“Experience” is no longer a technical term in philosophy, if it ever was. In the Anglo-American philosophical tradition, it has been understood to refer to “the given”. In this tradition, discussion of what experience is has focussed especially on two matters. First: Does the sense-datum theory, its precursors or successors, adequately capture the nature of the given? Or are those who oppose this view by insisting that the given is better described, with James, as a “booming, buzzing confusion” closer to the truth? Second: What role does the given play in our gaining knowledge of a world? Does the given provide raw material which we then work up into knowledge by categorizing it? And if so, what is the status of these categories? Are they in turn derived from experience? Or are they part of the furniture of our minds? Are we able to extract knowledge from the given by working it up in non-problematic ways ... as would be held, for example, by those who believe that the given is susceptible of description by means of incorrigible protocol statements?

It would advance understanding of distinctively esthetic experience (or of the esthetic in experience) hardly at all if the present discussion focussed on the questions about experience which are uppermost in the Anglo-American tradition. Fortunately, there is in the indigenous American philosophical tradition a different understanding of experience which can be more usefully deployed for present purposes. I have in mind the view of experience developed by John Dewey. Dewey’s account stresses three points which I want to develop in my own way here. The first is that experience does not consist simply in “having experiences” but includes as well an active aspect, and that these two, having experiences and being active are typically interrelated in a certain way. The second is that in experience means and ends form a continuum. The third is that a distinction may be made between the consciousness which a non-human animal has, mere feeling and awareness, and that

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which is characteristic of humans, sense-giving consciousness, by which meanings are assigned to events.¹

In developing an account of experience which builds on these three elements, Dewey was going back to the original meaning of the verb, to experience: to put to a test. Thus, in the OED one of the early uses shown is this one: ‘‘Make experience of my loyalty, by some service.’’ In this use we can understand that the person who is invited to carry out the test, to make the experience, will by doing so, have an experience in the contemporary philosophical sense. Specifically, the person will experience that behaviour of the speaker which exhibits the speaker’s loyalty. There is accordingly a significant connection between the original use of the verb, to experience, and its contemporary philosophical use. But Dewey develops the three themes in such a way as to exhibit that there advantages in reverting to a modified form of its original sense.

In this Deweyan usage, ‘‘experience’’ refers to a connection of events, either to something that happens in consequence of something done, or to something one does in consequence of something that happens. The experience is that when one acts in some way something follows, or that when something happens one acts or responds in some way. The experience is attributed to the actor. But what is experienced is not, as the modern view would have it, either the acting or the noted consequence or antecedent of the action. Rather, the experience is, precisely, the action as prompted by the antecedent event, or as yielding a consequence. Here something must be experienced, that is, the subject of the experience must have it. In light of this, Dewey’s choice of terms, ‘‘doing’’ and ‘‘undergoing’’, is appropriate. But, again, the experience in this usage does not consist merely in the sequence, a doing followed by something undergone. It consists in these as connected: the doing as bringing on that which is then undergone; that which is undergone as brought on by (or prompting) that which is done.

There would be no point in insisting that to experience ‘‘really’’ means to test, that an experience ‘‘really’’ is a means/consequence connection, and in recommending that contemporary philosophers drop the prevalent subjective use of experience in favour of Dewey’s broader one. I do think, however, that there would be some advantage in adding the Deweyan notion to our arsenal. One advantage is that the broader notion embeds the narrower, subjective sense of the term. Experience, as something we merely have, only occurs in the course of experiencing, in Dewey’s sense. (1) It is only by making reference to the broader use of the term that we can understand many of the features of subjective experience. (2) And, in particular, our understanding of esthetic and of artistic experience, of what they have in common and of how they should be distinguished, is advanced by having

¹. The two works of Dewey’s on which the following account is based are Experience and Nature, second edition (LaSalle, Illinois: Open Court, 1929); and Art as Experience (New York: Minton, Balch & Co., 1934). For the former, see especially Chapters 1, 8, and 9; for the latter, Chapters 1, 2, and 3.