Deweyan experiences and the aesthetics of remembering

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Abstract

My goal in this paper is to argue that some cases of autobiographical remembering can be, and sometimes are, experienced aesthetically. Building on a Deweyan approach to the nature of aesthetic experiences, I show how Dewey conceived of aesthetic experiences as having a cumulative and progressive structure—I call experiences with such structure *Deweyan experiences*—and how that structure is replicated in some cases of autobiographical remembering in virtue of their having narrative structure. I also discuss the relationship between remembering and other forms of narrative thinking and argue that not only it is easier for remembering to be experienced aesthetically, but also that only remembering can have the cumulative and progressive structure that characterizes Deweyan experiences. I conclude by showing how the Deweyan approach allows us to conceive of the aesthetic value of remembering in terms of the pleasurable or hedonic character of Deweyan experiences.

Keywords

Remembering; Aesthetic experience; Dewey; Narrative

1. Introduction

In *Art as Experience* (1934/1980), John Dewey offered what is arguably the most influential pragmatist account of the nature of aesthetic experience. Despite its prominence, Dewey's account was the subject of heavy criticism, which made it fall out of fashion in aesthetic

theorizing in the second half of the twentieth century.[1] More recently, however, there has been a revival of interest in Deweyan aesthetics, which is illustrated by various attempts to develop elements of Dewey's approach to theorize about issues concerning the nature of everyday aesthetics (e.g., Puolakka, 2014, 2015, 2017; Luque Moya, 2019; Leddy, 2021), somaesthetics (Shusterman, 2000, 2012), and even more traditional questions concerning aesthetic experience in relation to the objects of the fine arts (e.g., Goldman, 2013; Puolakka, 2019).

A crucial feature of Dewey's account of aesthetic experience, and one that has been at the core of the revival of interest in his work, is the idea that aesthetic experiences are not restricted to the objects of the fine arts. According to Dewey, the widespread idea, both in philosophy and in culture more generally, that there is a distinction to be made between the experiences we have when we engage with artworks, on the one hand, and those that we have when we engage with everyday or ordinary objects, on the other hand, does not reflect a difference in the nature of those experiences, but is merely an artefact of contingent sociopolitical factors. In particular, Dewey thought that this separation was motivated by nationalist and capitalist tendencies that established the museum as the bona fide home of artworks, and, consequently, as the exclusive domain in public and intellectual life that is dedicated to aesthetic development and appreciation (1930/1980, 8-10). However, once the contingent nature of this separation is brought to the fore, and, as I will discuss in more detail in Section 2, the intimate relationship between aesthetic and ordinary experience is made evident, it becomes clear that the domain of aesthetics is much broader than traditionally conceived. Even mundane activities, such as cooking or cleaning one's living room, can, on Dewey's account, be experienced aesthetically.

[1] For a comprehensive overview of critical reactions to Dewey's project in aesthetics, see Leddy & Puolakka (2021, Sect. 3).

This way of thinking about aesthetic experiences has, therefore, prompted developments in the field of *everyday aesthetics* that are inspired by Dewey's approach.[2] In one such development, Puolakka (2017) has argued that conversations can be experienced aesthetically. Since, for Dewey, what matters in characterizing aesthetic experiences is not the nature of their objects, but rather the fact that those experiences have a cumulative and progressive structure, conversations can, according to Puolakka, be experienced aesthetically in virtue of replicating that structure. While it is not my goal in this paper to embark on a discussion of conversations, the basic approach developed by Puolakka offers a promising framework for investigating whether there are other types of activities that could also be characterized in aesthetic terms. In other words, we can ask whether there are other activities that replicate the cumulative and progressive structure that Dewey thought was characteristic of aesthetic experience.

Prompted by this question, my goal in this paper is to argue that some cases of remembering can be, and sometimes are, experienced aesthetically in virtue of having a cumulative and progressive structure. I build on this account to show how thinking of remembering in aesthetic terms points to a new way of theorizing about the value of remembering. The plan for the paper is as follows. Section 2 offers a more detailed discussion of Dewey's approach to aesthetics, focusing on his account of aesthetic experience or on what I will call *Deweyan experiences*. Section 3 offers an account of how and under what conditions remembering can be, and sometimes is, experienced aesthetically. More specifically, I argue that remembering can have a cumulative and progressive structure in virtue of having narrative structure. Section 4 examines the relationship between remembering and other forms of narrative thinking, highlighting key differences between narrative thinking in remembering and imagining. I argue that those differences explain not only why it is easier for remembering to be experienced

[2] For attempts to theorize about everyday aesthetics from a Deweyan perspective, see Puolakka (2014, 2015, 2017), Luque Moya (2019), and Leddy (2021).

aesthetically, but also why only remembering can have the cumulative and progressive structure that characterizes Deweyan experiences. Section 5 considers issues pertaining to the aesthetic value of remembering and argues that a promising way to conceive of it is in terms of the pleasurable or hedonic character of aesthetic remembering.

2. Dewey on aesthetic experience[3]

In the third chapter of *Art as Experience* (1930/1980), Dewey offers what is his most extensive discussion of the nature of aesthetic experience. As Leddy and Puolakka (2021) point out, although Dewey never offered a definition or a straightforward statement of what aesthetic experiences are meant to be, there are a few recurring elements in his discussion that allow us to get a better grasp on how he intended this notion to be understood.

As a starting point, one feature of Dewey's account that is worth emphasizing, and one that helps situate it in the context of his overall philosophical project, is that it is a *naturalist* account at its core. According to Dewey, there is a deep continuity between the so-called ordinary and aesthetic experiences in that both are fundamentally results of the *interaction* between organisms and environments. Such interaction is, for Dewey, characterized by multiple moments of *tensions* and *resolutions* caused by the constant shift in the relationship of equilibrium between organisms and environments. Crucially, these tensions occur because the environment is experienced by the organism as a source of *resistance* to its efforts to engage with it. To briefly illustrate the point, consider the case of a hungry organism. Since obtaining food is often a costly activity, the environment acts as a source of resistance to the organism's efforts to survive. This creates a tension in the

[3] My discussion of Dewey's view on aesthetic experiences in this section is indebted to recent work by Kalle Puolakka on the subject. For discussion of how a Deweyan approach can shed light on a variety of issues in contemporary aesthetics, such as the nature of everyday aesthetics, the aesthetic appreciation of literature, and the aesthetic of conversations, see Puolakka (2014, 2015, 2017, 2019).

organism's relationship with the environment, which motivates the organism to deploy strategies to obtain food. If successful in its endeavors, the organism will resolve the initial tension caused by hunger and the equilibrium between it and the environment will be restored. For Dewey, this basic structure of ordinary experience, in which there are multiple phases of tensions and resolutions in the relationship between organisms and the environment over time, is replicated in aesthetic experience, but in a "clarified" and "intensified" manner (1930/1980, 46). What makes aesthetic experience stand out is, more precisely, the fact that the tensions and resolutions that are inherent to it are experienced in a structured way over time—that is, they are experienced as cumulative movements toward a culmination point that summarizes the multiple phases of the experience. In moving forward, I will call this the *cumulative and progressive structure* of aesthetic experience.

Since experiences of artworks are paradigmatic examples of such experiences, we can turn to them for an illustration. Consider the appreciation of musical works. Because those works have different phases, our experience of them is characterized by different phases that extend over time. More importantly, we do not just experience those phases in succession to one another, but rather as cumulative movements toward a culmination point. The experience is cumulative in that each phase not only builds on elements of previous phases, but also involves expectations about what the next phases will be like. For instance, a calm sequence of melodies might lead us to expect a gentle progression in the next stages. However, suppose that we are instead met with a sudden, intense burst of dissonance. This resitance offered by the musical work creates a tension in our attempt to engage with it, which is to be resolved in the subsequent phases. As we move through the phases of the musical work, we start to see how the intensity and calmness of its multiple phases are interconnected, thus contributing to a richer, more nuanced appreciation of the piece. There is, to put it differently, a a culmination point to the experience that summarizes and synthesizes the phases that preceded it.

Although Dewey does not deny that experiences of artworks are paradigmatic examples of aesthetic experience, the contrast category to aesthetic experience is not, on his view, the category of experiences whose objects are not artworks, but rather the category of experiences that he calls "inchoate" or "anesthetic". Those are, to be more precise, experiences that lack the cumulative and progressive structure that makes aesthetic experience stand out. As Puolakka (2014, 14) explains, "the material of [inchoate or anesthetic] experience does not reach a fulfillment. Things follow each other, but the different points of the experience in no way build on earlier phases of the experience or develop them". Importantly, these experiences are inchoate or anesthetic not in virtue of some intrinsic feature to them—as discussed above, Dewey thought that there is a deep continuity between aesthetic experience and experience in general—but rather in virtue of the various contingencies that are inherent to an organism's interaction with its environment, such as internal or external distractions that disrupt the flow of experience before it can reach its culmination point or that deviate our focus from its cumulative and progressive structure (1930/1980, 35). Some commentators have, for this reason, suggested that factors such as *attention* or *mindfulness* play a crucial role in bringing about experiences that have a cumulative and progressive structure (Leddy, 2021, 46; Luque, Moya 2019, 142).

The fact that aesthetic experiences are characterized by their cumulative and progressive structure brings into relief another important feature of Dewey's account. This is the idea that the *material*, the *subject matter*, or the *object* of aesthetic experience is not essential to explaining what makes it distinctive. As Dewey notes, even the most ordinary of experiences, such as cooking or having a conversation with a friend (Puolakka, 2014, 2017), can be experienced aesthetically as long as it has a cumulative and progressive structure. Moreover, it should be noted that although interaction with the environment is essential in Dewey's account, that interaction need not be with concrete objects. This is made evident in Dewey's discussion of experiences of thinking as having

an aesthetic character (1930/1980, 37). Experiences of thinking, Dewey notes, involve a cumulative and progressive movement from premises to conclusion, the latter of which serves as the culmination point for those experiences. What makes them distinctive is, therefore, not their material or subject matter, but rather the fact that they possess "internal integration and fulfillment reached through ordered and organized movement" (1930/1980, 38).

This does not mean, of course, that the materials of aesthetic experiences are not relevant to how they are experienced. This is what arguably makes artworks particularly suitable to generating those experiences—that is, their material or subject matter is crafted in such a way that it facilitates the elicitation of experiences with a cumulative and progressive structure. As Dewey notes, "[t]he real work of an artist is to build up an experience that is coherent in perception while moving with constant change in its development" (1930/1980, 51). So, although the materials of aesthetic experiences are not essential to explaining their aesthetic character, they constitute important enabling conditions in bringing about those experiences.

In summary, there are three aspects of Dewey's account that are worth highlighting for my purposes. The first is that what makes aesthetic experiences distinctive is their cumulative and progressive structure, which is possible due to our interactions with the world being characterized by experiences of resistance. The second is that a certain way of attending to those experiences is crucial to explaining how they can have a cumulative and progressive structure. Finally, the third is that while the material or subject matter of aesthetic experiences is not essential to explaining their distinctive character, it contributes in important ways to bringing about experiences with a cumulative and progressive structure.

Before I move on to consider whether remembering can be an aesthetic experience, I should address a potential concern regarding my reliance on Dewey's account to conceive of aesthetic experiences. The concern relates to the fact that there are many

competing accounts of aesthetic experience on offer in the literature, but no argument or motivation is offered in support of Dewey's account.

There are two reasons that explain the focus on Dewey's account. The first is that, despite there being different accounts of aesthetic experience on offer in the literature,[4] there is relatively little agreement on what the main features of those experiences are and on how we should account for their nature. This makes it particularly difficult to find a non-controversial set of assumptions or ideas from where to start. The second is that many of the existing views have attempted to account for aesthetic experiences by focusing on the experiences we have in relation to artworks, a consequence of which is that they have ignored or overlooked how other, non-artistic domains, could also promote aesthetic engagement. Since, however, the project I am engaged in is, to borrow a term from Shusterman (1997), a "transformational" one—that is, one that aims to transform the notion of aesthetic experience by widening the scope of what falls in the domain of aesthetics—the Deweyan approach offers a particularly attractive option to get that project off the ground.

In addition, we need not see the Deweyan approach as being in competition with existing approaches. It might well be that there is no unified category of aesthetic experience, such that a unified account of its nature can be given. In that respect, a more promising approach for theorizing in aesthetics might be to focus on the *experience* in aesthetic experience—that is, on the subjective experiences we enjoy in aesthetic contexts—and to offer an account of their phenomenological character and psychological bases.[5] On this way of thinking, the task of transformational projects would be that of determining whether one or more of those experiences can happen in contexts that are not traditionally considered to be aesthetic—for instance, contexts in which we engage in conversation or remembering. We can, therefore, think of aesthetic experiences (as

[4] For recent surveys of those accounts, see Matravers (2012) and Peacocke (2023).
[5] For an approach along these lines, see Nanay (2016).

characterized by Dewey) as just one type among potentially different types of experiences that can happen in aesthetic contexts. So, although it is not my goal to engage in conceptual analysis, one helpful way to view my proposal here is as saying that having a cumulative and progressive structure is a *sufficient*—but not necessary—condition for an experience to count as aesthetic. Whether there are other sufficient conditions, and whether any of those are also necessary, is an open question that, as pointed out before, has prompted the development of several but often incompatible approaches to the nature of aesthetic experience.

To avoid confusion in that respect, and also to highlight the non-exclusionary character of my approach, from now on I will use the term *Deweyan experiences* to refer to aesthetic experiences of a Deweyan kind—namely, those that have a cumulative and progressive structure. With these clarificatory remarks in mind, I will now argue that some occurrences of remembering can be, and sometimes are, Deweyan experiences.

3. Deweyan experiences in remembering

To motivate the claim that some occurrences of remembering can be, and sometimes are Deweyan experiences, we first need to get clear on what is meant by 'remembering'. In what follows, I will understand remembering in terms of what is sometimes called *autobiographical* remembering, that is, the type of remembering that concerns events or periods in a person's past. A crucial feature of autobiographical remembering, and the one I shall argue makes it possible for it to be experienced aesthetically, is the fact that it has *narrative structure* (Nelson, 1993; Reese, 2002; Rubin, 2006; Fivush, 2011; Keven, 2016; Hutto & Myin, 2017).[6] In moving forward, I will rely on an influential account of narrative

[6] One question here concerns the relationship between autobiographical remembering and what is sometimes called *episodic* remembering. Although both notions are prominent in philosophical and psychological research, not much conceptual work has been done to clarify their relationship, which makes it difficult to offer a noncontroversial answer to this question. For my purposes in this paper, I will take episodic memory to be the kind of memory that is exclusively dedicated to remembering individual events

structure developed by Goldie (2012) to characterize this notion. As it will become clear in due course, this account is fitting in that it makes it explicit how remembering can involve the tensions and resolutions that make it possible for it to have a cumulative and progressive structure.

According to Goldie (2012), narratives are characterized by three elements. First, they involve an *ordered presentation* of events, which is typically given by the representation of causal relations among those events, but not necessarily so (2012, 16; see also Velleman, 2003; Currie, 2006). Second, narratives involve *attempts to make sense* of the events narrated from different perspectives. Goldie distinguishes between two such perspectives. On the one hand, a narrative may involve attempts to make sense of one or more of its elements from the perspective of a character that is *internal* to the narrative. For instance, a narrative telling the story of how a car accident happened may involve a description of why one of the drivers—a character internal to the narrative—thought it was a good idea to drive home even after having had more than his fair share of drinks. On the other hand, a narrative may involve attempts to make sense of one or more of its elements from the perspective of a character that is *external* to it. For instance, the person telling the story of the car accident above—the narrator—may offer a different perspective on the driver's decision to drive home—e.g., they may judge that action as foolish and irresponsible. These perspectives can, therefore, come apart. Third, and finally, narratives have *emotional* and *evaluative import*. This element is closely related to the second in that it concerns the different evaluations made, and/or emotional reactions expressed, from the internal and external perspectives of the narrative.

One crucial feature of narratives, as Goldie (2012) conceives of them, is that they are not necessarily public. Narratives may also happen internally and be instantiated by

and autobiographical memory to be the kind of memory that is dedicated to remembering events or periods in a narrative format. (See Fivush (2011, 562-3) for a similar approach, although her focus is on autonoetic consciousness, which, for her, is explained by the narrative structure of autobiographical remembering).

thoughts. *Narrative thinking*, as Goldie (2012, 3) refers to this process, is very common in our mental lives. Autobiographical remembering is, as a matter of fact, a common way in which we engage in narrative thinking. That is, acts of autobiographical remembering involve an ordered presentation of events in which there are attempts to make sense of the narrative from different perspectives. The internal perspective is that of our past selves and/or that of other people represented in our memories. The external perspective is that of our present selves as narrators of the relevant events. Moreover, autobiographical remembering very often has evaluative and emotional content. Importantly, such content is not restricted to past mental states, but also to current states that are prompted by the act of remembering itself. Similar to narratives in general, autobiographical remembering may also be characterized by discrepancies in attempts to make sense of the narrative from internal and external perspectives. For instance, the drunk driver from the example above may remember on the following day how it seemed to him like a good idea to drive back home after having had more than his fair share of drinks, but feel shame and regret when he looks back at this event through his memory.

The fact that autobiographical remembering has narrative structure allows us to see how it *can be* a Deweyan experience. As discussed in Section 2, what makes Deweyan experiences distinctive is their cumulative and progressive structure—that is, they are composed of multiple phases that unfold over time and that move in a cumulative way toward a culmination point. Crucially, this structure is made possible by the fact that our interactions with the world are characterized by an experience of resistance that promotes tensions that can later be resolved. The first feature of narratives discussed above—that they involve an ordered presentation of events—makes it clear that autobiographical remembering is a temporal process with multiple phases. Insofar as the cumulative and progressive structure of Deweyan experiences is concerned, my suggestion is that some occurrences of autobiographical remembering can have that structure in virtue of involving attempts to make sense of the narrative from different perspectives.

More specifically, the suggestion is that because such perspectives can, and often do, come apart, they can create tensions in remembered narratives that can be resolved in their subsequent phases. But not only that, these tensions result from a resistance experienced by remembering subjects between their past perspectives on a remembered event and their attempts to engage with that same event from their current perspectives in the act of remembering. This experience of resistance is possible because remembering is responsive to how the past actual world was. In other words, remembered perspectives are experienced as *having been the case*, and, consequently, as aspects of the past world that *cannot be changed by us*. The content of remembering is not, therefore, responsive to our minds—in other words, it is not something that is under our control (Robins 2023; Sant'Anna 2023). So, when our past perspectives—which are not responsive to our present minds—and our current perspectives—which are, at least to some extent, responsive to our present minds—are contrasted in the same act of remembering, the former can impose themselves on the latter and *resist* current attempts to engage with the event in the act of remembering. It is in this sense, then, that remembering can replicate the experience of resistance that is crucial to Deweyan experiences: it is resistance offered by our past perspective on an event to our current attempt to engage with it.

Now that we have established that remembering *can be* a Deweyan experience, let us consider whether it *is* sometimes a Deweyan experience. To make this point, I will focus on two cases that exemplify ordinary occurrences of remembering that are Deweyan experiences. Consider, first, the case of a person who remembers his decision to change careers:

> **(Career Change)**
>
> Imagine the case of Bruno, who remembers his decision to change careers several years ago. Bruno starts by vividly remembering the period leading up to the decision. He recalls the dissatisfaction and lack of fulfillment he felt in his previous job. From the perspective of his past self, Bruno recalls feeling trapped and desperate for change. He remembers the excitement and optimism he felt when

> considering a new career path. His past self viewed this decision as a necessary step towards personal and professional growth. However, as Bruno engages more deeply with his memory, he encounters resistance resulting from diverging perspectives on his decision to change careers. From his present perspective, Bruno sees the career change differently, for the new career has not turned out as expected, leading to feelings of regret and doubt. In particular, the present self questions the past self's optimism and whether the decision was truly the right one. This leads Bruno to remember various other events related to his decision to change careers. He remembers the support and encouragement he received from family and friends during the career transition, which highlights the value of those relationships regardless of the career outcome. He remembers the various achievements and milestones reached in the new career, which, even if his overall experience in the new career is not positive, emphasize his resilience and capacity for growth. He also remembers the interesting people he met in his new job and the new places he got to visit in his professional travels, things that he only now realizes would not have been possible in his old profession. As Bruno entertains all these different memories, he develops a novel and more nuanced perspective on his decision to change careers. It now becomes clear that the reality of his new career did not match the optimism and enthusiasm of his past self, and that perhaps he should have been more careful in his transition. But he also realizes that if it were not for that optimism and enthusiasm, he might not have made the switch, which would have made it impossible for him to have had many of the experiences that he now values. While he still has doubts about the purely professional dimension of his decision, Bruno now comes to the understanding that the decision also brought many valued things to his life, and that at least in this sense it was the right decision to make.

Career Change offers a nice illustration of an act of remembering that is a Deweyan experience. Bruno's memory is characterized by a tension generated by the representation of diverging past and present perspectives on his decision to change careers. This tension is then resolved as the act of remembering progresses and focuses on events that resulted from his decision. As Bruno remembers things that were made possible by his decision to change of careers, he develops a more nuanced perspective of that decision that cannot be reduced to either his past perspective or his present perspective on it. Rather, this new perspective reconciles the opposing past and present perspectives and does so by synthesizing elements of the various situations or events

represented in Bruno's act of remembering. Bruno's act of remembering does, in this sense, replicate the cumulative and progressive structure of Deweyan experiences.

Consider, second, a case of a person who remembers the period of her life when she was a college student:

> **(College Life)**
>
> Imagine the case of Olivia, who remembers the period of her life when she was a college student. Her present perspective on this life period is very positive. She recalls the excitement of campus life, the joy of learning, and the friendships she formed. She remembers her life as a college student as a transformative period that led to personal growth, lifelong friendships, and a sense of achievement. However, as she engages more closely with her memory, she comes in contact with her past perspective on that period of life, which was not at all positive. She now remembers feeling overwhelmed by academic pressures, lonely for being away from home, and uncertain about her future. The past self's negative and distressed view of college life resists the the present self's positive and nostalgic outlook. This creates a tension in Olivia's memory. As Olivia progressively considers the various negative elements represented from the perspective of her past self, she starts to build a more nuanced understanding of her college years. She acknowledges the existence and importance of her past self's negative feelings while integrating the present self's reflections on the positive aspects. Each phase of her act of remembering adds layers of insight and emotional depth to her memory of that period of life. In the end, Olivia comes to appreciate her college years as a multifaceted experience that was both challenging and rewarding, leading to a more realistic and neutral perspective on this life period.

College Life also illustrates how remembering is sometimes a Deweyan experience. Similar to Bruno's memory in Career Change, Olivia's memory is characterized by a tension generated by the representation of diverging past and present perspectives on the period of her life in which she was a college student. This tension is then resolved as the act of remembering progresses and focuses on events from that period of life that had been overlooked or underplayed from her present perspective. As Olivia remembers the hardships that she had to endure during her time in college, she develops a more nuanced perspective on that period of life that cannot be reduced to either her past perspective or

her present perspective on it. Rather, this new perspective reconciles the opposing past and present perspectives and does so by synthesizing elements of the various situations or events represented in Olivia's act of remembering. Like in Bruno's case, Olivia's act of remembering also replicates the cumulative and progressive structure of Deweyan experiences.

One thing to note in terms of comparison between the two examples is that the culmination point that synthesizes the diverging perspectives need not always be positive in terms of its affective character, nor does it need to maximize the positive character of an act of remembering that started as such. While this is indeed what happens in Career Change—i.e., the new perspective formed by Bruno does add positive elements to his initial negative present perspective on his decision to change careers—College Life offers a contrast case in which the new perspective developed by the subject is not as positive as the one initially displayed by the present self's perspective—i.e., after remembering the hardships she endured in college, Olivia forms a more realistic and neutral perspective on that period of her life. I will come back to this point in Section 5, but what this contrast highlights is the fact that, to the extent to which we enjoy or take pleasure in having Deweyan experiences in remembering, this enjoyment or pleasure cannot be fully explained in terms of our becoming aware (or 're-living') past affective states that were enjoyable or pleasurable.

Now, if the goal here is to establish that remembering sometimes *is* a Deweyan experience, then it is crucial that the examples reflect how we actually remember the past in daily life. Both Career Change and College Life are, in this respect, normal and ordinary occurrences of remembering. In other words, it is very common for us to remember events or periods of our lives in which our past and present perspectives on those events conflict with one another in the way described by the examples. Moreover, we frequently engage with those memories by contrasting those perspectives and by

trying to reconcile them, even if this is not something that we do intentionally or consciously. On many occasions, autobiographical remembering is infused with questions such as: What has changed between then and now? Why was I so naïve to think that this idea would work? How did I fail to realize that this meeting was a good opportunity? or How could I know that such a small change would have so many important consequences? These and other similar questions put past and present perspectives in sharp contrast to one another by highlighting different epistemic and affective points of view on the same event, and hence they create tensions that call for resolutions. Of course, it is not always the case that those tensions will be resolved,[7] but when they are resolved, and when that is done by synthesizing different aspects of an act of remembering in the way exemplified by Career Change and College Life, they will result in Deweyan experiences. So, far from being some far-fetched theoretical possibility, aesthetic remembering—or occurrences remembering of remembering that are Deweyan experiences—is an important part of our mental lives that has so far been overlooked in philosophical theorizing.[8]

4. The relationship between remembering and other forms of narrative thinking

I have just argued that some occurrences remembering can, in virtue of having narrative structure, replicate the cumulative and progressive structure that is characteristic of Deweyan experiences. One important question that arises is why the focus on remembering here, as opposed to narrative thinking more generally. One might argue,

[7] Section 4 offers a more detailed discussion of this point.

[8] One interesting question is why we do not talk of those experiences as being 'aesthetic' in character. Unfortunately, I cannot discuss this question in detail in the context of this paper, but this is not a necessarily a problem from a Deweyan perspective. Dewey's approach, and also my own approach in this paper, is, to use a term from Shusterman (1997), a "transformational" one—that is, one that aims to transform the notion of aesthetic experience by widening the scope of what falls in the domain of aesthetics. From this perspective, it is not surprising that things and practices that are not, on the face of it, regarded as 'aesthetic' will eventually be classified as such.

for instance, that other forms of narrative thinking, such as future-oriented or counterfactual narrative thinking, could also replicate the structure of Deweyan experiences. But if that is the case, then it is not obvious what it is that makes remembering distinctive to merit separate treatment.

This is an important question and answering it will allow us to get clear on key aspects of the relationship between remembering and narrative thinking. As a starting point, I should clarify that I am not committed to the claim that *all* occurrences of autobiographical remembering have a cumulative and progressive structure. My claim is, instead, that autobiographical remembering having narrative structure makes it *possible* for it to have cumulative and progressive structure. There are two main reasons for thinking that narrative structure is necessary but not sufficient for occurrences of remembering to be Deweyan experiences. The first is that not all occurrences of remembering with narrative structure will be experienced as cumulative progressions toward culmination points. This is because a certain level of attentional and working memory resources must be dedicated to the narrative structure of an act of remembering for it to be experienced in a cumulative and progressive way. For instance, a narrative may involve various tensions and resolutions and may have reached an end point that could in principle summarize its previous phases. However, because one may be distracted or may have just forgotten about the previous phases of the narrative, one will not be able to effectively experience that end point as a culmination point.

The second reason is that even if an occurrence of remembering with narrative structure is experienced as progressing cumulatively toward a culmination point, this does not guarantee that it will reach its culmination point. Acts of remembering with narrative structure can be interrupted by extraneous factors, such as environmental distractions, and may not be resumed afterwards. So, in addition to narrative structure, how we attend to and engage with narratives in remembering plays a crucial role in determining the likelihood of its being experienced aesthetically. This is in line with the

second element of Dewey's account highlighted in Section 2—namely, that a certain way of attending to experiences is crucial to explaining how they can have a cumulative and progressive structure.

Building on these considerations, my suggestion is that a first feature that makes remembering a special form of narrative thinking is the fact that it is in general less cognitively demanding than other forms of narrative thinking. And because it is less cognitively demanding, remembering makes it easier for us to, first, focus our attention on the cumulative and progressive structure of our experiences, and second, to avoid distractions that could disrupt narrative thinking. This is not a trivial point, so to motivate it, we should look more closely into how narratives are constructed—that is, at what Goldie (2012), following Ricoeur (1990), calls the process of *emplotment* in narrative construction.

Emplotment, according to Goldie, is the process "by which a bare description of events […] can be transformed into a narrative, giving coherence, meaningfulness, and evaluative and emotional import to what is narrated" (2012, 9). More specifically,

> The process of emplotment involves *shaping*, *organizing*, and *colouring* the raw material [i.e., events, persons, actions, etc.] into a narrative structure. Shaping involves selecting raw material with the appropriate degree of richness, and shaping it in a way that is appropriate to the narrative. Organizing involves configuring the raw material into a narrative, with a beginning, middle, and end. And colouring (not a necessary ingredient of emplotment, perhaps, but a typical one) involves bestowing evaluative and emotional import to what might otherwise be a bare description of what happened. (2012, 11; emphasis in the original)

The claim I want to put forward here is that there are important differences in how emplotment happens in remembering and other forms of narrative thinking—for reasons of conciseness, I will refer to the latter as *imaginings* or *imagined narratives*.[9] More precisely,

[9] I should clarify that the account I develop in this section is restricted to cases of imagined narratives that are constructed by the subject as they engage in an act of imagining. The claims I make about imagining in this section are not, therefore, meant to apply to cases in which we engage with narratives in literary works by means of imagination. In those cases, the process of emplotment is not carried out by the subject, but rather by the work with which they are engaging.

these differences have to do with how much *explicit* or *conscious* intervention is demanded by the processes of shaping and coloring the narratives in those cases.

Let us consider shaping first. Engaging in remembered narratives requires considerably less effort in terms of conscious selection and shaping of the materials of the narrative. For instance, when I remember my tenth birthday party, the events that happened on that occasion, the people who were there, and the things they did are all determined by implicit or unconscious processes of information retrieval. Crucially, once that information reaches the level of consciousness, it is treated as information originating in the actual past that cannot be altered by conscious interventions.[10] Imagined narratives do, in contrast, typically involve explicit or conscious decisions about *which* information will be used and *how* that information will be used to narrate future or counterfactual scenarios. In imagining my next birthday party, I consciously intervene on the content of my imagining to determine various things about that scenario, such as who will be there, how they will be dressed, whether there will be dancing, and so on. This is not to say, of course, that there cannot be imagined narratives that involve very little in terms of conscious selecting and shaping, but only that those are much less common when compared to cases of remembering, which are typically like this.

Similar considerations, I submit, apply to the process of coloring the narrative. Much of the material that figures in remembered narratives include evaluative and emotional contents that were already present in—and hence likely preserved from—the original experiences. For that reason, much of the evaluative and emotional content that constitutes the internal perspective of the narrative is determined by implicit or unconscious retrieval processes. However, the same is not true of imagined narratives, or at least not typically so. The evaluative and emotional contents that figure in those

[10] As noted in Section 3, remembering is experienced as being responsive to the actual past world. See Robins (2023) and Sant'Anna (2023) for recent defenses of the claim that the content of remembering is not under our control.

representations are attributed to them by explicit or conscious decision processes that occur while we engage in imagining. That is, they typically involve explicit reasoning concerning, for instance, how likely we are to react—or would have reacted, in cases of counterfactual narratives—to certain situations based on similar past situations. Again, the point here is not that there cannot be imagined narratives that involve very little conscious coloring, but only that, when compared to remembering, imagining tends to be more active in this respect.

Now, these differences matter because they have a direct impact on how we experience remembered and imagined narratives. Because the process of emplotment in remembering is primarily unconscious, it affords less interruptions and distractions at the level of consciousness. This allows us to focus our attention on the elements of the narrative that matter to experiencing it aesthetically. Remember that, according to the account of Deweyan experiences discussed in Section 2, aesthetic experiences are characterized by tensions and resolutions that accumulate over time and that are summarized by a culmination point. In cases of remembering, these tensions and resolutions result from conflicting attempts to make sense of the narrative from internal and external perspectives. Awareness of tensions and resolutions is, for this reason, crucial for one to become aware of the cumulative and progressive structure of narratives and of their culmination points. Thus, by not requiring that our attention be focused on the process of emplotment, remembering makes it much easier for us to experience narratives aesthetically.

The second feature that renders remembering distinctive in comparison to other forms of narrative thinking is the fact that remembering replicates the experience of resistance that is essential to Deweyan experiences. As discussed in Section 3, the resistance we experience in remembering is a result of the imposition of past perspectives on an event on current attempts to engage with it. And this is made possible by the fact

that the content of remembering is not responsive to our minds—and hence is not under our control—but rather to the past actual world (see Section 2).

Imagining differs from remembering in this crucial aspect. While we may engage in acts of imagining whose contents can be held responsive to the world (Munro 2020), this responsiveness is either the result of deliberate conscious stipulation—e.g., one may stipulate that one's imagining at a certain moment will be responsive to how things were in the past, to how things are in the present, or to how things are likely to be in the future—or factors that, while not directly determined by conscious deliberative processes, could be changed by those processes without interfering with the nature of the imaginative act (Sant'Anna 2023). For instance, one may, while listening to a factual discussion of the Battle of Waterloo, engage in an imaginative act concerning this historical event and try to get things right with regard to how things were in the past. In this case, one does not deliberately engage in the imaginative act and the fact that the imagining is held responsive to an actual past event is simply determined by the context in which it takes place. However, one may deliberately interfere with this imagining and try to imagine how things would have been if some key facts concerning the Battle of Waterloo had been different. In this scenario, one changes the responsiveness of the imagining by consciously and deliberately intervening on it, but in doing so one does not interfere with the nature of the imaginative act—i.e., one continues to be engaged in imagining, but one's imagining is now responsive to a counterfactual event.

This stands in stark contrast to remembering. The fact that remembering is responsive to the actual past world is not something that we stipulate, but rather what defines remembering as such. This is made explicit by the fact that deliberately intervening on the responsiveness of an act of remembering immediately changes its nature. If one initially engages in an act of remembering a past event, but later represents how that event would have been like if some other things had been different, one ceases to remember and begins to imagine. Thus, imaginings cannot offer the experience of

resistance that characterizes Deweyan experiences because their contents are ultimately under our control. This, in turn, prevents them from being Deweyan experiences in the same way that remembering sometimes is such an experience.

To summarize, I argued that what makes remembering a special form of narrative thinking are the facts that it is in general less cognitively demanding than other forms of narrative thinking and that it replicates the experience of resistance that is essential to Deweyan experiences. This is in virtue of there being differences in the process of emplotment in remembered and imagined narratives and in how we exercise control over acts of remembering and imagining. These differences explain not only why it is easier for us to focus on the elements of the narrative that matter to experiencing it aesthetically—namely, its cumulative and progressive structure—but also why only remembering, but not other forms of narrative thinking, can be Deweyan experiences.

5. Deweyan experiences and the aesthetic value of remembering

If, as I have argued, remembering can be a Deweyan experience, then one natural implication of this view is that remembering can be—and perhaps should be—*valued* for its aesthetic character. However, that does not seem to reflect our practices around remembering. We do not, in other words, seem to engage in remembering for the sake of having experiences with aesthetic quality. One might thus argue that this speaks against the view that remembering sometimes is an aesthetic experience.

There are two different ways in which this challenge to the view can be understood. The first is as claiming that remembering cannot be valued aesthetically because it is always linked to some practical interest, such as finding out the truth about a subject matter or strengthening our psychological connection with our past selves. Aesthetic experience, in contrast, must involve a "disinterested attitude" (Stolnitz, 1960) or be valued for "its own sake" (Levinson, 1996; Scruton, 1982; Iseminger, 2003; Stecker,

2006), which is incompatible with the practical and psychological orientations of remembering.

Despite its influence in analytic aesthetics, the idea that aesthetic value is incompatible with other forms of valuing is not uncontroversial.[11] As a matter of fact, Dewey vehemently opposed the idea that the domain of aesthetics is detached from the domain of practical life. As noted in Section 2, the separation between the aesthetic and the ordinary or the practical is, for Dewey, a sociopolitical artefact that has no metaphysical counterpart. That is, Dewey thought that aesthetic experiences are continuous with ordinary experiences in that both have the same basic structure. What distinguishes them is only the fact that, in the former, we become aware of the basic structure of experience in an "amplified" and "clarified" manner. So, from a Deweyan perspective, there is no inconsistency in valuing an experience for its aesthetic *and* practical or psychological value.

When it comes to remembering practices centered around its aesthetic character, it should be noted that many occurrences of remembering of the type described in Section 3 occur in contexts where there is no clear practical or psychological interest involved. For instance, it is not uncommon for us to find ourselves remembering things from our past in contexts that bear no obvious relation to the contents entertained in the act of remembering, such as when we entertain memories of distant childhood events when lying in bed at night trying to sleep or while trying to relax by drinking a beer after a long day of work. Crucially, many of those memories have narrative structure in the sense specified above, and rather than contributing to what could plausibly be described as practical interests in those scenarios—e.g., our trying to sleep or relax—they are actually distractions from those interests. Despite this fact, we do not experience those memories as being detrimental to our interests or, more generally, as having a negative value. On

[11] See King (2022) for a recent overview of some of these controversies.

the contrary, we do sometimes enjoy or take pleasure in the activity of remembering in those scenarios. So, although this is not how we ordinarily talk about them, one plausible explanation of why we remember in those cases is that we have experiences with an aesthetic character—that is, Deweyan experiences. Of course, more needs to be said to fully motivate the claim that our practices in those cases are indeed centered around the aesthetic character of remembering, but if the considerations made here are on the right track, then cases in which we remember for "no apparent reason" are good candidates to fulfill that role.

The second way of understanding the initial challenge is as a more general criticism of the idea that Deweyan experiences have an aesthetic character that could be the subject of valuation. In particular, the concern here is that it is not obvious why we value (or should value) experiences that have the cumulative and progressive structure that is characteristic of Deweyan experiences.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to offer a full account of what makes Deweyan experiences valuable, but one promising approach is to conceive of their value in terms of the *pleasure* they promote. Aesthetic hedonism, or the view that aesthetic value has to do with its hedonic or pleasurable character, is a very influential view on the nature of aesthetic value.[12] While many hedonists have attempted to make sense of pleasure in terms of features possessed by (or attributed to) the objects of aesthetic appreciation—e.g., aesthetic properties, such as beauty—an alternative way to explain how we derive pleasure from those experiences is terms of the kind of mental activity that they promote.[13] One recent approach along these lines has been developed by Matthen (2017), according to whom aesthetic pleasure belongs to a more general category of pleasures

[12] Although see Lopes (2018) and Shelley (2019) for recent attempts to challenge hedonistic accounts of aesthetic value. See Van der Berg (2020) for an overview of those criticisms.

[13] For an informative discussion of the different views on the source of aesthetic pleasure, see Peacocke (2023).

that are responsible for "[motivating] the continuation of the activity that gives rise to them" (2017, 8). These are, to put it differently, pleasures that we take in *performing* certain activities—as opposed to the pleasure we take in the *outcomes* of those activities—such as drinking cool water after an exercise session, savoring a carefully prepared meal, reading philosophy, listening to music, and so on. For Matthen, aesthetic pleasure is, more precisely, the pleasure that we take in the mental activity of contemplating an object (2017, 16-17). While it is an open question whether, from a Deweyan perspective, the aesthetic mental activity could be characterized in terms of contemplation as defined by Matthen, Matthen's more general suggestion that the pleasure we derive from aesthetic experience is pleasure in an *activity* fits nicely with the Deweyan approach I have favored so far. To be more precise, it might be argued that what makes Deweyan experiences pleasurable—and hence what characterizes aesthetic pleasure in those cases—is the mental activity of cumulative and progressive resolution of tensions that makes those experiences stand out. Applied to remembering, the idea would thus be that what we value remembering for its aesthetic character because we take pleasure in the mental activity of cumulative and progressive resolution of tensions that is made possible by cases of remembering that have narrative structure.

To sum up, while questions concerning the relationship between remembering, Deweyan experiences, and aesthetic value deserve a more detailed treatment in future work, there are promising lines of inquiry that can be brought together to deal with concerns that arise when we begin thinking more seriously about that relationship.

6. Conclusion

My goal in this paper was to argue that some cases of autobiographical remembering can be, and sometimes are, experienced aesthetically in virtue of having a cumulative and progressive structure. Building on a Deweyan approach to the nature of aesthetic experiences, I argued that cases of autobiographical remembering that have narrative

structure can be, and sometimes are, Deweyan experiences—that is, they have a cumulative and progressive structure. I also discussed the relationship between remembering and other forms of narrative thinking and argued that not only it is easier for remembering to be experienced aesthetically, but also that only remembering can have the cumulative and progressive structure that characterizes Deweyan experiences. I concluded by suggesting that a promising way to conceive of the aesthetic value of remembering is in terms of the pleasurable or hedonic character of aesthetic remembering.

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