

Education and the Aesthetic Experience  
Professor Megan Laverty  
Philosophy and Education A&HF4092

**Aesthetic Experience and Subliminal Anxiety:  
An analysis of the value and implications of discomfort in education**

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Spring 2022

## Background

Interested in considering the power of learning through embodied practices and the role of discomfort in education, I spoke to Professor Megan Laverty of Teachers College, Columbia University about her inclusion of weekly ‘exercises’ alongside her coursework for graduate students.

Laverty’s activities require mindfully attending to one’s senses and experiences over the course of the week, coupled with specific intentions and directions related to the week’s course readings. These sensory, embodied exercises range from a focus on listening and sounds, to observing children at play, going on walks, practicing a virtue, engaging in an act of care, paying attention to smells, and so on. Students can post their thoughts, experiences, and ideas about their involvement in the exercise on a discussion board, which is available for the entire class to read. The discussion boards are relatively casual, and create an opportunity for students to engage with the coursework and the activity in multimodal approaches — posting pictures, videos, poems, bullet points, etc. Sometimes, the postings are quite poetic and moving, revealing a side of students that is not usually seen in academic settings or in classroom dialogue.

What is particularly intriguing about these activities is that each one, despite their differences, comes with encouragement to participate ‘to the point of discomfort.’ For example, when the activity asks to go on a walk, Laverty asked the class to, ‘go on a walk for longer than is comfortable.’ This is the constant refrain accompanying these weekly exercises.

I wanted to understand what Laverty believes discomfort can add to learning, and she agreed to share her ideas with me, expressing how the weekly exercises have evolved over the years and continue to be something of an experiment for her. What follows is paraphrased from our conversation on March 22nd, 2022.

In my conversation with Lavery, she acknowledged that compared to countries like Japan, many Americans are opposed to the idea of discomfort in education. Rather, American schooling seeks to promote confidence and self-esteem in students — an aim she believes is also reinforced by the role of student evaluations in the tenure and promotion of teachers. Concerned about this cultural and social phenomenon, Lavery uses these exercises as a relatively safe way for students to test whether there is anything to be learned from doing something for a period of time that is longer than is comfortable. While she is mindful to keep the exercises optional so that students do not feel obligated to push themselves, she is curious if students can discover for themselves whether discomfort can advance or heighten their awareness and self-cultivation.

Lavery finds support for her thinking about the value of sustained discomfort from John Dewey's concept of equilibrium, balance, and rhythm from his text, *Art as Experience*. In this text, Dewey suggests there is a need to leave a place of balance and 'detour' from comfort momentarily in order to return to the equilibrium more whole. This is because he believes too much comfort can deter growth by limiting interaction with new ideas.

Dewey is interested in habit, she explained, and much of graduate school is dedicated to creating good scholarly habits. But, as with all habits, even scholarly habits can become reified and this can prevent us from having new experiences that cause vulnerable or uncomfortable feelings that create opportunities for growth. Following this, a purpose of the weekly exercises is to help students become aware of their habits in order to break out of them, to be more alert, conscious, and awake to the changed world around them. It is in that consciousness, after the instance of discomfort, that she believes the possibility of new habits arise — the possibility of education.

Laverty has been encouraged to continue exploring the role of discomfort because of the positive feedback and gratitude she's received from her students. She's learned that students find these activities to be the most memorable aspect of the class, describing them as meaningful and imagination stirring. She believes this creativity and openness may be because moments of discomfort allow students to notice things that they wouldn't otherwise in comfortable situations. Pushing through extra moments, past the point of pleasure, when doing something like observing art or children, can create a sweet spot for observation that creates a deeper connection with the activity. She says it is a true discipline that requires practice, but it is worth it because it allows you to discover what you might not otherwise discover about yourself and the world around you.

## Introduction

Influenced by the weekly exercises, for this paper, I want to investigate the connection between John Dewey's conception of tension and equilibrium in *Art and Experience* and Immanuel Kant's description of the negative pleasure of sublimity in his *Critique of Judgment: Analytic of the Sublime* to analyze the aesthetic value of discomfort in education. While it seems to me not all aesthetic experiences result in the sublime, if the goal of the aesthetic experience is to create growth, then perhaps educators should aim for helping students reach the experience of sublimity, as this anxiety-inducing sensation can put us in tension with our environment, creating aesthetic potential for education through discomfort.

Exploring this claim, I will analyze the aesthetic experience of discomfort that leads to sublime experiences, and further discuss the educational implications of this transition. In doing so, I hope to explain what this aesthetic experience is and what its educational implications could be in terms of supporting students' self-cultivation and awareness within their environments. In

this paper, I assume that moving out of equilibrium creates a discomfort that is anxiety-inducing, and that sublime experiences are similar to experiences of anxiety.

I will begin this analysis by sharing two personal anecdotes I believe were both “Deweyianly direct” and “Kantianly sublime.” I will then explain how both of these experiences forced me out of balance, into tension, like an aesthetic Dewey experience, and how this created a sense of anxiety that transitioned the experience into one of Kantian sublimity. Afterwhich, I will describe the positive feeling of respite that occurred from coming out of the moments of sublime anxiety, and how that rhythmically shifted me back into equilibrium with more purpose. In doing so, I hope to make a sustained argument for the educative potential of discomfort to support the inclusion of educational practices like Laverty’s weekly exercises while also naming some risks.

### Anecdotes for Contemplation

On Sunday morning, May 1st, 2022, I was at work, serving brunch at a restaurant in Greenwich Village, about two blocks from Washington Square Park. As I was taking a coffee order, I heard an approaching crowd, with accompanying chants and drums that made me stop in my tracks. I looked up, and realized there was a protest making its way down Thompson Street. Others at the restaurant began to look as well. As the protest came closer, I realized it's a march for worker protection and citizenship, May Day. Over the next seven or so minutes, I watched without disturbance, as if all of the tables waiting for their avocado toast completely disappeared. I couldn't believe how many people and different groups came together for this march representing all kinds of organizations and causes. I stood on the street as all of my coworkers made their way out of the restaurant to watch the spectacle, even from back in the kitchen. It felt

as if time stopped. It was as if without needing to voice it, we all agreed we wouldn't work for however long it took for the protest to go past because we wanted to be with the crowd. I became emotional, which made me feel overwhelmed. It felt bizarre to be so proud of all of these strangers, a protest I didn't even know was going to happen, for a cause I do not have a direct connection to. Who was I to feel so sensitive, what was my role? And yet, the beauty of the organization of humans, the space that they took up causing our restaurant, and I'm sure many others, to pause to be with them, moved me to tears. It was so powerful. It gave me faith in change and pride in community.

Later that night, while dreaming of tsunamis, I was woken by one of the strongest, loudest thunderstorms I've ever heard. The lightning invaded my bedroom like a flash photograph directed exactly at me, and the thunder made my heart pound. It was invasive; I felt vulnerable. At that moment, I had a vision of Zeus and a group of Greek mythological Gods swarming in the sky wrecking havoc above me. I've never felt scared before about thunder, but for the first time I could imagine that primitive humans must have felt horrified, like they were being punished, before learning the scientific cause of thunder. I became more overwhelmed, thinking that the streets must be flooded with water and contemplating all of the ways we've mistreated our Earth. I saw Ghostbuster and King Kong-like scenes in my head of the Empire State Building being attacked by lightning. Perhaps we really were being punished. I was having anxiety about the climate crisis, and even though I was safe under the covers four floors up in my apartment, I felt like I could have been taken away by the storm at any moment. Listening to the set-off car alarms, I thought it really might be the end. And then, as I began to breathe and find solace, the cars stopped, and the thunder lessened. I was flooded (metaphorically) with relief. The storm calming down felt like the Earth saying it's not too late. I went back to sleep.

## Analysis

While these experiences were vastly different in their description, I find an underlying connection between the way they both took me out of my comfort zone, into a point of tension, and required that I forge my own way back into a comfort zone, bringing with me the lessons from my experience. This leads me to argue they both could be categorized as an aesthetic experience under Dewey's conception and simultaneously sublime under Kant's definition — the combination of which I find important to explore for its educative potential. I will explain the conceptions and their connection to my experience further.

Dewey's conception of direct aesthetic experience, which he believes makes us the most alive, relates to the forming of a purpose through becoming conscious of "...the rhythm of loss of integration with environment and recovery of union" (Dewey, 14). This is like how the protest interrupted my time at work — making me feel like I was in some liminal space without a sense of place. Interested in habits with aims of finding and creating greater wholeness, Dewey believes we must struggle with our environment. This is because he claims we have the most intense aesthetic experiences in "the moment of passage from disturbance into harmony," (Dewey, 16). For example, the moment I submitted to being present with the march, entering an environment different from that of my work, the potential of my aesthetic experience increased. At the same time, submitting to the break in my world caused me to feel overwhelmed, unsure of how to act or of my role. This movement, or rhythm of lost integration, led me toward feelings of anxiety, like when I felt I could be taken by the storm. However, I believe this movement of anxiety supported my understanding and openness to the experience overall by pushing me toward the sublime.

Kant calls the sublime an “outrage on our imagination,” and writes that “the delight in the sublime does not so much involve positive pleasure as admiration or respect i.e., merits the name of negative pleasure” (Kant, 91). Both of my experiences involved an interaction between myself and my environment, nature, and both involved a fleeting feeling of anxiety that made me feel tiny, helpless. However, I was also reminded of my humility, and then found a sense of respite once more. Kant explains that the sublime “postulates the mind’s susceptibility for ideas,” like the feelings of hope I found after both experiences. Eventually, I achieved the point of negative pleasure because I was able to continue the rhythm and ‘recover the union,’ leaving the moment of anxiety and finding comfort once again in my environment. It seems to me that the feeling of respite in the aftermath of a sublime experience is what Dewey means by a return to equilibrium that provides a purpose — like that it’s still possible to save the climate. This is why Dewey believes we must change our habits in order to see outside of what we are used to, finding higher points of unity.

However, Kant also claims that one must be of a ‘Proper mental mood’ for the generation of ideas to occur as an outcome of the sublime. He writes: “In fact, without the development of moral ideas, that which, thanks to preparatory culture, we call sublime, merely strikes the untutored man as terrifying” (Kant, 115). In this way, if education intends to incorporate lessons of discomfort, then it has a responsibility to support the cultivation of students’ interactions with nature, such that they are able to return to equilibrium after detours in tension. Education must work to equip students with tools for how to effectively manage the anxiety that can result from aesthetic experience for the experience to be more than just terrifying. Perhaps the acknowledgement of this challenge is why Laverly calls her exercises a true discipline.



## Concerns and Conclusion

In my conversation with Lavery, she acknowledged that not all of the exercises are equally successful for everyone. Some work far better than others, for reasons she doesn't entirely understand. I find it could be possible that some students are not allowing themselves to be vulnerable, not willing to submit themselves to the discomfort, and therefore not reaping the benefits. But, it's also possible that some students are not able to cope with the anxiety induced by discomfort. Some students may get stuck in the moment of anxiety, and not reach a point of negative pleasure at all. In this scenario, is there a benefit to practicing this discomfort? I argue there still is, given that there must be some rhythm of change occurring when moving between moments of anxiety and moments of relief regardless of students' awareness in that moment.

However, I also wonder the value of encouraging this anxiety to occur on a regular basis, considering the integrative nature of Dewey's arguments for aesthetic experience within daily life. In my experiences, moments of anxiety or discomfort can cause us to feel alone and detached from our surroundings. There can be associated dissolutions, and resulting anti-social behaviors. If every aesthetic experience we encountered resulted in sublime anxiety, would we have enough grip on reality? In other words, does this practice of awareness and mindfulness induced by discomfort only support an egotistical or detached growth?

Overall, it seems that practicing moments of intentional discomfort could create opportunities for students to understand how to manage their anxiety in unintentional scenarios — like talking myself down from crisis during a thunderstorm — and also create experiences for noticing things they would not have before, which I believe is worth pursuing through educational practices, with caution.

WORD COUNT: 2550 (Background section 750); 3 CREDITS

My final concern is related to the individuality and isolation of anxiety. In my experiences, moments of anxiety or discomfort can cause us to feel alone and detached. There can be associated dissolutions, and resulting anti-social behaviors. While I still see the potential of an increasingly positive re-centering created from coming out of anxious episodes with a heightened awareness of their cause or role in self-cultivation, I am still skeptical of the constructive value of this outside of a personal scale. In other words, does this practice of awareness and mindfulness induced by discomfort only support an egotistical growth?

and therefore there is value in creating educational practices that move between the rhythms of tension into sublimity.

For example, when I questioned my emotional response to the protest, it made me think about myself and if I deserved to be having that intense of a response. At first, I had feelings of guilt for not participating or doing enough to support the cause. Then, I thought I must be so much more caring and sensitive, because I could be moved by something I wasn't participating in. Then I felt further uncomfortable, because I realized I was making a huge protest about myself, rather than just appreciating the beauty of the event and those who did show up for it. Of course, I quickly did find appreciation and allowed myself to cry for what I think are the right

reasons, but these thoughts of making myself bigger first to then make myself smaller and reach the negative pleasure, did go through my mind.

-necessity of our interaction with aesthetic experiences and experiences with the sublime to be cultivated such that we can understand and control them and get to the point of respite. This is where breaking habits is necessary, to see outside of ourselves and into the release, back to equilibrium. **Learning and cultivating our interactions with nature**

\*\*it is important to note that not all anxious situations result in the sublime, some people do not know or have the ability to come out of their anxiety attacks, control it, or its last longer than it should... but even when it lasts longer than it should it eventually ends and the pleasure returns. How can we make students more equipped to be out of their comfort zones, to be more prepared to handle anxiety, such that they can experience the growth of the negative pleasure.

An aesthetic experience re: Dewey, tensions, equilibrium, full alive self

The sublime for Kant: types of sublimity, overwhelmed and then respite and realization/awareness of self

How taking Dewey's ideas seriously might imply having constant sublime experiences: to make our everyday experiences full may be overwhelming, but will be constantly moving us

The value of discomfort in education: how this discomfort actually works in ed, improving ones mindfulness

Conclusion: and yet, this mindfulness may be an isolating or individualistic lifestyle overall

Dewey's aesthetic experience is this, and he thinks its necessary to move in and out of tension in order to achieve this, to be fully alive, which means we have to have some sort of discomfort.

Kant thinks sublime experiences humble us, keep us alive... ourselves we experience sublime experiences

### **KANT QUOTES:**

Kant on judgement: "if...the particular is given and the universal has to be found for it, then the judgment is simply *reflective*."

-the reflect is to make an aesthetic judgement... need to slow down... deweys experience

"the sublime as a presentation of an indeterminate concept of reason" (p. 91).

-we cannot reason it, we cannot explain it, and this inability is overwhelming, reminds us that we are small.

"the delight in the sublime does not so much involve positive pleasure as admiration or respect i.e., merits the name of negative pleasure" (p. 91)

-we get delight from coming down from the overwhelm, from understanding the beauty in our humility, in our size, and the larger world that we have the pleasure of existing within.

**Mathematically sublime:** “For it represents all that is great in nature as in turn becoming little; or, to be more exact, it represents our imagination in all its boundlessness, and with it nature, as sinking into insignificance before the ideas of reason, once their adequate presentation is attempted’ (p. 105). “*that is sublime in comparison with which all else is small*” (p. 97). “But precisely because there is a striving in our imagination towards progress ad infinitum, while reason demands absolute totality, as a real idea, that same inability on the part of our faculty for the estimation of the magnitude of things of the world of sense to attain to this idea, is the awakening of a feeling of a supersensible faculty within us; and it is the use to which judgment naturally puts particular objects on behalf of this latter feeling, and not the object of sense, that is absolutely great, and every other contrasted employment small. Consequently it is the disposition of the soul evoked by a particular representation engaging the attention of the reflective judgment, not the Object, that is to be called sublime.”

**Dynamically sublime:** “provided our own position is secure, their aspect is all the more attractive for its fearfulness; and we readily call these objects sublime, because they raise the forces of the soul above the height of the vulgar commonplace, and discover within us a power of resistance of quite another kind, which gives us courage to be able to measure ourselves against the seeming omnipotence of nature” (pp. 110-111).

-fear, and then respite.

The Proper mental mood for a feeling of the sublime postulates the mind’s susceptibility for ideas, since it is precisely in the failure of nature to attain to these---and consequently only under the presupposition of this susceptibility and of the straining of the imagination to use nature as a schema for ideas—that there is something forbidding to sensibility, but which, for all that, has an attraction for us, arising from the fact of its being a dominion which reason exercises over sensibility with a view to extending it to the requirements of its own realm (the practical) and letting it look out beyond itself into the infinite, which for it is an abyss. In fact, without the development of moral ideas, that which, thanks to preparatory culture, we call sublime, merely strikes the untutored man as terrifying (p. 115).

-necessity of our interaction with aesthetic experiences and experiences with the sublime to be cultivated such that we can understand and control them and get to the point of respite. This

is where breaking habits is necessary, to see outside of ourselves and into the release, back to equilibrium. **Learning and cultivating our interactions with nature**

#### DEWEY QUOTES:

As an organism increases in complexity, the rhythms of struggle and consummation in its relation to its environment are varied and prolonged, and they come to include within themselves an endless variety of sub-rhythms. The designs of living are widened and enriched. Fulfillment is more massive and more subtly shaded.” (p.23)

There are two sorts of possible worlds in which aesthetic experience would not occur. In a world of mere flux, change would not be cumulative; it would not move toward a close. Stability and rest would have no being. Equally is it true, however, that a world that is finished, ended, would have no traits of suspense and crisis, and would offer no opportunity for resolution. **Where everything is already complete, there is no fulfillment. Because the actual world, the world in which we live, is a combination of movement and culmination, of breaks and re-unions, the experience of a living creature is capable of aesthetic quality. The live being recurrently and loses and reestablishes equilibrium with his surroundings. The moment of passage from disturbance into harmony is that of intensest life.** In a finished world, sleep and waking could not be distinguished. In one wholly perturbed, conditions could not even be struggled with. In a world made after the pattern of ours, moments of fulfillment punctuate experience with rhythmically enjoyed intervals (p. 15-16)

The rhythm of loss of integration with environment and recovery of union not only persists in man but becomes conscious with him; its conditions are material out of which he forms purposes. Emotion is the conscious sign of a break, actual or impending. The discord is the occasion that induces reflection. Desire for restoration of the union converts mere emotion into interest in objects as conditions of realization of harmony.

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Direct experience comes from nature and man interacting with each other. In this interaction, human energy gathers, is released, dammed up, frustrated and victorious. There are rhythmic beats of want and fulfillment, pulses of doing and being withheld from doing.” (p.

