

Biology of the Aesthetic Experience

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My purpose in this article, is to reflect upon our experience of aesthetics, and to look into the biological conditions that make such experience possible. I shall begin with a few words about why I have chosen this approach.

First of all, I shall speak as a scientist, not as a philosopher. Let me explain what I mean. I think that that which one wants to keep invariant or to conserve, determines what one allows to change in the different circumstances of life, and that the different theories that one may develop while explaining experience, differ precisely in that. Thus, I consider that the difference between a theory conceived as a scientific theory, and a theory conceived as a philosophical theory, lies in the difference between what the scientist and the philosopher want to conserve while making their respective theories. The scientist wants to conserve his or her attention on the experience that he or she wants to explain, as well as the operational coherences of all the experiential processes involved in the proposition and validation of the generative mechanism that will constitute the explanation. In this process, the scientist allows all principles and a priori notions to change while he or she moves in coherence with his or her experiences. At difference with the scientist, the philosopher wants to conserve principles as basic explanatory notions, or wants to secure certain results, while he or she develops the explanatory system that he or she thinks will do so. In this process the philosopher moves through the domain of his or her experiences accepting or rejecting one or another according to whether they allow or do not allow him or her to conserve or secure those principles or results. Accordingly, when I say that I am speaking as a scientist, I mean that what I shall say will be presented as part of a scientific theory of cognition, and not as part of a philosophical theory of it. So, I wish to make it clear that nothing that I shall say will be said in order to obtain certain results or to conserve some basic notions, but will be said as part of a scientific explanation of the experience of cognition, even if I do not develop all the arguments necessary to support every thing that I say. Let me now proceed.

We human beings are living systems. To say this is not a trivial reaffirmation of something that we all know if we are willing to accept the consequences of what it is entailed in being a living system. One of the consequences, is that we have to accept that we are structure determined systems; another consequence is that we have to accept that every thing that happens in us as human beings, happens in us in our living, and as a result of our living, even if what happens in us is an aesthetic, a spiritual, a mystical, or a rational experience; still another consequence, is that we have to accept that we are realized as human beings through our bodyhood even though we in fact exist as the kind of animals that we are in our relations. Now, allow me to explain and clarify what I mean, by saying a few things about our operation as observers of our own existence, about living systems as such about us as human beings, about our psychic existence, and then about aesthetic experiences and their participation in our human existence.

1. We as observers

2. We as living systems

3. Our nervous system

4. We as human beings

5. Our psychic existence

6. Aesthetic experience

Experiences are distinctions that an observer makes of his or her living as features of his or her living. Experiences as distinctions that an observer makes, then occur in conversations involving him or her in his or her emotioning in a dynamics of self observation, and different experiences correspond to different happenings of living in oneself that we live in different particular ways. In agreement with this condition, I claim that when we in our culture say that we have lived an aesthetic experience, what we say is that we have lived some particular circumstance of our living. Furthermore, according to all that I have already said, and explaining our aesthetic experiences as phenomena of our living, I claim that that which we connote in daily living as we refer to our aesthetic experiences, is a feature of our living in a manner of well being that arises as we find ourselves in coherence with some particular aspect of our domain of existence in the world that we bring about in our 'living, but which as such goes beyond that particular circumstance.

The distinction of an aesthetic experience takes place, then, as a reflexive commentary that we make on the harmony of our living in the world that we live, associated to the feeling of broad connectedness in that world, in a flow of living without contradictions that invites to a moment of pause. Moreover, the harmony with the world that one brings about in living has both external and internal dimensions that are lived as broad external and internal harmonies in the dynamics of living in all the dimensions of that world as a psychic space. I shall call the well being that we may distinguish associated with living in that external and internal harmony, natural well being. The well being proper to the aesthetic experience is part of this natural well being. Indeed, I think that a human life lived in the natural well being as I have defined it, is a human life lived in total aesthetics in the many dimensions of living. Yet, I also wish to add that as we look at daily life, we can see that the natural well being may be lost in some of the many dimensions of living, either in a transitory manner that ends with the development of a new manner of living with a new form of well being, or permanently in a manner that makes life impossible. and as this happens, the aesthetic experience is lost in those dimensions of living in which the harmony in living is lost. Conflicting opinions, conflicting emotions. conflicting desires, destroy the coherence of the flow of living, and bring forth the experience of ugliness.

As we human beings exist in conversations, we live that which we connote when speaking of aesthetic experiences in all the dimensions of our human living as this takes place in the human psychic space, including awareness. Human aesthetic experience, therefore, has the multidimensionality of the human life. But, there is something more. As our human aesthetic

experiences arise as distinctions that we make in conversations, the distinctions that we make in the domain of our aesthetic experiences partake of our reflections on them, and we can understand that what is involved in them is the multidimensionality of our operational coherences in our living in our domain of existence. Moreover, as we live our reflections on our aesthetic experiences and we distinguish different classes in them, we become aware that there are different manners of looking that reveal different dimension in our aesthetic experiences. I call the manner of looking that reveals the coherences of existence through grasping them even if the observer cannot describe them, the poetic look. At the same time I am implying that the normal well being of which I spoke above, takes place as we live in the poetic look, and becomes interfered with when through a dynamics of coincidence of emotions, we make part of our living ,some emotions that bring forth contradictory domains of actions. When this happens, our life loses its aesthetic coherence and becomes fragmented in a dynamics of suffering.

7. Human existence

We presently live a fragmented life that treats some experiences such as the aesthetic experience as something special and we are blind to its biological fundamentals. Normal life is in natural well being. It is only animals like us who exist in conversations who can have what I have called aesthetic experiences, but the aspects of living that are distinguished in the distinction of the aesthetic experience occur as pan of mere living. It is when the coherences of the relations of an organism and its medium are interfered with, that the fundamentals for what we distinguish when we distinguish an aesthetic experience become distorted, and we experience ugliness. A desert is beautiful, but a land that has become polluted, deforested, or damaged ecologically is not beautiful, is ugly, breaks our well being as it pushes us into an area of our psychic space that destroys. the harmony of the coherences of our living. This, of course, does not contradict the fact that in different cultures we live different aesthetic domains as different domains of relational coherences of living, and different domains of ugliness as different domains of contradictory emotionings that lead to contradictory actions. Most dimensions of the human psychic space are learned as we learn our emotioning and our doing, and as most dimensions of the psychic space are learned, the domain of relational; coherences proper to the culture to which one belongs is on the most learned too, and. constitutes the domain in which we live our aesthetic experiences and learn the psychic space in which we live them.

8. Final remarks

Every living being exists in a psychic space. This is a daring statement. Why not just say: Every living being exists in a relational space? I use the expression psychic space because I want to emphasize three things. namely: the invisible dimensions of the relational space as well as its extension in all aspects of the manner of living of the organism; that human beings differ from other living beings only in the many dimensions of their relational space which is fully centered in conversations and that nothing in what we call the human psyche is in fact outside the ordinary. If I were to make the statement in the reverse, saying, every living being exist in a relational space, no doubt I would be asked about the elusive character of the human psyche as if this belonged to a different phenomenal domain, and in answering that I would come to what I say above.

Yet, in saying that every living being exists in a psychic space, I am saying also that the experiences that we call mental, or psychic, or spiritual, arise in us as reflexive distinctions in language of our emotional involvement with different aspects of our biological dynamic congruence with our domain of existence. But, as I say what I say, I also insist in that the biological dynamic congruence with the domain of existence which is the biological fundament for the distinction of those experiences, is proper to all living beings as a condition of their existence as such. Indeed, it is not rare to observe that other animals exhibit some behaviours which remind us of our own psychic or mental experiences. One which reminds me of our aesthetic experience, is the well being that animals show as they relate with their domain of existence, and that appears some times as an actual contemplation of the landscape. But there is more. The fact that what we enjoy as natural beauty is precisely the comfortable coherence with each other that living beings exhibit when their conditions of existence have not been disturbed, shows that we pertain to the same constitutive domain of biological congruence as they do, as is to be expected since we are members of the same biosphere. I consider that the natural biological manner of living is constitutively aesthetic and effortless, and that we have become culturally blind to this condition. In this blindness we have made of beauty a commodity, creating ugliness in all dimensions of our living, and through that ugliness, more blindness in the loss of our capacity to see, to hear, to smell, to touch and to understand, the interconnectedness of the biosphere to which we belong. We have transformed aesthetics into an, health into medicine science into technology, human beings into public... and in this way we have lost the poetic look that permitted us to live our daily life as an aesthetic experience. Finally, in that loss, wisdom is lost. Which is the cure? The creation of the desire to live again, as a natural feature of our biosphere, the effortlessness of a multidimensional human living in a daily life of aesthetic experiences.