. To dive deeper, this “meaningful way” is not fast paced, or distracted. It can’t lack the pervasive quality of an emotion throughout the whole formation of the experience. On the contrary there must be resistance and the emotion must be worked out till satisfaction. Dewey thinks the emotion becomes this guide that directs the experience till its finishing. Here we see the connection on the other extreme of having experiences. If one were to have a tantrum and quick release of bursting emotion, Dewey would not consider it aesthetic. This kind of experience for Hume are usually the violent passions that take control in a person leading them to act quickly and without deep connection. These violent passions are usually followed without resistance and are harder to reason since they so strongly control the person. Where Dewey and Hume agree then is in saying that all meaningful experiences stem from the types of passions one can reason. Without reasoning, Dewey could see both violent and calm passions as quick releases of emotion that are not worked out. Dewey sees that all impulse should be worked out through resistance in the same way that Hume sees all passion should be worked out by reason. For both men, the reason, and in consequence the product, is all still a slave to the passion/emotion.

A big condition in Dewey’s thought process is that when a person is met then with an impulse and resistance they in some sense must choose to follow it to fruition. Here lies some concepts that Frankfurt brings up. Frankfurt believes that all people in this sense are free. Unless coerced, each person chooses to be in the experience and follow the impulse. In agreement with Hume and Dewey, the choice is not fruitful with passions that are not reasonable. Frankfurt coins the acting out of easy to reason and harder to reason impulses as first order volitions and second order volitions. Those choices that are easier and in our nature are first order volitions. And because they are easier and in our nature they do not meet resistance. Dewey would claim then that all first order volitions are ordinary experiences. This is because any impulse that does not meet resistance is not formed over time but fleeting. The

second order volitions are “higher order” desires each person has. In this sense they are the desires to have other desires that cannot be classified as first order. Frankfurt believes that realizing these second order desires is evidence for free will. Interpreting this into Dewey’s work is claiming that to choose the aesthetic experience is to assert free will in Frankfurt’s sense. It is following the “road less traveled” even if it has resistance that evidence free will. It is not random or chancy but clearly reasoned by the individual.

Dewey’s main argument is that those who learn to live with the changes of the environment live a life that is more wholly. They experience their lives aesthetically and not ordinarily. If one were to see this in the light of free will and determinism; those who do not reason and fight the first order volitions will never change with the environment and always live by quick impulses. They live life with ordinary experiences. And this kind of life is one that is determined and never challenged. The aesthetic life on the other hand, although seemingly framed by the environment, challenges the first order and claims that choice is available to people even if the environment is out of their control. In other words, causal relationships stipulate that all events have a beginning and an end, and for Dewey, we choose the experience of events to be meaningful or not by choosing to follow a second order volition. If we do not have free will, no one can choose to live a happy life but is determined to never engage with the environment and world to fulfill aesthetic experiences.