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Enhancing Awareness and Inquiry

Mark Tschaepe



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- 1 The following is an introductory analysis of an underexplored point of intersection between inquiry and somaesthetics: bodily discomfort. I argue that this constitutes an influential and important type of aesthetic experience that initiates certain inquiries, alters bodily self-conception and establishes habits that have evaluative consequences for beliefs, attitudes, and future decisions. Further, aesthetic experiences of bodily discomfort have the potential for contributing to moral imagination and tools that foster empathy in others.
- 2 The argument is organized as follows. I begin with how irritation or discomfort is considered an important aspect of inquiry by C.S. Peirce and John Dewey that may be understood from a somatic perspective. I then discuss comfort and discomfort as types of transient bodily experiences. This includes defining the concepts of comfort and discomfort while delineating variations of each. Next, I provide a brief description of somaesthetics and Mark Johnson's related work against the backdrop of C.S. Peirce's categories and Dewey's concept of qualitative feeling as they apply to experiences of bodily discomfort. These considerations provide a basis for why we should recognize these experiences as potentially aesthetic. I locate bodily discomfort at the intersection of somaesthetics and inquiry and explain how discomfort may be considered a type of aesthetic experience. This segues into examples of bodily discomfort that highlight their somaesthetic importance. Finally, I consider the importance of such aesthetic experiences for fostering moral imagination and empathy in others that contributes to creating more accommodating considerations, especially in design, for persons to achieve comfort.

1. Irritation and Inquiry

- 3 According to Peirce and Dewey, inquiry begins with doubt, which they describe as a form of irritation, disruption, or perplexity.¹ Peirce refers to doubt as a dissatisfied state that is like "the irritation of a nerve," later referring to "the irritation of doubt"

that “causes a struggle to attain a state of belief” (CP.5.373-4). The shift from harmony with the world one inhabits to disharmony with one’s world causes them to attempt to adjust and remedy their discord. Here, I consider irritations that are somatic discomforts, contemplating Peirce’s notion of irritation literally. There are not only dis-harmonies or dis-cordances of thought, but also bodily dis-comforts. Just as theoretical problems irritate so that systems of thought are called into question and solutions are imagined, reasoned through, and tested, so too do somatic problems stimulate inquiry in efforts to alleviate problematic situations. A sore throat, an upset stomach, a headache, a muscle cramp, a sudden burn or numbness, and countless other maladies propel a person from a relative state of comfort into phases of inquiry: suggestion, intellectualization, hypothesis, reasoning, and experimentation (LW.8). In the general scope of Peirce’s examination of experience and Dewey’s pattern of inquiry, irritation is any experience that suspends or threatens belief and initiates doubt. Before addressing how somatic discomfort, as a type of irritation that leads to inquiry, can be aesthetic, it is important to clarify what I mean by bodily discomfort.

- 4 Bodily discomfort is a type of physical irritation, generally speaking. To understand bodily discomfort in this sense, first I review common meanings of comfort. As Kolcaba and Kolcaba (1991) indicate, comfort has four general meanings in ordinary language. First, comfort may be considered a *cause* of relief. Second, it may be considered a *state* of comfort, which refers to a state of ease or peaceful contentment. For instance, I might say that the actions of the chiropractor were a comfort (first meaning) that caused my comfort (second meaning). Third, comfort may refer to scalar relief from discomfort. For instance, I may feel *some* comfort following a trip to the chiropractor, but unlike the first meaning, this does not eradicate discomfort, but only diminishes it. Finally, comfort may refer to things that contribute to hedonistic goals of maximizing pleasure. These are often referred to as *creature comforts*. Here, I use the second definition primarily: comfort as a state of being. Specifically, comfort is a bodily state of being that precedes and hopefully follows discomfort. Secondarily, comfort refers to the result of inquiry that achieves *some* comfort but does not necessarily eradicate the discomfort completely.
- 5 Following the work of Helander and Zhang (1997) and Bissell (2008), comfort is a bodily “sensation of being-at-one with the immediate environment” (2008: 1700). This aesthetic sense of comfort highlights the relationality between the person who experiences comfort and the surroundings they inhabit. This also points to the importance of comfort as contextual, i.e., comfort according to the first meaning given by Kolcaba and Kolcaba. Comfort also relates to Bissell’s notion of the experience as *specific affective resonance*, which “can circulate between and through both objects and bodies” (2008: 1701). Although this sense of comfort is not my focus when discussing discomfort as a somaesthetic cause of inquiry, it is an important aspect of the concept as it relates to discomfort as an aesthetic experience related to attributes of one’s environment.
- 6 Discomfort is a somatic state of being ill-at-ease or discontented. More specifically, it is the experience of being at-odds-with the immediate environment one inhabits. Discomfort is scalar and multidimensional. It is experienced at varying intensities, locations, and durations.² In his work on the phenomenology of illness, Fredrik Svenaeus captures the transition from comfort to discomfort in his description of falling ill. Discomfort is an alienating process wherein a person experiences their body

at odds with itself and its environment (Svenaesus 2009, 2019). Svenaesus describes illness as “an unhomelike being-in-the-world in which the embodied ways of being-in of the person have been thwarted” (2019: 463). This description of illness applies to discomfort, which is a symptom that often accompanies illness, but also extends beyond illness to those who are both healthy and in a state of transient discomfort (e.g., the discomfort of airline travel, even while relatively healthy). Discomfort directs attention to the state of the body and its relation to the world. Comfort, similar to health, is not a conscious aspect of experience usually. Experiencing discomfort, like experiencing illness is “to find oneself in a pattern of disorientation, resistance, helplessness, and perhaps even despair” (Svenaesus 2013: 232). Morse Bottorff and Hutchinson explain this as a theme of discomfort that they deem the dis-eased body: “Disruption pervades the experience of the dis-eased body as one’s normal orientation toward the world is deflected toward the body” (Morse, Bottorff & Hutchinson 1994: 190). Drew Leder refers to this experience as the dys-appearance of the body, wherein attention to the body focuses on it feeling “ill” or “bad” (Leder 1990: 84). As a focus of bodily feeling, discomfort should be considered from a somaesthetic perspective.

2. Somaesthetics and Feeling

- 7 According to Richard Shusterman, somaesthetics was “conceived to complement the basic project of pragmatist aesthetics by elaborating the ways that a disciplined, rarified, and interdisciplinary attention to bodily experience, methods, discourses, and performances could enrich our aesthetic experience and practices, not only in the fine arts but in the diverse arts of living” (Shusterman 2012: 140). Somaesthetics was borne from the transformational theory of aesthetics that Dewey presents in *Art as Experience* (1989), his work on immediate experience and embodiment, and his therapeutic work with F.M. Alexander (Shusterman 2009). Mark Johnson was similarly inspired by Dewey’s extensive understanding of aesthetic experience. “Aesthetics concerns the patterns, images, feelings, qualities, and emotions by which meaning is possible for us in every aspect of our lives” (Johnson 2015: 23). According to Johnson, aesthetics is a “field of inquiry” that supplies meaning to affordances, which emerge from the ways we engage with the world we inhabit (*ibid.*: 28). Aesthetics, according to this interpretation, extends well beyond the exclusive confines of the fine arts or objects considered as art. Additionally, Shusterman and Johnson consider aesthetics a dynamic category of activity rather than a static category of fixed value.
- 8 Following Dewey and Peirce, Shusterman and Johnson describe experience as preeminently qualitative. Shusterman describes qualitative feeling as being ungraspably immediate (Shusterman 2008: 205). Johnson echoes the idea when he states that “We are in and of the world via qualitative determination, before we know it” (Johnson 2015: 28). Qualitative feeling as preeminent is an idea that guides Dewey’s thought and was inspired by Peirce. The latter’s categories of experience provide tools for understanding qualitative experience and its relation to discomfort as somaesthetic.
- 9 Peirce categorizes experience into three types: Firsts (simples), Seconds (recurrences), and Thirds (comprehensions) (CP.7.529). Firsts are qualitative and are the foundation of experience. This category is also referred to as “suchness” and “tone of consciousness” (CP.1.302; 7.530). Aesthetic experience pertains to feeling that precedes thought

(Seconds; fact) and generalization (Thirds; law) (Hainic 2019). A feeling (First) is experienced before it is considered to be the case (Second) and before it can be categorized as a general type of feeling (Third). In his discussion of consciousness, Peirce states, “[f]eeling is the momentarily present contents of consciousness taken in its pristine simplicity, apart from anything else. It is consciousness in its first state...” (CP.7.551). At the moment of feeling, it is “sensation *minus* the attribution of it to any particular subject” (CP.1.332). Shifting attention to discomfort, the feeling of discomfort – irritation – is felt before it is considered to be a matter of fact, i.e., before it is thought as a case of discomfort. For Peirce, aesthetics is rooted in feeling before thoughts *about* feeling.

- 10 Both Peirce and Dewey recognize that reflection is stimulated by feeling that irritates or perplexes. Inquiry occurs when one’s “smooth interaction” with the world is disrupted or breaks down (Shusterman 2008: 187). In his 1930 essay, “Qualitative Thought,” Dewey echoes Peirce’s transition from feeling to thought when discussing the experience of sweetness. “A certain quality is experienced. When it is inquired into or thought (judged), it differentiates into ‘that thing’ on the one hand and ‘sweet’ on the other” (LW.5: 253).³ Similarly, discomfort overwhelms experience without being differentiated into a specific *quality* of the body or of the mismatch between the body and its space. Here, Peirce’s term *tone* is helpful – discomfort is a tone of experience before it is classified as a token (an instance) or type (generalization). The body is irritated. Irritation – feeling – initiates reflection, i.e., inquiry, which differentiates the feeling of discomfort as pertaining to some aspect of experience. The aesthetic is feeling – an all-consuming experience that stimulates reflection *about* the feeling as an object of thought. Before reflection, discomfort is what Dewey calls “brutely there” (*ibid.*: 254). Discomfort becomes the point of departure for inquiry. As Dewey states about qualitative experience, i.e., feeling, it is “the regulative principle of all thinking” (*ibid.*: 261). Understanding discomfort as an aesthetic feeling that stimulates and guides inquiry points to Peirce’s conception of aesthetics as guiding ethics and, in turn, logic.
- 11 According to Peirce, aesthetic science is normative because it determines what is good or bad in the realm of feeling. Determination of value regarding feeling guides determination of value in ethics and, transitively through ethics, of value in logic (CP. 5.130-2). As a field of experience and inquiry, aesthetics concerns the deliberate formation of habits of feelings (CP.1.574). Contrary to how aesthetics is often conceived, it is not limited to feelings of beauty or that which is detachedly pleasant in some regard. Peirce is clear that such one-sidedness regarding aesthetic experience is misguided. Feelings are aesthetically good *and* bad (CP.5.551). He clarifies that good and bad aesthetic feelings are closely aligned with pleasure and pain, but they are not equivalent. Pleasure and pain are symptoms of feelings. In the case of pain, Peirce claims that it is “a symptom of a feeling which repels us” (CP.5.552). Pain is a symptom of discomfort.
- 12 Shusterman advances Peirce’s conception of experience and recognizes that the body is the basis of aesthetic experience (Shusterman 2009: 180).⁴ Feeling – Firstness – regarding the body is *somatic perception*, whereas reflection upon the feeling is *somatic reflection* (*ibid.*: 14). The interplay between these types of somatic experience is helpful for understanding how discomfort occurs with increased awareness within the aesthetic realm. Shusterman interprets Peirce as providing material for enhancing somaesthetic awareness, noting that how one reflects upon feeling affects how one

feels. The way one engages in somatic reflection about discomfort affects feeling discomfort. This shifts a person from non-aesthetic consciousness to somaesthetic awareness. Shusterman states that somaesthetics “treats the body as *soma* – a living, sentient, subjectivity rather than a mere mechanical mechanism or tool that is used by something else (a mind or soul or person). The soma is not just a tool for perception and action but also the purposive, intentional agency that deploys tools (including bodily organs) in perceiving (i.e., aesthesis) and acting” (*ibid.*: 22). Understanding discomfort somaesthetically is to recognize the potential for enhanced bodily awareness that contributes to inquiry and how one trains the body to experience discomfort.

- 13 Through somaesthetic reflection, somaesthetic perception is habituated to be increasingly receptive to feeling. With respect to discomfort, enhanced somaesthetic awareness provides increased readiness for feeling what Leder calls the *dys-appearance* of the body and Svenaeus calls the *unhomelike feeling in the world* (see above). Greater somaesthetic awareness also enables more nuanced thoughts regarding such feeling and inquiry concerning adjustments pertaining to discomfort. As Xenakis and Arnellos indicate, aesthetics is an evaluative process that is borne from the intersection between oneself and the world and provides greater awareness of how one engages with one’s world (Xenakis & Arnellos 2015). Recognizing discomfort as somaesthetic points to the possibility of training oneself to recognize contexts that tend to cause bodily discomfort. Additionally, such recognition allows for training in somaesthetic reflection, honing skills that enhance abilities to reflect upon and remedy feelings of discomfort.

3. Somaesthetics of Discomfort

- 14 Aesthetics of bodily discomfort is relevant to any practice. All practices are rooted in the body and, as Peirce indicates, feeling “is consciousness in its first state” (CP.7.551). Examples of practices that are overtly relevant to somaesthetics of discomfort are physical exercise and athletics, gross and fine motor skills and movements, and bodily positions, such as being seated or standing. Receptivity to feelings of discomfort enhance one’s ability to experience nuances of feeling as they occur. Related to practices, such as the Alexander Technique of which Dewey was a devotee, somaesthetics of discomfort extends into fine-grained quality of feeling – how feelings are experienced (Firsts), how feelings are recognized as being the case (Seconds), and how feelings are categorized or generalized (Thirds). For example, somaesthetic awareness of discomfort during exercise entails feeling what might have otherwise felt like a general discomfort as a form of cramping, burning, shooting, or other more specific type of discomfort of which the exerciser has learned to become acutely aware through the dynamic of somaesthetic perception and somaesthetic reflection. The exerciser is not only able to feel discomfort in its qualitative richness but may also be better able to inquire and adjust to such discomfort because of somaesthetic perception. Reflection upon past discomfort provides richer feelings of discomfort if they recur. Similarly, aesthetic awareness of discomfort provides greater specificity to reflection concerning probable causes, symptoms, and remedies for the feeling.⁵
- 15 An example of the importance of somaesthetic awareness of discomfort during exercise is the feeling of back discomfort. Many exercises, especially when done with improper

form or too much weight, cause mild discomfort without immediate pain. By developing keen somaesthetic perception, wherein one is attuned to subtleties in back discomfort during exercise, one is better able to address issues occurring from improper form or excessive weight with greater precision than if one was not somaesthetically perceptive to nuances in discomfort.

- 16 Similar types of somaesthetic perception pertain to sitting. Ergonomics is a field that focuses on feelings of discomfort, especially those that are subtle and only develop after long hours of being seated. Measurements of comfort and discomfort are often reported in studies about workstations and chairs (Helander *et al.* 1987; Helander & Zhang 1997). These studies, although not explicitly somaesthetic, focus on subtleties and nuances of discomfort that are detected through research amenable to somaesthetic perception and somaesthetic reflection. Measures established for assessing comfort and discomfort, such as the General Comfort Rating (GCR) scale and the Body Part Discomfort (BPD) scale, attempt to capture discomfort as a set of scalar feelings that vary by intensity (Corlett & Bishop 1976). Although scales are quantified generalizations of discomfort, they are tools that may contribute to the development of somaesthetics and help designers solve problems in the design and use of workstations and chair design. Researchers, such as David Bissell, acknowledge the aesthetic sensibility involved in being sedentary, including the domain of seating, and work toward developing tools to help analyze transient feelings of comfort and discomfort (Bissell 2008). Developing somaesthetics of discomfort is important for improving one's abilities to be receptive to varying degrees and types of discomfort and to build from somaesthetic perception of discomfort to somaesthetic reflection about discomfort.
- 17 By improving sensitivity to discomfort as aesthetic experience, one may enhance their abilities to communicate discomfort more specifically to others, as well as be more receptive to the specific discomforts that others experience. In fields such as nursing, analysis of comfort and discomfort helps patients and healthcare workers enhance their sensitivity to feeling so as to develop more advanced vocabularies regarding discomfort (Kolcaba, Tilton & Drouin 2006; Kolcaba 1995; Kolcaba 1994; Kolcaba & Kolcaba 1991). Disability studies have also contributed to increasing the capacity to recognize how different bodies experience spaces differently, including feeling varieties of discomfort (Hansen & Philo 2007; Evans 2006; Tolia-Kelly 2006). Somaesthetics of discomfort strengthens the work being done in these domains by calling attention to the fine-grained experiences of discomfort and developing tools to discern and differentiate between feelings of discomfort. These are rich areas of work that call for more detailed attention that is facilitated through the development of somaesthetics.

4. Conclusion

- 18 Acute awareness of feeling provides enhanced somaesthetic reflection, which advances habits that facilitate greater precision to inquiries concerning discomfort. Through somaesthetics, discomfort is recognized as a call to inquiry. Just as one may become habituated to detecting beauty in objects and events, thus training the senses to feel the subtleties of beauty, one may become habituated to detecting discomfort somaesthetically, developing a keen sense of bodily feeling attuned to moments or situations wherein the body is not at home in the world. Somaesthetics of discomfort is

an extension of heightened somatic self-awareness and a means for enhancing one's awareness of others' discomfort. Recognizing the subtle variations of one's own discomforts provides a basis for openness to the varieties of discomfort experienced by bodies different than one's own. Coupled with tools, such as those found in graphic and narrative medicine, persons who develop a keen somaesthetic sensibility regarding discomfort also develop strengths in moral imagination and empathy.⁶ Cultivating such bodily awareness promotes somatic self-consciousness and increases the capacity to be receptive to how others experience and communicate their discomfort. Education of somaesthetic perception and somaesthetic reflection of this type provides benefits to a variety of fields, such as healthcare and design. Some specific design domains that benefit from somaesthetics of discomfort include interior and structural design, public transit, and tool design.⁷ Being attuned to the aesthetics of bodily discomfort relates to other forms of discomfort that are rooted in feeling but are beyond the scope of this essay, such as psychological, social, and political discomfort. Developing aesthetics of bodily discomfort provides a foundation for understanding other forms that branch into multiple domains of experience and study.

- 19 In the final paragraph of Shusterman's *Body Consciousness*, he states (Shusterman 2008: 216; emphasis mine):

Enchanting intensities of experience can thus be achieved in everyday living without requiring violent measures of sensory intensification that threaten ourselves and others. And if we still prefer more dangerous psychosomatic experiences of extreme intensity, our *somaesthetically cultivated sensory awareness should render us more alert to the imminent risks and also more skilled in avoiding or diminishing the damage.*

- 20 Somaesthetics of discomfort fits within the scope of the sensory awareness Shusterman indicates, but this is a field that requires more examination. I believe that there is immense potential for aesthetic work to be done on discomfort that will provide tools for people to develop greater self-awareness and empathy for others. If the basis of inquiry is irritation, as Peirce phrases the inception of doubt, then the irritation as discomfort is a suitable feeling to begin investigations concerning the body. Inquiry begins with discomfort, and the way discomfort is felt – and how attuned one is to one's discomfort or that of others – directs the inquiring process. Through in-depth examination, I believe that somaesthetics of discomfort will enhance other areas of aesthetics, ethics, and logic, in the sense that Peirce and Dewey use these concepts in their work.

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NOTES

1. Following current philosophical trends, this could be conceived as *epistemic discomfort*, though I believe Peirce and Dewey would hesitate to use the limiting qualifier.
2. For the sake of this argument, I only consider transient discomfort, not chronic discomfort. Additionally, I do not here explore the concept of pain as related or conflated with discomfort (see below). I also do not consider discomfort in terms of mood, language, or politics. Although these types of discomfort certainly give rise to inquiry and may be concomitant with bodily discomfort, they do not pertain to somaesthetic experience as discussed in the following.
3. Also see Dewey's *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (LW.12: 73-6).
4. Shusterman acknowledges a similar point in Dewey's *Art as Experience* regarding the "biological body" as the "roots of the esthetic" (Shusterman 2008: 180; LW.10: 20, 26).
5. This is related to Alexander's notions of "debauched *kinaesthetic* systems" and faulty "sense-appreciation," but without assuming a correct or standard *kinaesthetic* awareness of self

(Shusterman 2008: 191). Somaesthetics of discomfort is focused on enhancing sensitivity to discomfort rather than necessarily finding flaws in one's own bodily comportment. Although such flaws might be detected through increased bodily awareness of discomfort, this is not presumed as the causal basis of discomfort.

6. Graphic medicine is a rapidly growing field that utilizes comic books and graphic novels for expression and education concerning all facets of healthcare and medicine. For a general overview of graphic medicine, cf. Czerwiec *et al.* 2015. Regarding graphic medicine and empathy more specifically, cf. Ronan & Czerwiec 2020. Regarding developing moral imagination through aesthetic sensibility, cf. Johnson 1985; Mullin 2004; Waddock 2010.

7. Aesthetics of discomfort and design relate to everyday aesthetics, such as that put forth by Saito (2017). This topic is beyond the scope of this essay, but I believe it is a field that could bear worthwhile tools to understand experiences of discomfort with a focus on the aesthetics of everyday situations, objects, and environments.

ABSTRACTS

This essay presents somaesthetics of discomfort as an extension of the field of somaesthetics as developed by Shusterman. Using the work of Peirce and Dewey as a foundation upon which Shusterman and Johnson have considered the body as the basis of aesthetics, I propose that somaesthetics of discomfort provides a means of enhancing bodily awareness and reflection useful for domains of inquiry, such as healthcare and design. Taking Peirce's notion of the irritation of doubt in a literal sense, I explore bodily discomfort as the inception of inquiry. I consider work done by phenomenologists concerning experiences of comfort and discomfort, which includes definitions of each. My argument follows the perspective put forth by Peirce, Dewey, and contemporary pragmatists that experience is qualitative and that feeling is at the root of reflection. I explain how discomfort may be considered a type of aesthetic experience and provide examples of bodily discomfort as somaesthetic. In closing, I consider somaesthetic focus on discomfort as fostering moral imagination and empathy.

AUTHOR

MARK TSCHAEPE

Prairie View A&M University
mdtschaepe[at]pvamu.edu