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The world and knowledge as emergences
Expressive emergence and originary co-emergence in the work of Mikel Dufrenne

Abstract
One key aspect of Phenomenology, i.e. the relationship between consciousness and phenomena, has been described, with regard to when this relationship begins to arise, as a co-emergence of the subject and the world. The aim of this article is to demonstrate how the theme of emergence may also be found in the philosophy of Mikel Dufrenne. First of all, strictly speaking, what emerges is what manifests itself and exerts influence due to the merging of some properties, although what emerges cannot be reduced to these properties. This dynamic may be clearly seen in aesthetics, where affective or expressive qualities manifest themselves. Secondly, and more broadly, what emerges is that which begins to take shape from an indistinct, latent background. Hence, the plane of "presence" – a cognitive prereflective dimension of symbiosis with the world – may be understood as a place of originary co-emergence.

Keywords
Expressiveness, Form, Aesthetic qualities, Presence

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1. *An ontology of emergence: Some assumptions in Dufrenne's philosophy*

If we assume that the concept of "appearing" is analogous to that of "emerging", we can see why the topic of emergence is not at all alien to Phenomenology, but rather has been more or less explicitly addressed by phenomenological thinkers. Etymologically, a phenomenon is mainly that which appears, that which manifests in itself or to a consciousness, anything that takes shape or becomes identifiable from a latent background. This is all the more true when we question where perception begins, or how a world and a consciousness initially form and establish a relationship. Husserl addresses the issue of emergence in his 1920s lectures on the structure of pre-predicative experience (Husserl 2001; 1973). Both the perceived object and judgment are the actualization of operations and contents that are already internally coherent on an involuntary and passive plane. In particular, Husserl uses the expression "emergence" (*Abgehobenheit*) to describe what happens, in terms of content, during the formation of sense-units through contrast and internal references starting from a background that, because they impact the subject in the present moment, lead to affection:

> "To affect" means to emerge from the environment, which is always copresent, to attract interest to oneself, possibly interest in cognition. […] The stronger this "affection", the stronger the tendency to give way to it, to bring about the apprehension. […] To be awakened means to submit to an effective affection. A background becomes "alive"; intentional objects from this background draw more or less close to the ego; this or that attracts the ego powerfully to itself. The ego is close to an object when it turns toward it. (Husserl 1973: 30, 78, 79, translation slightly modified)

Affection transforms pure passivity into action and passive syntheses become active. The latter are expressions of actions that are still always involuntary and hence unreflective; however, the subject reacts to the action of an object in any case, it gives it its attention, positions itself in relation to it through the movement of its body from specific perspectives, which is why some objectivating acts may occur as well as the grasping of a meaning (through the modalities of evidence, negation, doubt and indeterminateness with respect to what was initially experienced). Husserl talks in terms of emergence because the contrast between a given and its surroundings – or between what comes before and after it in time – takes on varying degrees of clarity (Husserl 1973: 74-5). Formally speaking,

however, these dynamics are only possible due to the increasingly clear pre-categorical manifestation of temporality and spatiality (in the modalities of retention and protention), which enable any kind of experience (Husserl 1973: 164-5, 185). On the other hand, Husserl remarks: "must we not say that, in contrast to the waking Ego, the sleeping is complete immersion in Ego-matter, in the *hyle,* is undifferentiated Ego-being, is Ego-sunkenness, whereas the awake Ego opposes itself to the matter and then is affected, acts, undergoes, etc.?" (Husserl 1989: 265). So, for Husserl, knowledge presents itself as a process of actualization – both in the object and the subject – of latent properties or abilities, which certainly has ethical implications: "No one 'knows' himself or has 'knowledge' of what he is, without *learning* to know himself. Self-experience, self-apperception, is constantly expanding. The 'learning to know oneself' is one with the development of self-apperception, with the constitution of the 'self', and this development is carried out in unity with the development of the subject itself" (Husserl 1989: 264-5).

It is interesting to note how, although Mikel Dufrenne was not directly influenced by Husserl – and he even sometimes denies any such influence – some of these assumptions may be found in Dufrenne's ontological reflections because, in the field of French phenomenology, Dufrenne contributed more than any other to giving cognitive primacy to the sensuous experience. From his beginnings in the 1950s (*The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, 1953) until his last work (*L'œil et l'oreille,* 1987), Dufrenne's line of philosophical enquiry focused on exploring the dynamics of mutual, equal influence between the subject and the world, an influence that allows the actualization of latent predispositions and properties from a common ground, that can be construed – depending on whether the focus is on its gnoseological or ontological aspects – as "virtual", "prereal" or "Nature". Intentionality is considered a process whereby distinguishing the active from the passive is only possible in the abstract, which is why intentionality concerns not only representative and reflexive knowledge, but also affective knowledge. Far from being an egoic pole providing order and structure to a chaotic sensuous substrate, consciousness is instead what gradually takes shape from a dimension of pregivenness already with its own constitution and meaningfulness, a dimension where the lines between what is subjective and objective are blurred. These aspects are what led Dufrenne to develop "an ontology of meaning" (Dufrenne 1973a: 552) and reconsider Kant's transcendentalism in material and affective terms. Actually, we can say that, in Dufrenne's philosophy the theme of emergence is closely connected to that

of the *a priori*, the focal point of his philosophical thought: "[t]he real is lived as the field of possibilities. Furthermore, the real appears precisely through the mediation of the *a priori* taken as the purely possible" (Dufrenne 1973a: 532).

It is known that, when addressing Kantian thought, Dufrenne criticizes Kant's conception of formal *a priori*, pointing out how the gnoseological function of the *a priori* is only one of its implications and not its constituent aspect (Dufrenne 1966: 3-42). More radically, the *a priori* cannot be only a subjective predisposition because this would not explain the existence of all those "secret affinities" that characterize our relationship with the world, i.e. the fact that expressive, affective and, more broadly, ontological qualities also express modes of being of reality itself. Since it is material, the *a priori* is equally objective and subjective. In the first case, it indicates a meaning, a holistic quality that is indispensable or structural for a given object, enabling it to be what it is. There can be many such qualities in the same object depending on the type of cognitive interest exerted, and these are not always known or actualized (Dufrenne 1966: 114-5). In the second case, it indicates the subject's ability to grasp or anticipate this meaning of the object, a virtuality (or "power") that can be deployed in relation to various objects we establish relationships with. In *L'inventaire des a priori* (Dufrenne 1981a) – one of his most substantial and meaningful works, as has been correctly noted (Formaggio 1981: 10) – Dufrenne takes on the challenging task of classifying these objective and subjective *a priori* and trying to define the traits of a formal and material ontology. In doing so, since such research is already problematic and not exhaustive in itself (Ricoeur 1999), Dufrenne is aware that the essential characteristics of the objects must be differentiated from their contingent aspects in order to avoid the risk of merely classifying them empirically (Dufrenne 1981: 311).

Without delving further into this and risking going off topic, what is useful to point out is that, in this last work, the concept of emergence is addressed more explicitly than in his previous works, seeing as the final part of the book is indeed entitled "Emergences"[1]. Here, in order to understand what gives rise to the correlation between subjective and objective *a priori*, Dufrenne makes a genesis of the *a priori* themselves, i.e. he

[1] More generally speaking, Dufrenne himself admits that in this book he reflects on things which he did not pay adequate attention to in his previous writings (Dufrenne 1981: 293). He already discussed the co-emergence of subjective and objective *a priori* in *The A Priori and the Philosophy of Nature* (Dufrenne 1990: 13-26).

investigates the common ground ("*l'a priori des a priori*") they emerge from, a ground that should not be construed as a temporal beginning, but rather as the "originary" or the *foyer des possibles*:

> What justifies this search for a primary state – without facilitating it, however – is the fact that a secondary state exists: we can conceive the splitting of the a priori into subjective and objective as a derivative of a primitive unit […] The pluralism of the a priori, as well as – since the objective a priori is also constituent of the object – the pluralism of the real itself, i.e. the emergence (*surgissement*) of a diversified world. (Dufrenne 1981: 226)[2]

The only temporal form of this ground is that of an infinite present, or an *écoulement sans succession*. Dufrenne uses this expression to stress that such becoming – far from being a temporal genesis of objects *ex nihilo* – is akin to an emergence of aspects of the real that are ever present. In other words, the only thing that is historical is how the *a priori* come to be known and actualized over time: the subjective *a priori* (or the cognitive process) which each time causes specific aspects of the world to emerge. Through this process, the subject becomes itself, or rather, the subject itself emerges, thereby causing the latent meaning of the world to emerge: "through art, man gains his being, while at the same time nature acquires its meaning" (Dufrenne 1973a: 552). Finally, it should be pointed out that a same "class" of *a priori* manifests in different ways depending on the perceptive or cognitive situation in which it is operating, so what we see is a process of differentiation or multiplication of the *a priori*, as the subject gradually, detaching from a merely unreflective experience, also comes to use representation and understanding[3].

2. *"Form is a promise of interiority": The aesthetic object and affective-expressive emergence*

In light of the foregoing, it is possible to identify a first meaning of the concept of emergence in Dufrenne's philosophy, although he rarely used

[2] When the quote still has no official English translation, we have provided one here.
[3] For example, "sensory *a priori*" predispose the body to experience the different forms of apprehension. Subsequently, they present as "*a priori* of knowledge", which like the "sensory *a priori*" predispose us to the different realms of knowledge. Needs, i.e. the implicit knowledge of certain vital values and necessary goods that we immediately recognize, express an aptitude found in the "affective *a priori*". Instincts give rise to the "activity *a priori*" and so on.

this term. A great many complex phenomena and objects (consciousness, society, vital phenomenon, esthetic objects) have structural features or qualities that, in addition to characterizing them in a specific way, cannot be deduced from the sum of their parts. This is indeed why they are specularly and authentically known to the subject, not through analytical study, but through the unfolding of certain innate attitudes. In formulating a theory on this, Dufrenne was undoubtedly influenced by the theories of Gestalt psychology, which he was familiar with mainly through the synthesis provided by Paul Guillaume (1937)[4]. When discussing vital phenomena, for example, Dufrenne uses the expression "good form" to indicate the organization of a whole which cannot be deprived of its parts, otherwise, it will disappear. The organism, and the immanent law that endows it with a permanence that goes beyond its contingent changes, is more radically defined as "unifying and informing energy", "a unity that is a harbinger of interiority" (Dufrenne 1981:181). Elsewhere, the *a priori* is described as a form that enables the object to take on its meaning (Dufrenne 1966: 105), and later we will see how the concept of form is central to his aesthetic reflections[5]. However, it should be noted that, in the last two texts cited, Dufrenne's analyses often tend to overlap, and even confuse, the description of the relationship between an object's individual elements and structural qualities with the more general Husserl-inspired description of "regional ontologies", which is why the meaning of "emergence" that we have identified is not always explored as it should be. This is hardly due to Dufrenne's negligence; rather, it may quite easily be because a great many phenomena are being analyzed simultaneously, phenomena that are so varied that, as previously pointed out, performing an exhaustive detailed analysis of them is challenging. However, the situation changes entirely if we shift over to the field of aesthetics, where we know the majority of Dufrenne's philosophical interests converged. In *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, the aesthetic object in its multiple expressions and the reasons enabling its expressive emergence are analyzed with almost unrivalled rigor and accuracy in phenomenological aesthetics. This is why we will be focusing exclusively on the type of emergence characterizing the aesthetic object.

[4] In *Psychologie de la forme*, Guillaume mainly explores the most important positions of the so-called "Berlin School", i.e. the thought of Koffka, Köhler and Lewin, and highlights how Gestalt theory is equally different from materialism and from spiritualism.
[5] On the relationship between form and a criticism of Formalism as an investigatory method, see these essays by Dufrenne: *Formalisme logique et formalisme esthétique* (in Dufrenne 1967); and *Le formalisme* (in Dufrenne 1981b).

In fact, we cannot completely understand Dufrenne's philosophy without taking into account that ontological qualities manifest also, if not primarily, as affective qualities. A work of art is composed of many different aspects: the materials used, the matter arranged according to schemata, the object represented, the artist's transposition of their way of being. Yet its "affective *a priori*" – a particular mood which we intersubjectively recognize that it expresses – can in no way be deduced from the sum of these aspects. Both the artist and the spectators, with their individual natures and in different ways, cause this *a priori* to emerge: the artist by creating the work, i.e. by making a feeling or a unique, irreplaceable "world" appear (because it is also imbued with its creator's way of being) that would otherwise remain hidden in Nature's meanderings; the spectators by actualizing certain expressions of this world: affective nuances of meaning that can only exist or be understood through the way of being of those who perceive them. Hence, art takes on a cosmological function, because, first and foremost, it shows us some features of the real that cannot otherwise be experienced (Dufrenne 1973a: 503). This is why it is not art that needs the real, but "on the contrary, the real does expect something from art […]. The real expects its meaning to be spoken," its affective meaning (Dufrenne 1973a: 549). Therefore, affective qualities are not merely subjective experiences, which is why they also inspire the evocative nature of metaphorical language.

Now, let's focus more specifically on the relationship between emergence and expressive form, or better, on the expressive form of the aesthetic object as an emergent principle. As already partially mentioned, according to Dufrenne, for the aesthetic object, form is what gives the work expressive and affective unity, or it is even this very unity. It is a meaning that, unlike what occurs with objects of use, cannot be separated from the sensuous aspects it expresses itself through. We could say that form is the specific way that the sensuous arranges itself in a work, or its physiognomy or behavior, so to speak (Dufrenne 1973a: 326-7). So, nothing could be further from the idea of form as mere "contour". Form, as we describe it, regards the artistic dimension; while contour regards decorative or ornamental aspects, and it is indeed this important distinction that Dufrenne focuses on to explain what form is. In fact, in ornament the signification conveyed prevails over the sensuous, making it totally impersonal. Take a geometric pattern: the overall organizing principle is independent from how it is expressed, from its material components, and the pleasure we feel in contemplating it is akin to what we feel when we intellectually grasp a concept. Ornament does not possess a sensuous

flesh: the concrete aspect of the world that inspired it has become an abstract idea. In the aesthetic object, on the other hand, meaning is only expressed through the specific way of being of the sensuous itself: the colors, shapes or sounds, what is narrated or represented, are arranged according to specific relationships that express a style. Obviously, form is also what marks the contours of the aesthetic object and distinguishes it from an external background, and it is also what helps to define some of the objects portrayed (as in the visual arts in particular)[6]. However, form is first and foremost a sort of organization, a compenetration of aspects, an internal meaning that endows the whole with a certain expressiveness. And Dufrenne points out that it was Gestalt psychology which stressed this way of understanding form, which is why he states that "the models proposed by Gestalt psychology could serve to manifest the difference between the ornamental and the artistic, particularly between the decorative and the pictorial" (Dufrenne 1973a: 139).

In light of this, Dufrenne notes how, in the aesthetic object, the unity provided by form acts or is situated on various levels. Therefore, we could describe the aesthetic object's structure as concentric, where a form or a kind of primary unity is part of a larger form, the overall form of the work. The first level of formal unity is the unity deriving from its representative elements. What is represented – whether it be the subject portrayed, narrated or listened to[7] – provides a way of being to the material and sensuous aspects of the work (which are already structured according to specific rhythmic, harmonic and melodic schemata) that gives them additional meaning. Likewise, these sensuous aspects allow what is represented to express its signification: "This is the secret of the work of art […]. The subject – in the sense of the subject matter [*le sujet*] – is wedded with exactitude to the form of the sensuous; it is the form of this form" (Dufrenne 1973a: 142). Hence, what is important is not so much what is represented but how it is represented. The signification is immanent in the signifying: it is that immanent meaning in the work that, as we have

[6] The fact that, in a drawing, a figure's contours prevail over sensuous matter causes Dufrenne to consider this art as potentially ambiguous. Just as graphic features refer to a signification that is external, likewise, in a painting, the fact of assigning too much importance to the drawing to the detriment of color causes painting to fall prey to mimesis. We erroneously pay more attention to contour because it is easier to analyze through understanding (Dufrenne 1973a: 140-1, 283-5).

[7] In the case of music, which is a non-representative art, Dufrenne argues that the representative function is carried out by the melody, which gives the work a theme or subject.

seen, is different from the abstract signification inherent to decoration[8]. However, this first formal level alone would not account for the unique nature of the aesthetic object, because what is represented (its "subject") only acquires further meaning as part of a greater form, or better, through a new way of presenting itself deriving from the overall affective expression of the work. "The aesthetic object speaks not only from the richness of the sensuous but through the affective quality which it expresses and which allows us to recognize it without recourse to concepts. Its unity is not only sensuous but affective" (Dufrenne 1973a: 143). Dufrenne provides a very eloquent example to explain this kind of formal, two-tier organization. He does so by using the example of a rather simple aesthetic object: a column, which is a sign that his reflections can be applied to works of any kind. "[T]o be a column is an implicit meaning of stone, but to be slender and majestic involves a surplus of sense. It is thanks to this surplus that we truly see the column" (Dufrenne 1973a: 144). The fact that it is a column is the first formal level of the aesthetic object, the one that organizes and provides signification to the matter it is made of. However, the fact that a column is majestic is a further form, that gives the object an expression. Another example from his writings is poetry. It is not enough for the verbal material to be organized or that the language be musical, it must express a meaning: not meaning that can be expressed using ordinary language, but rather affective meaning which poetry exhales "like perfume and which is the work's genuine garment" (Dufrenne 1973a: 143). In short, if the subject of the work (i.e. what is represented) already confers a meaning (i.e. an initial formal unity) to the sensuous aspects of the work, the expression is instead "the ultimate form of the aesthetic object and the meaning of its meaning" (Dufrenne 1973a: 142). This also makes it superfluous to distinguish between form and background, since the form of the aesthetic object is "a form pregnant with a ground", the "unity of the internal and the external". And aesthetic perception is none other than what "grasps the ground in the form".

However, what we are really curious about is the relationship between the individual parts and the overall form. Does expressivity only belong to the whole, i.e. to the form, whether it be of the first or second

[8] Dufrenne notes that the immanence of meaning in the sensuous must not be grasped through the notion of isomorphism between expression and content, as occurs, in the case of poetry, through structurally separating sememes and phonemes. Instead, they total adhere to one another (Dufrenne 1976: 250).

type, or does it also belong to the parts that make it up? How do the parts elicit the overall affective quality of the work? Then, conversely, how is it that the expressive form also ends up exerting influence or power over these parts? We know these questions are crucial to emergentist metaphysics and ontologies (both for British Emergentism and Later Emergentism, which mainly developed through analytic philosophy and its aesthetic theories), and this is why we feel that Dufrenne's answers to these questions may be of further interest[9]. We have seen how, because expressiveness is an affective quality that engages us before reflection, it can neither be analyzed nor broken down. Moreover, the fact that the aesthetic value of a work does not derive from the sum of its parts is proven by all those instances where, although some of the specific elements of the work may be missing or substituted, its overall expressiveness is unchanged. Dufrenne gives the example of a ruin that is still expressive despite its decrepit state, or a work that has been executed over and over again that, although changed its "body", does not change its essence which resides in its form, i.e. in its set of relationships and not in its individual parts (Dufrenne 1973a: 163-6). Nevertheless, Dufrenne remarks how one is totally justified in wondering whether the expressiveness of a work, or of a whole in general, might also be generated by the expressiveness of its individual elements:

> When we admire the striking serenity of someone's face, do we not seek the characteristics which produce this impression in us – the contrast between the lines of the forehead which speak of passion and struggle and the calm gaze, the vivacity of the pupils, or the firm outline of the mouth? It is in the same way that we refer to expressive traits in the work of art. (Dufrenne 1973a: 327)

Moreover, in his criticism of using a structuralist approach to study literary works, which risks overlooking concrete references to the sensuous elements of the world, Dufrenne remarks how, although a work is a meaningful whole (which "ought to be read in the same way as a *Gestalt*"), it is necessary that the elements thereof – in this case words – already possess their own meaning (Dufrenne 1990: 182). However, in light of this, Dufrenne explains that, if a work's individual parts seem

[9] Given the vast bibliography on this topic, for an overall introductive summary of the main questions addressed in Emergentism, to which we make implicit reference herein, we would like to limit ourselves to mentioning the following essays: Humphreys (1996); Lovejoy (1927); McLaughlin (1997); Pepper (1926) and Zhok 2022 (published in this same issue of "Studi di estetica").

especially expressive, this is because we have already been struck by the expressiveness of the whole. Would each of the expressive features we think we identify actually retain the same expressiveness within a different whole? Of course not. On the contrary, any element can contribute to the expressiveness of the whole, which is why expressiveness must be attributed to the work as a whole, not to its parts. This argument is confirmed by the fact that, if we try to artificially create expressive elements and later introduce them into the whole, the expressiveness of the work becomes unnatural (Dufrenne 1973a: 328-9). In a nutshell, Dufrenne admits that in a work the individual figurative or objectual elements may be expressive, but he explains that this expressiveness can only emerge within a whole or a set of relationships. This means that, by emerging, the affective/expressive form of the work ends up transforming (or actualizing) the expressive and relational potential of its very elements. Although obviously Dufrenne does not use these words, we can compare this to some of the phenomena theorized by emergentist ontologies: on the one hand, to the so-called "downward causation", i.e. the fact that the emergent quality ends up acting on its parts (Andersen 2000); and on the other hand, to the manifestation of those "dispositional properties"[10] that cause the object and its parts to assume certain "behaviors" (in our case affective), which will be actualized when they are triggered by the encounter with an external element (in our case the perception of the spectator):

> the decorative is not truly expressive, although it has its own physiognomy in the sense that we can feel that a certain line is supple, a particular outline is severe, or a particular figure is heavy. But such characteristics do not appear to be directed or ordered by an individual who is expressing himself through them. They gain their complete meaning only in the aesthetic object […] In this case, since the represented object has been neutralized, a line does not hold my attention as a contour of some object. But it does not attract it either, as in the case of the decorative arts, because of some abstract law of design. Rather, the line expresses what is sensuous within it, to wit, its splendor, its firmness, its fantasy, and its elegance. (Dufrenne 1973a: 140-1, translation slightly modified)

In fact, we have already seen how the overall expressive meaning of a work influences its parts on several (downward) levels. First, this affective

[10] Regarding the classical juxtoposition between "dispositional properties" and "categorical properties" (see Marmodoro-Mayr 2017: 41-53), it should be noted that Dufrenne also develops a concept that could be likened to the latter: the "affective categories" (Dufrenne 1973a: 463-500).

meaning renders the objects represented expressive and transforms them into "new objects" (Dufrenne 1973a: 143). Second, what is represented in turn structures and renders the sensuous matter, i.e. the individual graphic, sound or visual elements, expressive or meaningful. Now, if we broaden our discussion of this type of causation, we might consider the "regional ontologies" or the ontological bounds identified by Phenomenology as areas that owe their specific nature to the fact of giving rise to certain causal powers and not others (in the case of aesthetic objects: to affective powers or bounds)[11]. Dufrenne himself suggested this interpretation of the "causal power" of emergent expressive qualities. What he mainly says is that the sensuous of the aesthetic object, organized by form, is "powerful" (Dufrenne 1973a: 91). What is more, he associates the function of form in the aesthetic object with the function of the soul in a body, making explicit reference to the Aristotelian concept of the soul as the "formal cause" or "substantial form" (Dufrenne 1973a: 144, 230, 268). Dufrenne went even further than what we have discussed, attributing emancipatory and subversive potential to the practice of art, which is why we can say that emergent affective qualities go beyond the confines of the works and transform even mankind and the world (Dufrenne 1974).

This makes it all the more clear why Dufrenne considers the aesthetic object a *quasi for-itself* (or a *quasi subject*), an interiority that can enter into a relationship with other subjects but without diminishing its own essence. It is a whole, or an expressive totality, distinct from what is external to it. Although it is an expression of Nature, a work of art generates its own "world"; a form that refers to more than just an external object, it contains its own truth[12]. Using an effective and evocative expression, Dufrenne synthesizes this by arguing that "form is a promise of interiority" (Dufrenne 1973a: 146). These features of a work of art are also what enable the aesthetic object to be distinguished from the natural sensuous object. The latter is rooted in the background from which it appears; it is interconnected with the world or is "lost in it" through a network of references; it is "*powerless* in-itself", because it is incapable of autonomously manifesting an affective meaning that is intrinsic to it (such

[11] On the relationship between Emergentism and Phenomenology, also in reference to the material *a priori*, see De Monticelli, Conni (2008).

[12] "Instead of being indefinitely determined from without, affective qualities involve a certain way of relating to themselves, a manner of constituting themselves as a totality – in short, a capacity for affecting *themselves*" (Dufrenne 1973a: 442, translation partially modified).

meaning, if it exists, is projected onto it by a subject that aestheticizes it); and, because it is perceived in relation to its context, it is mainly understood using the intellect. Aesthetic objects – since they are also not created for a purpose and an expression of Nature construed as the origin – obviously also have some of the same characteristics as natural objects, i.e. extraneousness, depth, mysteriousness. However, because aesthetic objects give matter new form (namely, a new way of expressing itself), they surpass nature itself and become "signifying nature"; hence they possess a necessity and a purpose that is wholly internal (Dufrenne 1973a: 89-91, 243). In aesthetic objects, sensuous matter is self-sufficient: it organizes itself and expresses a meaning that is not externally imposed, although it is also linked to the personality of its author. For all these reasons, the aesthetic object is considered "the apotheosis of the sensuous" or "the sensuous appearing in its glory". Finally, it should also be noted that, although its emergent affective qualities may in no way be deduced from the sum of its specific aspects, it is still possible to identify some constants when it comes how they manifest, which is why their potential expressive effects may be known and temporarily classified (what Dufrenne calls "affective categories"): "[t]o express oneself is therefore to raise oneself to the level of universality because what is expressed is a universal" (Dufrenne 1966: 112).

However, what gives a work of art its affective meaning? It is true that we have explained how this emerges from the merging of various different parts, but how do we justify, on a deeper level, the emergence of something that is extraneous to its parts? As we know and have mentioned, these questions can be answered through a philosophy of Nature, understood as the unfathomable ground from which both the subject and the many significations that populate the world originate (Dufrenne 1990:168-9; Franzini 1982). Because of this, even the notion of beauty is equated with emergence. In fact, in *Art et politique*, Dufrenne provides a rare and clear explanation of this notion, defining beauty as the "radiance (*éclat*) or the intensity of that which appears […]; an appearing in action, likewise the emergence of a figure presents itself as the act of a ground." That which is "beautiful" is therefore that which is able to manifest the ground (or Nature), or that which, in any case, attempts to appear from it: the emergence of the deep essence of everything or every occurrence (Dufrenne 1974: 240-2, 251). Since we cannot truly know this origin because we have been ontologically separated from it, we can at least understand it indirectly by describing the origin of the subject's process of perception (Dufrenne 1981: 232). And here we find the second (broader)

meaning of the concept of emergence, which we initially described by referring to Husserl's philosophy. Dufrenne describes the process of perception, when it begins, as a co-emergence of the subject and the objects it enters into a relationship with; co-emergence that reproduces, on a gnoseological level, a more radical ontological co-emergence, i.e. the co-emergence of the subject and the world starting from a *naturans* substrate. Dufrenne refers to this originary and pre-predicative perceptive condition as the "plane of presence": this is where the *a priori* start to be defined, where the meaningfulness of the real originally emerge, and the body already implicitly grasps the differences between the realms of the real.

3. *The plane of presence as a place of originary co-emersion*

Because this is the primordial condition from which every form of knowledge originates, Dufrenne talks about "presence" every time he analyzes a specific realm of experience. This is why presence is described, in various ways, in almost all his writings. We can define presence as that condition of absolute adherence to oneself before the reflective separation between self and object; "being in the primitive world of the body" before distinguishing between the various intentions of consciousness; in the words of Dufrenne: "the individual who has yet to suffer the torment of individualization and for whom being is not yet representation. The happiness of irresponsible passivity, a feeling of fullness, of *Fülle* that does not come from the *Erfüllung* of an initially empty intention" (Dufrenne 1970: 315). A state that can only be described retrospectively, hence using dualistic categories that somehow never do it justice. This is why it is difficult to understand and discuss this condition, as Dufrenne notes over and over again, aware of its indispensable affective and cognitive function. Since presence is the pre-predicative condition par excellence, presence centers on the experience of the body as well as on the indistinct and vague nature, not only of subject and object, but also of the qualities and objectual realms that were traditionally thought to be distinct, but instead are found to be interconnected and almost indistinguishable. Within it, the sensuous presents itself as "a system of markings, references, signs that I am continuously learning to decipher and use, though without becoming a sovereign consciousness, since I am never able to completely cast off my moorings to the immediate" (Dufrenne 2020: 69).

He first addresses the topic of presence at the beginning of volume II of *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, where, before analyzing the different aspects characterizing the enjoyment of a work of art, Dufrenne points out that these aspects are rooted in this intangible condition. More generally speaking – because perceiving is more than just taking in information, it is grasping meaning in things that is relevant to our conduct –, such grasping does not occur primarily through judgment or learning, whereby we attach signs and meanings out of habit, but rather through an immediate affection:

> Meaning is not primarily something that I think about with detachment but something that concerns and determines me, resonating in me and moving me. The pure signification that I contemplate without adhering to it will arise from this more primitive signification, which convinces me because it sets me in motion. Meaning is a demand to which I respond with my body. (Dufrenne 1973a: 335-6)

A meaning is grasped immediately, before reflection, because how an object manifests itself is precisely what makes it meaningful: "[t]he object as seen says something, just as a certain heaviness in the air indicates a tempest to the sailor, or a strident intonation expresses anger" (Dufrenne 1973a: 338)[13]. Differentiation between sign and signification, between the matter something is made of and its meaning, only occurs later, through analysis that is nothing more than retrospective reflection on a unitary meaning that has already been experienced before any form of reflection: "I can decipher signs only when I have already had the experience of signification. I am capable of effecting a higher synthesis of the signified and the signifying only because this synthesis is given to me (in the Gestalt formula) 'in the *emergence* of an indissoluble signification'" (Dufrenne 1973a: 336, emphasis added).

Dufrenne again reflects more broadly on presence in *The notion of a priori* and in *L'Inventaire des a priori*. In these two volumes, unlike in the previous one, he addresses the topic by giving more weight to the transcendental significance of the body, i.e. exploring how the fact that the subject is incarnate influences the theory of the *a priori* and vice versa. He also points out how a first objective *a priori* of presence is that of the existence of the world or of the real itself, of a sensuous that is already

[13] Regarding this, Dufrenne also refers to *The Structure of Behavior* by Merleau-Ponty, where they argue that "Consciousness can *live* in existing things without reflection, can abandon itself to their concrete structure, which has not yet been converted into expressible signification" (Merleau-Ponty 1967: 222).

formally structured in space and time and that imposes itself, like when we know we are powerless in front of reality and say: "I can't". The second, important aspect, as aforementioned, is that the object presents itself as being meaningful, and its meaning is etched into the material nature of things. Although this meaning has yet to be understood using language, it is nevertheless understood using sensorial categories (according to which things are audible, visible and so on), albeit not yet clearly defined. On a primitive level, what we experience are not only the object's vital qualities, but also more general logico-formal concepts, which are also always given in materiality. This way we immediately recognize what type of relation (predicate, conjunction, etc.) or object (image, idea, matter, etc.) we are dealing with, even though this does not yet imply any conscious classification into regional ontologies, something that is done subsequently and reflectively by the intellect. Therefore, in *presence*, there is already an intelligibility (in fact, we use the term "corporeal intellection"), because the object unifies the multiplicity of the sensuous; it offers something for the senses to grasp onto; it is perceived in the blending "of all the sensuous aspects that are connected to each other, in absolute equivalence, and this meaning is immediately grasped by the body" (Dufrenne 1981:268). It is also through this primordial logical intelligibility that the object stimulates the body and its life force, which is why it appears desirable, relaxing, provocative and so on.

In this originary state, time is experienced as a present we are immersed in, and the passage of time is only sensed virtually. Instead, space is less ambiguous, because it is the experience of the body, its needs and habits, that determine place. It is a space-time that already has affective connotations and is expressed in a series of pairs that organize experience prior to conceptualization: present/absent; full/empty; close/far; large/small, etc. Although these pairs are identified using the physical movements (e.g., moving away or towards; rising and falling) or psychic movements (remorse or expectation) of the experiencer, this does not mean they do not reveal something about the object: "distance is revealed through expectation; what is straight is revealed through momentum; emptiness is revealed through anguish; greatness is revealed through amazement or respect: as the object's constitutive properties and not the subject's projections or interpretations" (Dufrenne 1981:110). Dufrenne points out how these dichotomies cannot be reduced to mere points of view, but are instead interconnected aspects and qualities of the world that even language strives to express: "'left' (*gauche*) does not mean merely the opposite of 'right', it also designates

something awkward (*gauche*) or sinister, and likewise 'right' (*droite*) also designates what is straight (*droit*) or dextrous (*adroit*)" (Dufrenne 1981:270). Many different factors determine the signification of these aspects: "immediate experience is never simple, the meaning we are attuned to is never univocal, the type of understanding we have of the world is never played out using distinct, separate categories" (Dufrenne 1981:109). The individual is perceived starting with movement and the awareness of their own bodily schemata, which are a sort of pre-language and originary orientation in a body that has yet to acquire speech, which is why the subject is a consciousness of *possible* movements.

Since it is both the subject and object that gradually take shape, Dufrenne often describes this form of originary knowledge as the process of the co-emergence of both: "the philosophy of perception […] puts presence first, as the place of emergence (*surgissement*) of the appearing, as natura *naturans*, i.e. that gives rise to the subject and the world simultaneously" (Dufrenne 1971-1972: 8). We have already seen, implicitly, how this co-emergence continues to manifest even in aesthetic experience: a subject, with its individuality and predispositions (what Dufrenne calls "existential *a priori*", but also in this case "the subjective affective a priori"), is able to grasp a specific latent affective nuance of meaning in the aesthetic object, that can only arise or emerge because of that subject. More generally speaking, the affective quality of the work of art (its "world" or that part of reality) was only able to emerge because it was created by a specific artist:

> "Therefore, art calls into question what is known and perceived; it makes one perceive something, but something different and for another perception; not contemplation but participation: a mutual emergence (*surgissement commun*) of the subject and the object." (Dufrenne 1971-1972: 9)

After stressing the importance of the moment of presence which endows conscious perception with fullness and vividness, Dufrenne points out however that this originary condition must necessarily be surpassed, since it is not sufficient to ensure real knowledge of the object. This is because "[o]n the plane of presence, everything is given [but] nothing is known. Or, if you will, here I know things in the same way that they know me, that is, without explicitly recognizing them" (Dufrenne 1973a: 338). The paradox of presence is that it must be surpassed through representation and reflection. So, there must be a detachment; space must be created between the self and objects so they can be analyzed. For

example, a work of art is grasped through how it resonates with our body. However, in the end, its structural schemata (rhythm, harmony and melody) can only be truly understood by representing them to us and reflecting on them. So, we should be wary of works of art that only aim to amuse us physically, and in order to judge them, our body must be to taught pay attention and endowed with discernment[14]. It is the object itself that asks to be surpassed and transcended. So, perception as a whole is not exhausted on this primitive plane because here perception is not really conscious of itself. This is why Dufrenne often compares the process of originary co-emergence from the plane of presence to a process of co-birth. In more general terms, he talks about Nature as a Mother detaching from her child, and compares detaching from one's origin with the detachment that gives rise to adult life, albeit without expressing any negative value judgment on presence through these analogies:

> to know (*connaître*), like being born, means separating. But it is also a mutual birth (*co-naître*), coming into the world. We at least have an idea of what we are separated from, which will never fully be known, and this idea makes us equal to it. (Dufrenne 1981: 148)

> The transcendental is like a mark left inside us of a primary intimacy, of a mutual birth. (Dufrenne 1971-1972: 9)

When it comes to the "originary", the aporias only arise when we use our intellect to apply ordinary temporal categories to it, because the originary is actually outside of time. The experience of (our) birth, on the other hand, is what enables us to understand the concept better, and just how radical it is. In fact, it is an experience that refers to the past even though it is not really an experience of the past. Yes, it is an occurrence, but only for others, since we can neither experience nor remember it. It is something that generates (*qui fonde*) but remains in the background (*fond*). Likewise, we can only talk about Nature after it has appeared and after we have also appeared. In fact, an "inventory of the *a priori*" only begins after duality has already been established. Each perception (and therefore, broadly speaking, each act of knowledge) already implies

[14] Although this aspect recalls the well-known distinction in *Critique of the Power of Judgment* between "beautiful" and "agreeable", in this case, Dufrenne makes no reference to Kant's writings, because he does not want to run the risk of likening his perspective, in which reference to the corporeality is essential, to Kant's perspective, for whom aesthetic experience essentially resides in a judgment (Kant 2000: 89-98).

separation and hence birth, so, paradoxically, birth is a process of emergence that accompanies us till death, and this birth is what makes us transcendental subjects: "temporality does not mean, first, the precariousness of the real, nor […] the means for each thing to cease to be: it means the open infinity of fulfilled or possible fields of presence, continuous rebirth" (Dufrenne 1981:167)[15]. Moreover, because each presence is presence *to something* definite, proximity to the origin is never total. Even the proximity senses, in fact, Dufrenne notes, are already senses at a distance.

Conceiving of knowledge as the continuous co-emergence or co-birth of the subject and object leads Dufrenne to develop a philosophy that centers on the primacy of life over death, in both gnoseological and ontological terms. In fact, he criticizes the prevailing idea of Western thought, according to which philosophy is *meditatio mortis*: this idea attributes greater importance to death than to life in the understanding of human beings (Dufrenne 1968; 1996a). In *Pour une philosophie non théologique* (Dufrenne 1973), he expresses the primacy of life in his criticism of the so-called "philosophies of absence" (in particular those of Heidegger and Derrida) arguing that, because they are based on difference rather than on presence, in the end, these philosophies are essentially based on *nothing*. Dufrenne counters them with a philosophy of Nature, where perception consigns us to presence, "it brings us into the world", and where there is indeed a consciousness that comes into the world: "one can only experience absence because of presence: it is contingent" (Dufrenne: 1971-1972: 8). In *L'inventaire des a priori,* Dufrenne again wonders whether it is right to consider death as an *a priori* of the "region Life" and, more radically, if it is right to interpret life as a collection of forces that resist death. The answer to both of these questions is no. So he formulates a very radical argument that says, "death is the *a posteriori* par excellence" (Dufrenne 1981: 182). In fact, unlike what happens with life, we do not immediately realize that we are mortal, nor do we ever consider death as a fundamental characteristic of our being. Yes, death is everywhere, but it is the death of others, it is never our death, and old age seems strange and scandalous, as may be seen in children

[15] Marcelle Brisson was the first to notice how birth is a recurrent topic in Dufrenne's thought (Brisson 1975: 35-6), but only recently has this been made the object of a systematic study that traced Dufrenne's entire philosophical path to this theme (Jacquet 2014). On the relationship between Phenomenology and the philosophies of birth, see Vergani (2020) and Jacquet again (2020).

who assume an expression of shock when they see an elderly person. If we encounter death, it always seems accidental: it is the unpredictable and the stranger par excellence. By contrast, we immediately recognize the living, and we instinctively fail to think that they will eventually die: we do not know "a priori" that they are mortal. Therefore, death is neither the essence of the living nor its vocation (Dufrenne 1981; 1996a).

In the end, the necessary loss of the plane of presence is connected to the pursuit of a reunion with the originary, a return to Nature. Although we live in the realm of separation, in fact, our connection to the immediate, to our "native land", is never broken. There can be differences *between*, but never any radical differences: "the origin is always here, in this pact that sanctions my birth, and that perception never ceases to renew" (Dufrenne 1973b: 56). So, Dufrenne questions how the experience of the originary comes about, and his answer is that this experience is generated by a feeling, or better, a pre-feeling, "although man may argue he is active, he never cuts the umbilical cord that links him to the originary, he is always nature and part of Nature. At times he may experience this rootedness more vividly: it is exactly this experience that we call feeling" (Dufrenne 1981: 294). He is not referring to a subjective emotion, but rather to that affective state that connects us to the totality. This totality is lived through some experiences wherein that lost sense of immediacy is recovered, albeit partially: for example, in erotic experience or in play (Dufrenne 1996b). However, without question, aesthetic experience is top among these: making it therefore the culmination of perceptive experience, because it is what gives rise to this tendency to seek reunion with the origin. Although we may be led to forget the originary, the subject never ceases to experience it again:

> every time he emerges, indeed because he has been immersed in the originary: like a swimmer, who can slice through the water but only if he merges with it, and that at times, instead of fighting it, prefers to allow himself to be pleasantly carried by the water toward the surface. But the surface is the skin of depth: hence resting [*se re-poser*] is akin to re-birth. (Dufrenne 1976: 92)

In conclusion, the following passage provides a good summary of our discussion and the points we covered in the beginning:

> A philosophy of depth [if we look closely] is not a philosophy of interiority: individuality does not imply interiority, at least the sovereign interiority of a totally autonomous constitutive subject. Instead, this individuality is constituted and generated from the ground that sustains it and from which it emerges. A

philosophy of the ground is a philosophy of opening and birth […]. This appearing – of man to the world and of the world to man – is established through presence. (Dufrenne 1976: 91)

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