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William James: Exploring The Possibilities of an Aesthetic Theory

A Thesis Presented

by

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to

The Graduate School

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in

Philosophy

Stony Brook University

August 2007

Stony Brook University

The Graduate School

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Abstract of the Thesis

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2007

Through extensive background reading of writings by and about William James and his philosophy, a solid understanding of James' view of what it is to encounter an object was ascertained. With this perspective, Mikel Dufrenne's works are examined and a strong comparison of his judgment on encountering an aesthetic object is created. By applying James' understanding of the art-like way one perceives objects to Dufrenne's rarified views on how one experiences solely the aesthetic object in art, an interesting motivation becomes present; Dufrenne's perceptual theory is delimited from art objects to all objects when applying the Jamesian understanding of perception.

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Preface

It is with a cautious heart that this essayist begins this examination. First, John Dewey has already written an amazing work on aesthetics in the pragmatic tradition, from that important early pragmatist era, namely *Art as Experience*¹. As grand as that work is, William James and John Dewey are differing people in the same tradition and it is worthwhile to examine James for his own aesthetic views to see what fruit they bear. Second, William James never published a full aesthetic theory. However, there are remarks on art throughout his works and he continually points out how our aesthetic interests are vital to the human condition due to the manner in which individuals encounter and classify objects². It is this understanding upon which this paper hinges. Third, as with adding to or drawing opinions out of any philosophy, caution must be exercised not to overstep one's bounds or give an unfair treatment to that philosophy. Thus, this author will make every attempt to stick to the original author's published words and ideas. Fourth and finally, the intention of this paper is to till the fertile soil of James' philosophy to derive a general aesthetic theory while understanding this essay is not the full scope of a completed Jamesian aesthetic theory, but rather the foundations of one. This concern will not stop our inquiry into beginning such an examination for our purpose is to overcome this difficult task and discover useful origins for philosophical harvesting, digestion, and advancement.

William James: Exploring The Possibilities of an Aesthetic Theory

The purpose of this exposition is to carefully examine the works of William James and derive the rules for a general aesthetic theory in a Jamesian framework endogenously from his works. This exposition will cover an array of James' works by pulling specific textual evidence to draft guidelines for a possible Jamesian general aesthetic theory. This examination will specifically reflect upon the nature of truth in William James' philosophy³ as it applies generally to all objects and the implications that obtain for aesthetic objects. Moreover, it will examine aspects of William James' philosophy that shine light on the phenomenal qualities of truth-in-objects and the art-like characteristics of perception. This essay will draw upon comparisons to Mikel Dufrenne's work in the area of the phenomenology of aesthetic experience to elucidate and highlight James' own views. This exposition will examine the humanistic elements James requires of all theories, aesthetic or otherwise. It will look at the artistic world encounter in acquaintance with objects as well as the importance of free will. It will examine the self as an art object and analyze the status of the real in objects. It will conclude with a culmination of these requirements as rules for an aesthetic theory of art under James' philosophy.

¹ Dewey, John. *Art As Experience* 1934.

² This is explicitly mentioned in the discussion on *attention* as important to epistemology in *The Principles of Psychology* pp. 227.

³ For the purpose of simplicity this author will sometimes shorten this to "Jamesian" philosophy.

I. Overview

A summary of some of James' views will be useful here in order to set the stage, grab the overall metaphysical sense of life, and pull out some basic aesthetic criterion. For James, life is an aesthetic project, so his understanding of the operations of the world in which man functions and feels is important to understanding James.

The early William James, caught up in the philosophical naturalism of his time, and heavily influenced and impressed by Darwin's theories, rejected free will. Indeed, not so much as a "wobble of will" could escape physical laws⁴. Burdened by these deterministic feelings, James almost experienced full mental collapse. He found his way out, however, after reading Renouvier's second "Essais," choosing to believe in free will and consequently to become one of its strongest supporters in the history of philosophy⁵. This wagering-to-believe within James' philosophy is grounded in this gained freedom that James finds.

Truth

Also important is the fact that one aspect of truth for James is that truth is gained by wagering to believe⁶. An infant stands as a prime example for someone in a position of ignorance in regards to truth. Humans are all infants in regards to approaching a possible truth. The infant needs to believe that the truth will correspond to the belief ahead of time (and thus believe prior to action) to want to test out its belief in the world to see if it corresponds⁷. Human beings have a primacy of subjective demands that come with the human organism in dealing with the world.

Truth-making for James involves self-making. It involves putting oneself "out there" contra the other position: avoiding putting oneself "out there" to avoid error or "dupery"⁸. Just as in dealings with truth James requires a human face, James is constantly critical of any science that leaves out man and his human values, which would include aesthetics, being as it is a branch of the science of philosophy. Here one comes across an early requisite for a general aesthetic theory for James. It must be an explanation that includes a human explanation.

The reason for this stems from the fact that truth is a human affair because truth-making involves man's subjective self for James, his duties on what to believe, insofar as he has volitional control over his beliefs. Truth-making involves the human process of valuation. What values one has is a key ingredient to what truths you baptize for yourself as Truth. Truth is not just truth, it is also value.

In being selective about which truths become baptized as Truths, one can begin to see how the aesthetic interests of a man, for himself and his reality, begin to manifest in James' philosophy. Any science, aesthetic or otherwise, whenever it leaves out human activity blocks out aspects of truth (part of this is a justification for doing psychology) in

⁴ Kauber, Peter. "The Foundations of James' Ethics of Belief" *Ethics* Vol. 84. No2. (Jan. 1974), pp. 154-155.

⁵ Ibid. pp. 157.

⁶ Ibid. pp. 159.

⁷ Ibid. pp. 156-158.

⁸ James, William. *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* "The Will to Believe" Dover Publications: New York. 1956. pp. 17-22.

virtue of truth being “too rich and complete a thing to be reached by any method which fails to take all departments of human activity into account, the aspirational as well as the logical”⁹.

Humanism

The aesthetic point taken here is that all departments of human activity must be taken into account in a general aesthetic theory for James. In order to talk about art itself and to have a true theory, all facets of human artistic activity must fall under it. Thus, a theory of general art would be incomplete if it only explained human painting but not poetry, or art-like perception but not art-like attention¹⁰. This incompleteness does not ruin theories per se, but diminishes their explanatory power. They may still have something to valuable to add.

A further requisite is that the theory cannot be overly scholastic and must adhere to human experience. James criticizes in many places the overly academic philosophical accounts of reality that drop out the human context for the appearance of being scientific or putting on the mask of an absolute truth when the theory was generated by a human being for human purposes¹¹.

A truth, aesthetic or otherwise, must take into account what a human being is: an organism that discovers truths, turns them into Truths, coming out of the context of experiencing the world pre-theoretically as value. This can be seen very easily in James’ essay on Spencer’s Definition on the Mind as Correspondence. In the essay, the failure of Spencer’s account of mind, which is based on an evolutionary understanding of how the mind was formed to correspond to the world to aid the organism in its dealings, lacks full explanatory power because it is unable to explain adequately endeavors that fall outside survival that human beings engage in, such as the arts and ironically, philosophy¹².

Wilshire summarizes: “Minds are those of embodied beings, and they are in the world and act upon it: the world is knowable only insofar as it falls within their ideal and, in some degree, spontaneous projects. But we embodied minds find ever more and more meaning in the world than we can at any one time predict we will find, and we experience the world as that which exists independently of, and prior to, our projects”¹³.

Any science that does not encompass the human element becomes a nightmare. It puts man into a situation in which “we have powers but no motives” while in an ordinary nightmare “we have motives but no powers”¹⁴. An aesthetic theory needs to incorporate the human element because truth is the fate of thought, precisely human thought.

⁹ Bixler, Julius Seelye. “Mysticism and the Philosophy of William James” *International Journal of Ethics* Vol. 36, No. 1. (Oct., 1925), pp. 71-85.

¹⁰ This is a special word in James’ philosophy, not used idly here. Discussion found in *Principles of Psychology*.

¹¹ An easy example can be found in “Humanism and Truth” where William James writes: ...we condemn all noble, clean-cut, fixed, eternal, rational, temple-like systems of philosophy. pp 271 in Wilshire’s *William James: The Essential Writings*.

¹² Wilshire, Bruce W. “Spencer’s Definition of the Mind as Correspondence” *William James – The Essential Writings*. 1984.

¹³ Wilshire, Bruce W. “Introduction” *William James – The Essential Writings*. 1984. pp. xxi.

¹⁴ *Ibid*.

Further, an aesthetic philosophy will not be accepted that violates or does not give rise to our desires as humans. For a philosophy to fit into the project of man, to have cash value for him, to make an attempt to be universal for man, it must be both suitable to explain why men seek out and value specific beliefs, while at the same time saying which theories will not be acceptable (truth will not happen to them) if they are not True. James points out that the circumpressure of experience weeds out falsehoods in virtue of not corresponding to experience as it bears itself out. This should be found especially true in art as well, as the artist submits to thousands of implicit rules when unleashing himself upon the canvas. If certain rules are violated, the work of art fails.

In the Jamesian framework, even concepts, function as teleological instruments for humans. Concepts sort the world by the manner of consequences they produce for humans¹⁵. Humans come into the world making concepts in the way that human structures dictate and have the ability to modify them by choosing certain concepts and placing value on one more than another. This type of fashioning is sorting the world epistemically with an ethical component, namely, value. For choosing, or having a duty to choose, implies a choice between objects of value. Some choices are better than others. James is trying to actively preserve a natural scientific outlook on the world while maintaining the human system of values in both the religious sphere and the sphere of goodness and virtue.

Knowledge by Acquaintance

It should be noted that James does not think that all thought is intentional and that humans are conscious of their thinking all the time. James would agree that most of the time the human thought process is largely unreflective and unfocused. This is important to the aesthetic discussion because the aesthetic experience is largely unreflective and in some regards very passive¹⁶.

Thought is often inadequate to explain the conditions of the experience and essentially what is going on for two reasons. The first reason stems from the fact that objects experienced can always reveal more truth for us to discover. The concepts in our minds are always inadequate to the fullness of the reality of the object in experience. There is always more to an object. An art object can be returned to continually and have more taken from it.

The second reason is that experience is full and enriched and humans only sort out a portion of what is going on. The impact of experience can only be captured in part. Most of what occurs in any given experience lies outside conceptualization. Our concepts are too small for the largeness of the situation¹⁷.

This essentially brings in the need to explain the knowledge one does gain in experience that exists between first, what humans are too small to take in due to the limits of their cognitive machinery and second, what humans strictly conceptualize. This in-between is what is taken in vaguely without strict conceptualization that becomes a stepping stone to strict conceptualization. Such a phenomenon is explained with

¹⁵ Ibid. pp. xxv-xxvi.

¹⁶ Movie-watching is a particularly apt example here.

¹⁷ Art works that are sublime fall into this category.

knowledge by acquaintance¹⁸. Knowledge by acquaintance for James is “a wash of non-deliberate thought and experience, habitually and essentially vague and ill-defined, and out of which all deliberate thought takes rise”¹⁹. Also on real objects and conceptualization: “Moreover, there is always more to any real thing than any set of concepts has as yet revealed, and what will be revealed may correct our previous ideas of the thing”²⁰.

The importance to aesthetics here lies in the ability to return to a work. Although returning to a work of art object does not qualify us to correct our previous idea of the object. The subject will and has the ability to gain and encounter new ideas and experiences from an art work. There is always more to an object for James and art objects are intended to be noticed, being as they are spectacles.

Freedom

Willing is an artistic freedom for James because human organisms have ends they seek to gain, both consciously and unconsciously, which requires that the person must select certain aspects of the world to focus on while decentering others²¹. This choice is an aesthetic one being as the individual must look out at the world horizon and select which preferences to follow and bring forward while potentially abolishing others. If life is a grand artistic narrative, then life selections are chosen adventures.

Believing in this variety of freedom aids in the obviousness of freedom. Choosing to believe in freedom, for James, lays the fertile soil such that freedom can be experienced²². One error within determinism is that it undercuts its own rationale. For if determinism is accepted as truth, than the machinery by which one has come to accept determinism as truth becomes specious. Then one does not necessarily believe in determinism on its merits, but because one could not have believed otherwise. Freedom then looks to be a condition for actual belief in freedom.

Belief in freedom also enables one to accomplish that which would not have been accomplished otherwise. Belief creates the evidence that verifies it. It promotes human activity instead of stagnation²³. Believing that one can perform a task, a trust in the self as life’s artist, furthers one’s abilities in the world.

A boxer who believes in his freedom is better suited to win a fight than one who is not if they are equal in skill, but differing in belief. His belief in his own abilities and the ability to control his future and possess it enable him to win, while the other boxer, feeling fated, feels that the fight is out of his hands and performs in such a manner and loses. This zeal for life is easily seen in those people who live in relative freedom versus those who are enslaved. Freedom is felt. Further, not just belief in freedom is necessary to remove the damage that comes from feeling (from believing) unfree, but freedom is also enabling. The artist creates his life.

¹⁸ James, William. “The Function of Cognition” – *The Meaning of Truth* pp. 10-12. Prometheus. New York. 1997.

¹⁹ Wilshire, Bruce W. “Introduction” *William James – The Essential Writings*. 1984. pp. xxvi.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid. pp. xxix.

²² Ibid. pp. xxx.

²³ Ibid. pp. xxxi.

Beliefs can be enabling as well. Believing in one's belief is the way for self-making and creating possibilities that may not have existed otherwise, even unlikely ones. Imagine a situation wherein a gorge must be jumped in order to continue a journey. For James, a belief in one's belief, even in spite of contrary evidence for that belief (supposing the gorge is wide) may enable one to make the jump and justify the belief that one could make the jump whereas lacking belief disables, disheartens, and reduces the ability to make the jump.

The Self as Art

The Self is an art project for James. As one of the major historical psychologists James had a tremendous understanding of this. By placing an importance on wagering to believe anything in order to achieve ends in the world, humanity is thrust into the position of being forced to be free. As a result use their will, forcing them to self-create. Wagering to believe in the world, especially with colossal failure (infants believe they can do and try to perform many actions they cannot, for example, believing they can walk and falling repeatedly), is an artistic experimental mode of self-creation through learning. Humans never truly leave this beginning way of wagering to believe and being artists over themselves.

Even experience itself, for James, is a way of self-fashioning because it is art-like in nature, and whether unknown to ourselves or not, one is constructing a narrative for oneself. The creation of your own self-narrative requires that one be continually taking possession of future possibilities and mankind can move in any direction at any time. Each making of a choice is an art-like construction of a personal story. There exists a haunting and spectral unreality contained within realistic books, because they lack the vitality of the narrative of one's life and the lived weight of the choices therein. Men, according to James, have within them a heroic drive and ability to see the world as a theater for the heroic, wherein excitement, tragedy, and human affairs play themselves out on the artist's stage²⁴. Such artistic drama is built into human affairs.

There is also an unconscious mode of fashioning going on here, in virtue of the body having desires, needs, and functions of the organs that are the background of the self and push life in one direction or another. An easy example would be fashioning of the life brought about by the decay of the organs and death. Choices one make that influence health (in which you do not know the ramifications of your food choices) also unconsciously fashion the body, and subsequently the self.

Further, humans are also truth-makers, not simply truth-discoverers and as mentioned before, truth-making involves valuation. Truth and value are wrapped up in one another for James. Valuations are a component in James' philosophy that plays the role of arbiter for the truths one accepts or rejects into one's belief system. The important values are chosen, not socially imposed. One should not be surprised then that artistic truths or the experience of a particularly fine piece of art instills in one a sense of value coupled with the aesthetic experience.

²⁴ Ibid. pp. xxxii.

There is, of course, a mode in which one has a social self²⁵. The social is not ruled out. James would not deny that upbringing, culture, and the nurture species of the world influence the self. The key is to make those aspects yours, to make them my own, even though they already are. One can change some of these aspects of the self and more importantly learn about the self by examining them. There is a limit to how much you can fashion, for an individual can only change those changeable aspects of the self and the changeable aspects of the body. James does reject absolute relativism, cultural or otherwise²⁶.

William James' understanding of the self is reminiscent of Aristotle's understanding of character building. Aristotle understood that men become or take up a particular quality of character by continually acting in the manner befitting that type of person. One can become just by performing just actions, temperate by performing temperate actions, brave by performing brave actions. James had a similar understanding of this stylistic freedom of character. For James, if one acted the part one would become the part. Here the self has a relation to the world such that by behaving in certain ways the behavior alters the self in at least two ways.

Of first importance is that the behavior can potentially alter the person and give him that quality. Performing brave actions (and frankly, surviving them) can make an individual braver. The second way of self-narrating in this manner is such that by performing brave actions one becomes perceived as brave. This is not simply reputation that becomes changed here, because once the social world perceives one as brave then the self becomes influenced by the social world and can make that social aspect of the self their own. This is a way of owning one's self through one's actions. This is an interesting claim, because unlike other social theories wherein the influence of the social removes responsibility from actions, actions are not divorced from the self in James' claim about the social but rather the self is reinforced and changed²⁷.

James' thoughts in psychology applies equally well to his variety of self-narrating (which for him is tied up in psychology to begin with). James commented frequently on the state of psychology and teaching in general. He believed that the discovery by human beings to alter the inner states of mind would change the outward aspects of existence was momentous. The very field and establishment of psychology was fervently working on this project. This fact made psychology possible at all and worth pursuing.

A current of mystic thought also runs through James' thoughts on self-fashioning. Since humans are embodied beings whose feelings correspond to their beliefs, changing modes of being in the world influences how beliefs are felt. For instance, staring up at the stars while thinking about and dealing with one's beliefs about the sublime can increase the magnitude of that feeling. Even changing one's breathing rhythm can alter how beliefs are felt. More serious with slow breathing. More frantic with quick breathing.

James' view on other individuals is humanizing. Other individuals are part of an individual's world and an individual makes them his by painting them with judgments and using them as a tool for social self-knowledge and expressions of acknowledgement,

²⁵ James is good at explaining the phenomenon: telling the whole story without leaving ingredients vital to our lived life or what we expect to find in our ordinary existence and common understanding.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Dr. Harvey Cormier, in a separate conversation, once remarked that: One pushes on the world and the world pushes back. This relates well to James here.

friendship, and emotions. His views on others are practical as well. Individuals can pick and choose how they treat others, which explains the massive variety of human treatment due to the massive amount of free willing individuals running around. But his explanation of self-narration allows for repairing and maintaining benevolent relationships between persons, even if it is the case that men have a drive for heroism and warlike behavior. It opens a door into ethics.

James' conception of freedom is the cornerstone of his theory of self-narrating. Freedom is both enabling and self-verifying. The common problem in philosophy holds for James. Without free will there is no logical way to talk about self-creation. James does not eliminate the social element from his philosophy and because of that free will promotes the ability to free oneself from some of the confines and influences of the social element. This is part of why psychology works at all.

James' theory of self-narrating is really one of his own life. James can claim free will self-verifies, proving itself in the world once one comes to not only act like one is free but to believe it as well, because this realization of his freedom is what allowed James to escape his own nightmare of determinism and to bring value back into his life. He put light back into his world-horizon. James sees self-creation through freedom, being an artist upon one's life, as undoing damage to the self (in this sense freedom is, interestingly enough, curative) and as a means to promote the self. What else, if anything, is contemporary clinical psychology for? True slaves cannot create anything of their own. Nor can they escape their situations.

The Status of The Real

It will be important to get clear on how realism works in art and how objects without the proper realism fail as art objects. This section attempts to lay out not what realism in art is as such but how realism must adhere within an object for the object to work. The type of object will determine its proper relationship to realism. For instance, a work of art, such as a film, that displays a close tie to physical realism (or the facts) borders on documentary if it does not become so. A art film displaying rotating shapes and changing colors may have a shallow tie to physical realism (in virtue of being intentionally abstract), but is nevertheless bonded to the realism of forms²⁸.

A pencil, cereal box, or Brillo box²⁹ may be seen as a work of art, but that is just one relation it bears out in the world as an object of many. The pencil's power as an art object is extremely small and it is best characterized by its ability to put graphite onto paper. Its quality as an art object almost goes entirely without speaking of, because it is so pathetic and marginal. This still leaves room for the other end of the spectrum, where fantastic displays of art and aesthetic objects are manifest, such as in a Robert Smithson exhibit at the Whitney Museum, or Barnett Newmann at the Museum of Modern Art.

²⁸ The reference here is to the possibility that abstract shapes may be tied to some eidetic realism, Hegelian Geist, or Platonic otherworldliness wherein such an art film would be attempting to display, perhaps accidentally, the realism behind the transitory world: the "more real" universe of essences. This is just one possible realm that abstract art may be closely bonded with. Modernism critiques art itself, and abstract art's realism could be seen as tied to the realism of art in itself, if it has any.

²⁹ The reference here is to Andy Warhol's controversial Brillo box art.

Realism, in virtue of having so many modes, can run the spectrum from a brute concrete existence to the most extra-dimensional and abstract situations. Realism, in any of these realms, will obtain somewhere. The task of art objects then is to take into itself the realism appropriate to the content if the content is to do justice to the art. If work of art lacks the realism appropriate to itself, then the object will either fail to become art at all or fail as art. This is a strange way of speaking, but examples will bear this out. The purpose is to eventually arrive at a Jamesian understanding of realism.

If a Hollywood movie, a work of art in progress³⁰, being scripted and filmed, during the shooting process does not take in the realism that is proper to that content, then the scenes will fall short³¹. Actors must give a convincing appearance of realism proper to the character played. Humans are very adept at spotting bad actors. The scenes, sets, flow of time, must fit in with the overall schema of reality particular to the content of the film or the film suffers as a result. Anachronistic places, mistakes, contradictory facts, stuttered lines, objects moved from scene to scene, events out of sequence, unbelievable motives, unconvincing actors, unconvincing plot lines or plot lines too divorced from reality and too fantastical, all betray the realism appropriate to the content of the film.

If a film takes place in ancient Rome, a jukebox next to Pompey would destroy the realism. These types of incompatibilities cannot maintain themselves for us to take the film seriously³². There is uniformity in the realism presented that carries throughout a film. A documentary that suddenly turns into a slapstick comedy and then into an inspirational fictitious sports movie would be a colossal failure unless it was parody. As humans we require a certain consistency amongst our beliefs about the world. In experience, we expect a certain predictability and rigidity in the logic of how events play out. Unless a film is challenging that predictability and rigidity of the ebb and flow of experience³³, the move to break with that current that is so prevalent in our acquaintance with reality that it seems like the wrong move. It is certainly felt as such.

A lot of emphasis has been put on realism so far, yet in film an exact realism is not required in works of art. Banal events are skipped for the sake of brevity. In film noir, some events are intentionally left out as for purposive discovery later. What is vital is not that the realism be exact, but that it be consistent and not betray the content of the work. In an idealized sense, there is perfect way to display the content of a film or craft work of art. It would display perfectly the content and maximize the aesthetic object of the film³⁴. There is no reason to believe this idealized sense occurs, but getting nearer to displaying the content in its best form gives the best chance for an art work to deliver an impressive

³⁰ A film will eventually become an art object or at least have an aesthetic object emerge from it.

³¹ An obvious exception to this would be a film that intentionally botches scenes to draw out this failing effect in scenes by mismatching realisms. A comedic line delivered during a sad scene. This is encountered in life when one tells a joke in a situation of serious gravity because their emotions do not line up with the reality of the situation. The felt realism of the individual is askew.

³² Unless of course the incompatibility is intentional such as in a modernist critique, which often intentionally break rules to highlight them for the purposes of critiquing art itself. This, however, is simply an exception that proves the rule. The same goes for Mel Brooks' comedies, wherein a hip hop dance scene may break out amongst cavemen for the sake of comedy. Realism in such a case is hardly taken seriously.

³³ Memento and The Matrix come to mind, while 2001: A Space Odyssey would be a very exact following of the flow of time.

³⁴ I'm referring to Mikel Dufrenne's theory here; wherein a work of art has the task of letting the immanent aesthetic object (which is what is viewed in an aesthetic experience) deliver its execution-performance.

and worthwhile aesthetic experience³⁵. Attention will now be turned to an analysis of the views in James' philosophy that will relate to the realism presented in art when an art piece works.

James and Realism

In James' pragmatism, if a statement's being true or false has no practical difference then the statement has no real meaning. Truths should have practical consequences and moreover, truth is in the business of collaborating with realities to bring about a clearer result by getting us more in touch with reality³⁶. There is a general frame where answers fall, in virtue of the evolution of our beliefs. Reality must fall within the intellectual structures and invented teleology of the mind in an earlier stage so later on it can then meet our needs³⁷. The truths of reality do not require a transreality. What matters in the world, concerning truth, is a relation between the sensuous parts to the conceptual belief.

Experience places the circumpressure on truth. If experience does not bear it out it will not be true as more experience rids one of errors by shedding falsehoods³⁸. A falsehood is unstable, useless, disappointing, lying, unreliable, contradictory, and inconsistent³⁹.

Another relevant part of James' philosophy when considering any art work and its realism is the explanation that as objects are mentally compared, they are perceived to either be alike or unlike⁴⁰. We continually make such comparisons and form standards that aide us in judging reality that grow "endogenously inside the web of the experiences"⁴¹. Further, the consistency in reality is not a consistency between an absolute reality and the mind's perception of the copies from it, but rather a felt consistency among judgment and objects⁴².

Comparisons

Let us take a film as a work of art. Films have realism, but it is not a realism simply of a world of brute facts, but realism large enough that it often deals with fictions⁴³. No one seeing a fiction film, unless they are confused, believes the events are true. Yet, if nothing were true about the film, then it would have no personal value and no

³⁵ If any of this seems out of left field, it is subject matter from Casey's course on phenomenology and art.

³⁶ Wilshire, Bruce W. "Humanism and Truth" *The Essential William James* pp. 262-264.

³⁷ Ibid. pp. 266.

³⁸ Ibid. pp. 269.

³⁹ Ibid. pp. 270.

⁴⁰ Ibid. pp. 273.

⁴¹ Ibid. pp. 276.

⁴² Ibid. pp. 278.

⁴³ I am reminded here of David Lewis's talk about chauvinism in dealing with definitions. In discussing pain, one would be chauvinistic if one defined pain simply as c-fiber firings, because that only refers to the physical event of pain in humans. This definition would not be large enough to allow us to apply the term pain to an alien, who perhaps experiences pain as y-fiber firings. It may not even be a good definition for the biology of submarine life. In the same way, the term realism must stay large enough to not simply be what is real in the world, but everything one considers real, even those truths garnered from fictions, which are traditionally seen as unreal. I am not playing loose with the term 'realism', but construing it very broadly as 'a quality of taking up the real or something real'.

meaning. Seeing through the lens of James, one can see how the realism of film gives meaning. Films collaborate with realities as far flung as Lord Of The Rings to 1940s Manhattan. Amazingly, stories set in such differing worlds with different sets of represented objects, can bring about clearer results that gets us more in touch with a part of reality, if it clears up or sheds light on an issue important to us. A romantic film can get us in touch with our romantic feelings. It may point to something one did not realize was there prior. It may offer a perspective that one had never noticed, thus enhancing our perspective. All of this comes from the real in the film.

Just as humans have pretheoretical structures, ontological and teleological structures that answers must fall within, a film operates by bringing these structures with it by bringing forward a world from a particular view, from a particular place, with particular attitudes and character needs. It brings with it an assumed realism, an assumed world of represented objects, mores, taboos, and so forth, in the same way a man brings an assumed realism with him in confronting the world. Just as a film does not require correspondence to the reality outside of itself, nor does humankind for Truth⁴⁴. Throw this entire carpet over art objects and one can see clear aesthetic conditions for works of art.

Because art objects have their own realism, however it is manifest from its content, there exists a self-regulation within art. If an art object is to stay true to the realism and truths that bear it out, then it must regulate itself at least to the extent that it does not stray from its realism and the truths given. For instance, a movie about the problems of the war on drugs, such as *Traffic*, would go against its internal pressure provided by its agenda (to demonstrate the many faceted problems in the war), if it showed a very rosy side to drug use. In the same way, *Gladiator* has this circumpressure in the movement of content, because it is unthinkable for Maximus to be a vile character or a pathetically unskilled gladiator. If so, the movie would fail. At the least, it would be bad art. It would be likely the movie would not have been made at all. The content of the script, the feeling of that world, the feeling of the story and of the characters therein, demand that Maximus is a noble character and an incredibly skilled warrior. There is a circumpressure for James on facts. Facts have to relate to facts in the right way in order to be consistent in experience. In the same way there is a circumpressure in film and art. Although the events/facts could logically be different, events/facts cannot escape a felt consistency provided by the realism of that world. In both cases, if the facts are inconsistent (unreal) or have a shoddy realism that is not well held together, then they will likely be abandoned.

Falsehood for James has to work itself out in experience, because it is unreliable, contradictory, unsatisfactory for meeting our expectations, it lacks consistency, and is useless. The mark of a bad film would be that it tells a story full of contradictions, it fails to live up to our expectations, it lacks a consistency that fits with the realism of the film and our felt realism, and is useless in its ability to entertain us.

⁴⁴ James at times is neutral about whether some absolute reality must exist to give our reality its existence. His mocking tone in *Humanism and Truth* seems to suggest that such a view is bogus, needlessly academic, unnecessary and problematic. Later, in *Pluralistic Universe*, he denies an absolute reality more explicitly, claiming that no set of concepts would be adequate to the world. The ground of meaning is always changing, so no absolute reality would be sufficient for us.

Also in James, is the fact that realism and how well an art object is staying true to its own realism, involves a continual current of objects being mentally compared. The realism of the film is present in the analysis of the objects in the film (people, events, et cetera) as like or unlike. If an object or behavior fits in with the general schema of the real for the film, it is accepted. If it is askew from the world presented in the film, then it strikes us as odd and hard to swallow.

Just as the consistency required to maintain the realism in the content of the film requires an analysis of the objects seen on the screen⁴⁵ to see the consistency, the standards for judging the realism within the film grows from an analysis the film itself as it unfolds. This analysis may or may not be conscious, in virtue of the fact that the world is mostly taken in unreflectively, even if reflection is possible. Realism in art does not have to be consciously analyzed to be analyzed and felt⁴⁶. Both the standards for judging the realism of the film and the objects that give evidence of that realism come from this unfolding of film from its content. For James, the world operates in a similar manner, as the standards that one uses to judge reality and to feel it out, grow from within experience as it happens and is interacted with, but unlike film, the standards are subject to revision, while the content of a film is fixed, even if the meaning is not.

To further tie this to James, the consistency within the represented world in the film and the realism that comes with it, is not a consistency between an absolute reality and the mind's ability to perceive copies from it, but a consistency felt amongst the objects and judgments upon those objects coming from their assumed reality.

Aesthetic Criteria

Having tilled the some of the relevant basics of James' philosophy one can begin to see an aesthetic theory it is pregnant with. First, an aesthetic theory must be a human one. It must be a human explanation that covers or explains our straightforward understanding of our interactions with art objects. It must not be overly esoteric, overly rationalistic or overly empirical. It must be woven into the human fabric.

Second, it must be broad enough to cover all human activity that would fall within the rubric of art. This is not to claim that a general theory must encompass from architecture to expressionist dancing. The point here is that it must be general enough to apply to a theory of artistic architecture as well as blanket and give an understanding of expressionist dancing. Both of these ideas are ever-present in James' insistence that philosophy remain within the human realm.

Third, as with a general experience of objects, some of an aesthetic experience should be passively understood, taken in pre-reflectively and fed through the current of knowledge by acquaintance.

Fourth, James' general theory will be able to explain the experiencing of an aesthetic object. Further, it will be able to explain the phenomenon of returning to an

⁴⁵ Objects in the largest scene. People, ideas, metaphors tied to the real, and so forth are all objects of thought.

⁴⁶ The ebb and flow of life is ignored in almost all of our affairs, but nevertheless violations to that consistency can be spotted immediately as it disrupts our mostly passive acceptance of our felt world, such as thunder breaking in on silence. A sudden stabbing pain brings our body, which is largely non-focal and viewed as another object in space, to the forefront, out of that passive ignoring of it.

object and taking more from it. For James, the world of objects and the experiences therein always have more to return to and take away than can be limited to one general encounter. The cup runs over.

Fifth, a Jamesian aesthetic theory should have an understanding of freedom. An artist, whether over his self or a canvas, must have believe in the freedom to bring the values or percepts forward by which the artist finds him or herself impelled.

Under the lens of an aesthetic theory, an experience of an art object reveals some truth. While this truth may be unspeakable due to the nature of aesthetic objects (the section concerning the phenomenology of Mikel Dufrenne will address this) or too complex to tie down it still remains that some truth is encountered. Precisely because truth is coupled with value, even moral sentiment (because truths matter), James has a perfect explanation for art objects and the variety of truth they are pregnant with. We encounter art objects and historically we value them and deify them. Art objects matter and are political, some very overtly so.

II. The Aesthetic Experience

“Most men would reply that they are all that makes survival worth securing. The social affections, all the various forms of play, the thrilling intimations of art, the delights of philosophic contemplation, the rest of religious emotion, the joy of moral self-approbation, the charm of fancy and of wit—some or all of these are absolutely required to make the notion of mere existence tolerable.” –William James⁴⁷

The purpose of this section is to draw out what an aesthetic object is for William James by comparing James’ philosophical work on objects to that of Mikel Dufrenne’s in *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*. First, discussion will focus on what an object is and how something becomes an object for William James. Second, Dufrenne’s analysis of a work of art and how an aesthetic object emerges from an art work will be explored. Third, in full view of the important characteristics of objects for both James and Dufrenne, how they function and come to be, an analysis of their similarities and differences will be laid out. The importance of this section is that fundamentally William James and Mikel Dufrenne are in agreement about the *modus operandi* of objects, only differing on which objects deserve the specific designation of art. This is vital to building any kind of aesthetic theory out of James’ works.

William James and Objects

To declare that some thing exists for James is to give it a Dasein. The object exists over there or in that space. All one’s experiences must come back to oneself. To identify that an object is over there implies that it takes a place amongst a set of objects in relation to one’s own existence at a distance from that object. An object’s existence denotes my own. James’ philosophy demands that humans must correspond in some way with any object for a person to enter into relations with that object. First, let us remind ourselves of James’ views on object as given earlier in this paper, but in a more condensed form.

There is no science of the object in itself as if objects existed in a vacuum⁴⁸. Again James, forever critical of any science that leaves out man and his both theoretical and pre-reflective human values (science being the enterprise that categorizes and explores causal relations between objects), points out that part of the necessary self-making in the world involves truth-making. The truth about truth for James is that truth is gained by wagering to believe⁴⁹. Humans are all infants in regards to approaching a possible truth. The infant needs to believe that the truth will correspond to the belief ahead of time (and thus believe prior to action) to want to test out its belief in the world to determine if it corresponds⁵⁰. Human beings have a primacy of subjective demands that

⁴⁷ James, William. “Spencer’s Definition of Mind as Correspondence.”

⁴⁸ Wilshire, Bruce W. *William James: The Essential Writings* Introduction. pp lx.

⁴⁹ Kauber, Peter. "The Foundations of James' Ethics of Belief" *Ethics* Vol. 84, No. 2 (Jan., 1974), pp.159.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 156-158.

come with the human organism in dealing with the world and the objects they encounter in it.

Objects for James have inherent value. When talking about objects in James' philosophy, one must also talk about Truth. Truth must take into account what a human being is: an organism that discovers truths, turns them into Truths, coming out of the context of experiencing the world pre-theoretically as value. The world and the objects therein are experienced as values. In Spencer's Definition on the Mind as Correspondence by James, the failure of Spencer's account of mind (which is based on an evolutionary understanding of how the mind was formed to correspond to the world to aid the organism in its dealings) is attributed to the fact that Spencer's understanding of how the mind evolved lacks full explanatory power because it is unable to elucidate adequately endeavors that fall outside survival that human beings engage in, such as the arts and, ironically, philosophy⁵¹. Objects have value for us as human beings and it is not simply survival value. Objects matter.

To repeat and keep to the front of our minds, how one takes up objects is important as well. Thought is often inadequate to explain the conditions of the experience and essentially what is going on for two reasons. The first reason stems from the fact that objects experienced can always reveal more truth for us to discover. The concepts in our minds are always inadequate to the fullness of the reality of the object in experience. There is always more. The second reason is that experience has a dynamic fullness, an ungraspable largeness, and is enriched by objects and meaning. Humans can only sort out a portion of what is going on. The impact of experience can merely be captured in part. Most of what occurs in any given experience lies outside conceptualization. Man's concepts are too small for the largeness of the situation. There are always more objects, always more meanings, than human cognition is capable of recognizing. As a result, humans pick out objects to recognize while ignoring others. In this regard, all perception is art-like. Certain objects are chosen over their remainders. In the context of art, certain objects pass from being simply an object, to becoming crafted into an object spectacle, or what is called a work of art.

Again, the problem of one being unable to fully conceptualize the world brings in the need to explain the knowledge one does gain in experience that exists between, first, what humans are too small to take in due to the limits of their cognitive machinery and, second, what humans strictly conceptualize. This in-between is what is taken in vaguely without strict conceptualization that becomes a stepping stone to strict conceptualization. Such a phenomenon is explained with knowledge by acquaintance. Knowledge by acquaintance for James is "a wash of non-deliberate thought and experience, habitually and essentially vague and ill-defined, and out of which all deliberate thought takes rise." Also on real objects and conceptualization: "Moreover, there is always more to any real thing than any set of concepts has as yet revealed, and what will be revealed may correct our previous ideas of the thing"⁵².

For James, reality is interwoven and connected. Intellectual and conceptual systems carve up and turn the manifold of continuous experience into concrete bits.

⁵¹ Wilshire, Bruce W. "Spencer's Definition of the Mind as Correspondence." *William James - The Essential Writings*. 1984.

⁵² Wilshire, Bruce W. *William James -- The Essential Writings*. Introduction. 1984. pp. xxvi.

These intellectual cuts do not exist in the world as experienced as a continuum. Concepts function as teleological instruments for dividing up and organizing the world to give it purpose and a meaningful structure for man to make sense of. Concepts bracket, limit, and tie off, while the world overflows one's concepts, pushes out one's bracketing, delimits, and spills out of any boundaries one imposes upon it. The world is a world-horizon, with always more under the surface, more in the distance; sectioning off one part and declaring it the truth of the matter will always fail to encapsulate the world⁵³.

Further, this world-horizon James presents is one in which the ground of meaning is always changing. Concepts attempt to remain static and stay true, while the soil from which they are derived is continually shifting. James explains:

The gist of the matter is always the same—something ever goes indissolubly with something else. You cannot separate the same from its other, except by abandoning the real altogether and taking to the conceptual system. What is immediately given in the singular and particular instance is always something pooled and mutual, something with no dark spot, no point of ignorance. No one elementary bit of reality is eclipsed from the next bit's point of view...consciousness is too short to grasp the larger collectivity of things except nominally and abstractly.⁵⁴

James concludes that objects are made up of their relations. Objects do not have to have any essence, specific substance, or Platonic trans-reality from which they get their reality (via copying or corresponding). Objects do not have to have a core. Water is both two hydrogen atoms bonded to an oxygen atom and what we desire to remove thirst. It is both that which you can swim in when properly pooled and that which can take the form of steam. Objects are not simply their scientific properties, but how they relate to all other objects they come in contact with. They carry with them this type of performance in their dealings with the world. These relations make up their many-in-oneness.

The many-in-oneness in objects grants the object the ability to present itself as having many relations that make the object what it is, along with its innumerable connections, without having to be complete. As James points out, an "and..." hangs on the back of every object, because an object can be many things, be put in many environments, and be added and subtracted from. How many relations hang together in an object makes up what it is and could be. It is not a rigid copy or strict definition. Relations are subject to the natural flux of the world and as such so should one's objects⁵⁵.

James eliminates the subject / object distinction in order to remove the problem Descartes made famous: the problem of knowing with certainty facts about the external world, between the knower and the known, between the internal and the external. All objects for James are objects in thought. Nothing can be specified independent of the world in its appearance to mind. Thoughts never find themselves; thoughts are always thoughts of something or some object, having some content, with no blank in itself.

⁵³ Wilshire, Bruce W. *William James – The Essential Writings*. A Pluralistic Universe pp 363.

⁵⁴ Wilshire, Bruce W. *William James – The Essential Writings*. A Pluralistic Universe pp. 363.

⁵⁵ Wilshire, Bruce W. *William James – The Essential Writings*. A Pluralistic Universe pp. 368-369

Because one encounters objects and the world as existing prior to one's projects and experiencing of them, James explains that objects prior to being encountered or experienced have virtually pre-existing truth. Objects have an immanence that will come to be expressed upon confrontation. Truths, for James, are made upon interaction, so objects that have yet to come into one's phenomenal fields have virtually pre-existing content to share, but that content, in order to be made meaningful requires one's interaction. Man's confrontation with objects, as James explains, is similar to a fish's visible field in the depths of the ocean. The fish can only see or experience so far in the circle surrounding him before everything becomes a wall of blue around him. As he moves through the ocean, objects that come into his range of vision become seen and experienced, arriving simply out of this blue unknown. There is a world that exists prior to this scaly friend, but what becomes seen and emerges out of the blue as objects (such as a new reef, a previously un-met fish), only occurs when they enter into the animal's visible field. The content is out there to be discovered. It virtually pre-exists as a truth ready-to-be-made or ready-to-be-experienced⁵⁶. Similarities in this truth-discovering can be seen in Dufrenne's account of works of art bearing aesthetic objects.

Mikel Dufrenne and the Aesthetic Object

For Mikel Dufrenne, the work of art is the object from which the aesthetic object emerges. The work is located simply by reference to the aesthetic object. A work of art invites a perception of it. It compels one to seek the aesthetic object within it. Not all objects are worthy of, nor lend out, this invitation to view the aesthetic object within it when it performs⁵⁷. Dufrenne favors direct perception as the means by which the aesthetic object is discovered when it is examined in its performance, instead of an art-historical or conceptual analysis of the work. For Dufrenne, one has to immerse oneself in it and experience it. Aesthetic properties lay virtually in a work prior to performance. It is only when a work is completed or performed (properly) that these properties become actualized⁵⁸.

An extremely fascinating aspect of the work of art is the status it places on the real. While one may garner real truths from a work, one does not require a work to be excessively real. Dufrenne writes: "Thus, I am a dupe neither of the real--e.g., the actors, the sets, the hall itself--nor even of the unreal--i.e., the represented object. For the represented object is too neutralized, since we do not actually posit it as unreal...it is an unreality which is not completely unreal...I do not posit the real as real, because there is also the unreal which this real designates; I do not posit the unreal as unreal, because there is also the real which promotes and supports this unreal."⁵⁹ A play carries on as if it were real, while it is not, even though it has throughout real objects, thoughts, and persons. The aesthetic object emerges from the canvas of these objects, but is not reducible to them.

What is irreplaceable in the work of an art object is the sensuous that one opens oneself to. The aesthetic object is immanent in the sensuous and "goes beyond what is

⁵⁶ Wilshire, Bruce W. *William James – The Essential Writings*. Humanism and Truth pp. 275-277.

⁵⁷ Dufrenne, Mikel *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience* pp. 5.

⁵⁸ Ibid. pp. 8

⁵⁹ Ibid. pp. 9-10

purely intelligible and comes to convergence in a coalescence of sensuous elements”... “for such meaning is the very face of the sensuous turned toward me”⁶⁰. One must belong to the experience of the sensuous in order to perceive the aesthetic object or one may fall short of seeing it. The work of art, suitably considered, is what is left of an aesthetic object when it is not perceived or perceived incorrectly.

The aesthetic object lingers in a state of the possibly being perceived. It awaits its epiphany⁶¹. The aesthetic object lives as an idea not yet thought through, pending animation by a consciousness able to animate it and/or a performance worthy of it. The work has a virtual existence of the aesthetic object; it becomes pregnant with it, ready to birth it in a sensuous display⁶².

While the work of art is irreducible to its performances, it is still only graspable in them. The truth of the work consists on being a truth that must be presented in sensuous form⁶³. The transformation from a work of art to a work of art tending to the bearing out of an aesthetic object hinges on a work of art’s ability to move from the abstract existence to sensuous existence, from possible being to that being’s appearance⁶⁴.

Similarities and Differences

The similarities between these analyses of objects are many. For James, an object’s existence denotes my own, in the same way for Dufrenne, a work of art requires a spectator. In both analyses the object viewed implies the existence of the spectator and goes a step further. James eliminates the subject / object dichotomy, which entails that the object implies the mind and all minds imply objects (without objects they have no content and are in no way human⁶⁵). Dufrenne, however, limits this special animation of the work of art to art works, while James insists that all perception is art-like, that all objects are animated and carved out of the world. Both demand that the spectator correspond in some way with objects for a person to enter into relations with that object, but for Dufrenne, the aesthetic object is of a special variety, a special animation, differing from regular objects.

Both Dufrenne and James are on the mark about including mankind in their exploration of objects and as such do not become absurdly abstract. Both philosophers require an analysis of art from the standpoint of the human encounter with art, instead of an art-historical or art critical account (some theory about how art should be judged, for example, from the standpoint of the Futurists or a Marxist critique), while leaving room for both. They move away from Kierkegaard’s complaint that analysis of objects as external, as third person, wipes out the engrossment inherent in the object examined.

⁶⁰ Ibid. pp. 13

⁶¹ Ibid. pp 14

⁶² Ibid. pp 15

⁶³ Ibid. pp 27

⁶⁴ Ibid. pp 38

⁶⁵ If a mind has no content, it certainly is not a human mind, which is riddled with content until death. Perhaps it would be like a disembodied Cartesian mind, but that mind is hardly human either. This reminds me of a remark Merleau-Ponty makes in *Eye and Mind*: Or what if, like certain animals, we had lateral eyes with no cross-blending of visual fields? Such a body would not reflect itself; it would be an almost adamant body, not really flesh, not really the body of a human being. There would be no humanity.

A work of art, in some sense, must be about what it is to be human or one could not relate to it at all, even if the relationship is simply one of being a meaning-making sentient being witnessing a display of meaning. It must include engrossment and meaning as affecting one as both man qua man and as simply the individual that one exists as (simply being human and simply this particular human). A point by Merleau-Ponty is particularly apt here: "...my body is a thing among things; it is one of them. It is caught in the fabric of the world, and its cohesion is that of a thing. But because it moves itself and sees, it holds things in a circle around itself. Things are an annex or prolongation of itself; they are incrustated in its flesh, they are part of its full definition; the world is made of the very stuff of the body"⁶⁶. Objects, including art objects, are a prolongation of the body and must speak to it in order for it to be identified. The work of art must take over one's consciousness to a degree, in order to give itself a body. An art object must identify with an individual in order to take him over and communicate the aesthetic object. If these relations could not be made then no individual would be able to witness the aesthetic object that sits pregnant in works of art.

For James, knowledge by acquaintance is the current of the ever-changing phenomenal landscape. Knowledge by acquaintance is the facing of the world in its sensuousness. It gives one the experiences about which we strictly conceptualize and carve meaning out of. It is the current that makes conceptual knowledge possible. Dufrenne's theory relies heavily on perception of the sensuous, which is essentially knowledge by acquaintance. Direct acquaintance with the sensuous as it presents the aesthetic object is the mode by which the aesthetic experience occurs. James' knowledge by acquaintance is Dufrenne's sensuous experience of the aesthetic object. It is by knowledge by acquaintance that one becomes engrossed, becomes the spectator, becomes impinged upon, by the aesthetic object and thus has an aesthetic experience.

Both thinkers realize that the ground of meaning undergoes change. Dufrenne leaves the understanding of an art work, even the experience of the aesthetic object, as liable to be somewhat impinged upon by one's historical situation. This is a strength in the theory, because it alleviates one from the problem of having to deal with immutable truths not being received the same way by different people and different analyses of the work of art by different spectators. Dufrenne's lack of a dogmatic approach in this regard leaves the aesthetic object open to a multitude of explanations. James would wholeheartedly agree.

Both men recognize that objects experienced can always reveal more truth to be discovered, experienced, and appreciated differently in different places in history, attitudes, and other differing modes of being. Objects in general for James, and specifically aesthetic objects for Dufrenne, both have the quality of being able to be returned to with different results, especially if the object delivers a different performance from the work of art (the work of art called Romeo and Juliet is always Romeo and Juliet – the performances differ, not the printed work of art). Concepts are always inadequate to the fullness of the reality of the object in experience to begin with. There is always more to discover.

Dufrenne and James agree that experience, especially aesthetic experience, has an incredible richness that cannot fully be grasped. One may return to a performance or object and never take in all that is presented by the aesthetic object. There are good

⁶⁶ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetic's Reader* Eye and Mind pp 125.

reasons for thinking this may never happen. The ground of meaning is always changing, along with the performance delivered. No view point, no performance, is the last. Individuals can only sort out a portion of what is going on and that shifts from performance to performance. Director X's *Romeo and Juliet* is not Director Y's. Performances even alter from show to show. There are always more meanings in objects, aesthetic or otherwise, than human cognition is capable of recognizing. Real things for James are inexhaustible.

For James, a necessary component of self-making in the world involves truth-making. The same can be seen in Dufrenne's version of what an art work does. An aesthetic object, in order to make it's self in the world, is forced to make truth as well. The aesthetic object brings forward truth, even if that truth may be unintelligible because it has ties in the unreal.

Both accounts of objects rely heavily on value. For James, inspecting objects involves valuation and discerning which objects have more value than others. For Dufrenne, this works precisely the same way in the analysis of works of art. First, some objects lack enough value to be considered art objects. Even if every day objects were considered as art objects, as the avant-garde might argue, they would lack value in that they were poor bearers of aesthetic objects, hardly having enough value to take into serious consideration. Second, such banal objects are simply poor harbingers of aesthetic objects. They lack the ability to manifest the execution-performance well, if at all, so a discerning valuation of art objects is necessary. Both accounts attest that value is tied up in the truth of an object. While James applies this more generally, Dufrenne is also correct to use it specifically. If the aesthetic object puts forward truth, then valuing objects that actualize aesthetic objects over pathetic substitutes simply makes sense to a discerning art examiner.

Another similarity rests in the manner meaning emerges under both theories. For James, meaning grows endogenously from collections of objects to provide one with principles, concepts, and ideas to encompass them. Objects are caught within the web of meaning and the connections between them bring to bear new meanings and new meanings come with different configurations of objects. Each realm of objects is judged by standards native to it. For instance, a collection of objects that are all living organisms give rise to the principles derived in the science of biology, while the behaviors of various card games give rise to the principles and mathematics governing those systems. These principles grow endogenously from the soil of the objects themselves. Similarly, in Dufrenne's work, while an aesthetic object is not reducible to the objects that create it, the aesthetic object is actualized by the sensuous objects because it emerges from that medium. The aesthetic object grows endogenously from the work of art if the proper conditions are met (one can always fall short and thus fail to give birth to the aesthetic object).

Dufrenne's explanation of the way objects function also is in line with James' presentation of them in *A Pluralistic Universe*. For James, objects go into one another, literally. Objects interpenetrate one another. Our intellectual cuts make objects into distinct entities, but while this is useful it is ultimately a farce⁶⁷. Many changing and different relations come together to form what we experience as an object and those relations are shared by other objects. James states: "Things are with one another in many

⁶⁷ Buddhists make a similar point, especially in the Mahayana sect.

ways, but nothing includes everything, or dominates over everything”⁶⁸. This is not a claim that, if every object were broken down into some fundamental gunk or substratum, that every object is identical and tied together. James is not a monist. It is not to claim that if one had God’s eye and could see the universe in its entirety, that everything would be connected. The point is simply that objects share traits and interpenetrate one another. This can be done with external relations. It does not require an internalized set of universals to tie them together (in the way that a universal blueness would tie together all blue objects). James continues: “a bit of reality when actively engaged in one of these relations is not by that very fact engaged in all the other relations simultaneously...without losing its identity a thing can either take up or drop another thing”⁶⁹. Further, an object can have many possible connections which are not necessarily yet actualized in that moment⁷⁰. This allowance by James allows for the type of virtual being of the aesthetic object not yet actualized at that moment, until its animation.

For Dufrenne, objects (such as a stage setting) come together with other objects (actors, symbols, signs, voices) to deliver an aesthetic object which interpenetrates another object as an aesthetic experience (the spectator). Our intellectual cuts divide the stage set into discrete objects, but the overall experience is voluminous, unified, and continuous.

For Dufrenne, the aesthetic experience comes out of the phenomenon of the sensuousness when confronting the aesthetic object. For James, all objects come into our phenomenal fields as sensuously felt. Phenomenology is a key ingredient in how objects come to be before us at all. It allows us to interact with reality while adding to its effect⁷¹.

⁶⁸ Wilshire, Bruce W. *William James The Essential Writings A Pluralistic Universe* pp 367.

⁶⁹ Ibid. pp. 368

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ This author favors a view wherein William James’ account of objects is correct. All objects are art-like and can easily be seen as art objects while regarding Mikel Dufrenne’s examination of art objects as being proper for that specific set of art objects that are high art, or art that is exemplified as bringing forward the aesthetic object and hence the aesthetic experience. It is not necessarily murky to regard all objects as art objects (a view held by many in early 20th century) but simply regarding them as low art objects or art objects simply bad at producing an aesthetic object.

III. A Theory

After all this footwork, what does a Jamesian aesthetic theory look like? The immediate requirements are that it is a human theory. It must not be overly scholastic or divorced from reality. An artistic truth must be made through the encounter (whether it is understood is another thing) and the spectator must animate it and receive its virtually pre-existing epiphany if it is indeed such a special object.

Because such general rules apply to all objects for James, the art object must be special from other objects in that it is art. It must fall under the standards and philosophies to which rules of art apply. If it is painting, then it must carry with it the logic(s) of painting, just as the rules of math grow from within it and the conditions that obtain for biology come from within biology. Moreover, if a general theory is devised, it must be broad enough to cover all human activity that is considered art if it genuinely is art. The circumpressure of art objects will be the guide through which the rules and judgments are made about art objects for an individual. There will not be any reliance on transrealities or absolute truths about art. It will not be a window into Absolute Spirit⁷².

The truth made must be a human one and require the spectator. There will not be any inherent truths in art other than the virtually immanent ones that appear when animated by our Jamesian and perhaps only to him.

The aesthetic experience is highly phenomenal in nature. The spectator encounters an object as he or she would any other general object as it appears out of the perceptual fog, then is forced to take into account all the rules, judgments, and standards that grow out of it as all of this is united in the aesthetic experience (including the conscious and unconscious phenomenal impact). The spectator is thrust into a situation of choosing which characteristics to notice and which to ignore. The spectator brings forward his own judgments and sits absorbing the object as it is animated for him.

The spectator will take most of the aesthetic experience in unreflectively and passively, although is certainly able to be the art critic and reflect upon the spectacle in front of him. Thoughts are often inadequate to the fullness of reality so art objects can be easily returned to and thought of without dogmatism⁷³. Moreover, the ground of meaning is always changing. The art object's significance changes historically, as does the spectator who revisits art objects, thus enabling all art object experiences to be (in theory) different and inexhaustible. If the spectator derives some grand meaning out of the work of art, then the spectator has found some object of thought within himself that was not in focus before.

The realism and the spectator's understanding and judgments about realism will be compared during the encounter of the object⁷⁴. (The spectator must align himself somewhat or understand the realism inherent in the object in order for him to impact him correctly. Dufrenne would demand the sensuous encounter to perform for him.) Further, the standards for objects and art objects will be compared.

The spectator will be penetrated by the object and interrelated with its special, chosen relations, brought by the free hand of an artist, and witness a new world-horizon.

⁷² As in the case of Hegel or other transcendentalists.

⁷³ As the Dada movement may remark: An art object is endlessly misinterpretable.

⁷⁴ There is some hesitancy in speaking in this manner of spectator versus object, due to James' elimination of that dichotomy, but it is instructive in the essay.

IV. Conclusion

The purpose of this exposition was to carefully examine the works of William James and derive the rules for a general aesthetic theory in a Jamesian framework endogenously from his works. This exposition covered an array of James' works by pulling specific textual evidence to draft guidelines for a possible Jamesian general aesthetic theory. This examination reflected upon the nature of truth in William James' philosophy as it applied generally to all objects and the implications that obtain for aesthetic objects. Moreover, it examined aspects of William James' philosophy that placed light on the phenomenal qualities of truth-in-objects and the art-like characteristics of perception. This essay drew upon comparisons to Mikel Dufrenne's work in the area of the phenomenology of aesthetic experience to elucidate and highlight James' own views. This exposition took careful consideration to examine the humanistic elements James requires of all theories, aesthetic or otherwise. It looked at the artistic world encounter in acquaintance with objects as well as the importance of free will. It examined the self as an art object and analyzes the status of the real in objects. It concluded with a culmination of these requirements as rules for an aesthetic theory of art under James' philosophy.