

## DEWEY AND THE ART OF EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT: Instead of following the behaviorists and abandoning the concept of experience, Dewey wanted to reconstruct it. Dewey was an ardent Darwinist, so whatever experience is, it has to be an evolved, presumably adaptive power. "Experience" became for him one word for the multiplex relation between the evolved, adapted organism and its environment. Human environments include groups and social relations mediated by language. But "experience" is not centered there, or restricted to the use of language. Experience comprises our total interaction with the environment. It is with *this* experience that knowledge begins and where its value is proved.

Dewey seems largely indifferent to the idea of empiricism. He ignores it in his various epitomes of pragmatism. "Empiricism" sounds like something made up for textbooks. But *experience* is the most real thing Dewey can think of, and he thinks about it a lot. It is mentioned in the titles of two important books, *Experience and Nature* (1925) and *Art As Experience* (1934). Instead of following the behaviorists, and abandoning the concept of experience, he wanted to reconstruct it. Evidently he counted it a mistake in philosophy to forget about experience. "Ultimately there are but two philosophies," he said. "One of them accepts life and experience in all its uncertainty, mystery, doubt, and half-knowledge and turns that experience upon itself to deepen and intensify its own qualities." (AE 34) He never says what the other one is.<sup>1</sup>

Dewey was an ardent Darwinist. Whatever experience is, it has to be an evolved, presumably adaptive power, and cannot be restricted to a sphere

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<sup>1</sup> References to the following works by John Dewey are parenthetically embedded:

- AE *Art as Experience* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1934)  
EN *Experience and Nature*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (La Salle: Open Court, 1929).  
L *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (New York: Henry Holt, 1938).  
QC *The Quest for Certainty, Later Works*, vol. 4 (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988).

isolated from the evolutionary causality of time. "Experience is not a veil that shuts man off from nature; it is a means of penetrating continually further into the heart of nature . . . a growing progressive self-disclosure of nature itself." (EN xv) When Dewey thinks about knowledge he thinks about the evolved, adaptive relation between organism and environment. "Experience" became for him one word for this multiplex relation. "Interaction of environment with organism is the source, direct or indirect, of all experience." (AE 147)

Human environments include groups and social relations mediated by language. So a relation between organism and environment does not exclude discursive relations with others. But it is not centered there, or restricted to the use of language. Experience comprises our total interaction with the environment, including the corporeal *milieu intérieur*, "the entire organic agent-patient in all its interactions with the environment, natural and social."<sup>2</sup> It is with *this* experience that knowledge begins and where its value is proved. Epitomizing his "instrumental" conception of knowledge, Dewey says "knowledge is instrumental to the enrichment of immediate experience through the control over action that it exercises." (AE 290) Knowledge is "a mode of experiencing things which facilitates control of objects for purposes of non-cognitive experiences" (QC 79), these being satisfactions, or what Dewey calls consummations.

Dewey explained the value of experience with a distinction between subsistence and growth. We were to imagine subsistence as bare life, while growth was the spiral movement from a temporary falling out to a more extensive recovery. This was the experience by which we learned and became experienced. Such experience came in waves. First, a phase of need, the organism momentarily falling out of step with an environment. Then came improvised recovery, which was not a simple return, but an enrichment for invention expressed in resistance surmounted. Dewey seems to have read little Nietzsche

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<sup>2</sup> John Dewey, "The Need for Recovery in Philosophy," *The Middle Works*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980), 10:26.

and to have liked none of it. But he did believe, as Nietzsche famously said, that whatever does not kill you makes you stronger.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps they both learned it from Emerson. For Dewey, any resistance or tension was an opportunity to discover unsuspected potentials, and the occasion of experience from which something was learned. Without suspense, crisis, and resolution, no experience, at least none that we learn from.

Dewey has an idea of how experience ought to unfold. He describes a norm. He thinks he finds this norm in nature, in evolution, in adaptation. It belongs to life, to nature, not to history or culture. Concurrent sensations, memories, percepts, and who-knows-what other mental states do not automatically compose an experience. An experience is a complex, processual event that tends to come to a normative close. Life is beset with distraction, the discrepancy of observation and thought, the miscalculation of means and end. We have a consummated experience when the material runs its course to fulfillment. Then the episode is integrated within and individuated in the stream of experience, a unity, a single felt, emotional quality, that pervades the parts. In those moments when nothing is broken off, nothing intermittent, everything so rounded out that its close becomes a fruition rather than a caseation, we enjoy *an experience*, the kind we learn from, but more, the kind we live for, the aesthetic, imaginative, satisfying kind.

A normatively whole experience is emotional, that is, unified; it is intellectual, that is, meaningful; and it is practical, that is, an adaptive interaction with an environment. Consummation is not reserved until the end. It is anticipated throughout and recurrently savored in ceaseless small consummations, always presenting something new. Such experience is in virtue of its satisfying quality described as *aesthetic*, as experience of

an satisfying aesthetic quality. Aesthetic is the quality proper to experience, the norm for experience, “the clarified and intensified development of traits that belong to every normally complete experience.” (AE 46) Aesthetic consummation “is experience in its integrity . . . pure experience . . . experience freed from the forces that impede and confuse its development as experience. . . . To esthetic experience, then, the philosopher must go to understand what experience is.” (AE 274)

First thing we need to understand is that experience is not a veil that shuts us off from nature. It is a means of penetrating into nature, pursuing “a growing progressive self-disclosure of nature itself.” (EN xv) Philosophy has had a tendency to oppose nature and experience. Experience was a superimposed veil, something to be transcended to find nature. Modern science no longer feels this problem. It takes for granted that experience controlled in appropriate ways is the path to facts and laws of nature. Philosophy should rethink its concept of experience accordingly. The experience of natural science shows that experience is not just a thin layer of nature but penetrates nature in a way that can be extended. Experience is primarily experience of things, of nature, of the real, and not of sense data or impressions, which merely delay the real. These are reflective products of analysis and not the primary given.

Another thing we have to appreciate, then, is the directing power of experience. The philosophers have not been good empiricists on this score. Dewey thought that the failure of traditional philosophy came from “lack of confidence in the directive powers that inhere in experience.” (EN xv) Philosophy has tended to understand experience as experiencing only itself, solitary states of subjective, private consciousness, rather than common things of nature. This tendency is as ancient as the Cyrenaics and as modern as Mach. On one point Dewey might agree with Carnap. De-subjectification was indispensable to scientific success. “The de-personalizing and de-socializing of some objects,” he said, “was a necessary precondition of ability to regulate experience.” (EN 16) Carnap’s

<sup>3</sup> “What does not kill him makes him stronger.” Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 77. I discuss their relationship in “Pragmatism and Gay Science,” *Dewey and Continental Philosophy*, ed. Paul Fairfield (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2010), 69-89.

response to de-subjectification was flight from experience into pure structure.<sup>4</sup> Dewey's was to put experience under the control of experimental logic. Carnap had difficulty finding anything to say about the value of experiments in science. Dewey could not say enough. He repeated a signature theme of empiricism. The value of knowledge depends on experience. To know a thing takes experience with it, and is not something you can get from thought alone. Nor from perception alone, without memory, that is, experience.

Experience presupposes unscripted instability, however momentary. But it has to be instability within a context of stability. Experience emerges from this mix of the new and the familiar, difference and repetition. "It is precisely the peculiar intermixture of support and frustration of man by nature which constitutes experience." (EN 341) If life were all one and the same, there would be nothing to remember, nothing to learn, no experience. But when nature fluctuates and refuses to satisfy our expectations, then we have a problem, a question, a halt, and an opportunity for the experience from which we learn. The exchange may involve the acquisition of experience, or may be an expression of what experience has learned. Either way, whether as memory or as something to be remembered, experience arises and finds its expression at the interface of stability and uncertainty. With experience, we learn how to enlarge the stability or at least limit the precariousness. We also learn that any experience could be otherwise, that it could be better, and that its being so depends on choices we make.

Dewey sent philosophers to aesthetic experience to study what experience is. Later, he said that *imaginative* experience "exemplifies more fully than any other kind

of experience what experience itself is in its very movement and structure." (AE 281) Implicitly, then, he equated aesthetic quality, which we know was the consummatory satisfaction of an experience, with *imaginative* quality. So we wonder, what quality is "imaginative"? He mocked Kant's facultative psychology, and assured us that imagination was not a power or faculty. It was a quality of experience. Experience had this quality, was imaginative, when notably successful in stitching old and new together, making the whole experience consummatory and aesthetically satisfying. "When old and familiar things are made new in experience, there is imagination. . . . There is always some measure of adventure in the meeting of mind and universe, and this adventure is, in its measure, imagination." (AE 267)

Perceptions were not given. They were elicited in response to something problematic in the environment. Perception was a felt response of the live organism to changes in the near environment, a relay between environment and organism, and not an inner show for a Cartesian homunculus. "Unless there were something problematic, undecided, still going-on and as yet unfinished and indeterminate in nature, there could be no such events as perceptions." (EN 283) For an empirically oriented thinker the evidence of enjoyment and suffering prove that nature includes finalities. The fact that they happen proves that they can happen, that nature makes no objection to the physical reality of finalities or consummations. Consummation is a natural quality, a natural way for experiences to end, and not merely some conventional agreement. "If experienced things are valid evidence, then nature in having qualities within itself has what in the literal sense must be called ends, terminals, arrests, enclosures." (EN 82) These afford the empirical meaning of "good." Philosophers do not have to fly to the transcendent. The finalities that dignify life are natural and occur in nature.

Dewey was alert to anything that seemed to confirm that "human hopes and purposes find a basis and support in nature." (AE 28) These hopes were not just a

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<sup>4</sup> The elimination of subjectivity was a priority for Carnap. He could not simply abolish experience and still be an empiricist. But he could de-subjectify that experience, which he proposed to do by "a transition from material to structure." Rudolf Carnap (1925), cited in A.W. Carus, *Carnap and Twentieth-Century Thought: Explication as Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 168.

conventional, cultural, subjective, arbitrary concoction. Art, for instance, could “[stir] into activity resonances of dispositions acquired in primitive relationships of the living being to its surroundings.” (AE 29) Art did deliberately what any organism does instinctively in response to need. The intervention of consciousness added “regulation, power of selection, and redistribution,” but this built on and raised higher powers long prepared in the evolution of life. What other satisfaction could there be for him in his refrain that our efforts are no less “the doing of the universe, and they in some way, however slight, carry the universe forward . . . our endeavors are significant not only for themselves but in the whole”? (EN 340) Apparently that is meant to be reassuring. In our pursuit of what is preferable and good we continue the course of nature. It is not just us; it is nature acting through us. To convert the unfulfilling to the fulfilled is “the manifest destiny of [the] contingency . . . and generic uniformities in nature.” (EN 341)

He fought with relativism, the notion that art could be anything, that its history was arbitrary. No, he said. It was objectively constrained, a response to objective conditions that had to be respected, however much latitude they held out. “Underneath the rhythm of every art and of every work of art there lies, as a substratum in the depths of subconsciousness, the basic patterns of the relations of man and his environment.” (AE 151) Art was natural. The attraction of beauty, the repulsion of the ugly, was natural, our evolved human nature. “There must be, in spite of all indifference and hostility of nature to human interests, some congruity of nature with man or life could not exist. In art the forces that are congenial, that sustain not this or that special aim but the processes of enjoyed experience itself, are set free.” (AE 185) Our aspirations belong to nature, and are, for the consistent naturalist in philosophy, a phase of nature itself. “Nature signifies nothing less than the whole complex of the results of the interaction of man, with his memories and hopes, understanding and desire, with that world to which one-sided philosophy confines ‘nature.’” (AE 152)

It reassured him to think that “the same natural processes which generate goods and evils generate also the strivings to secure the one and avoid the other, and generate judgments to regulate the strivings.” (EN 345) It seemed to address the worry that the valuable qualities that make life worth living are completely arbitrary and not worth defending, for instance, from totalitarianism. Ends, finalities, consummate satisfactions were neither arbitrary creations of private fantasy, nor eternal forms, nor fetishistic figments of false consciousness. Empirically, they were “projections of possible consequences.” Such ends were also means employed as plans, where Dewey called them ends-in-view. The objectives of conscious endeavor were not ideal endpoints, but working parts of working plans that entered into the organization of action and were indispensable to the materialization of what they posit.

We learned this use of ends from the arts. “Apart from the processes of art,” Dewey said, “there is no basis for introducing the idea of fulfillment, realization, into the notion of end nor for interpreting antecedent operations as potentialities.” (EN 105) Humanity’s long practice with the arts have taught us the difference between how a thing is and how it can be transformed. Dewey’s idea of “art” is closer to Greek *techne* or Latin *ars* than to our idea of “fine arts.” He explains that “art” means action that deals with materials and energies, assembling and refining to a new satisfaction. (EN 288) He described the “history of human experience” as a “history of the development of arts” (EN 314), and said that “the *idea* of art as a conscious idea—the greatest intellectual achievement in the history of humanity”—was born in our first experience with the supplement of artifice. (AE 26)

The arts taking over, introducing their inventions, converting the precarious to the stable and enhancing our control of experience, was not an *unnatural* event, not a sheer artifice foisted upon physical matter by an invader or exile. Human art is a continuation of human nature, and human nature a continuation of nature overall. The arts and their changes are as “natural” or “physical” as any

occurrence in nature. "Art is a continuation, by means of intelligent selection and arrangement, of natural tendencies of natural events." (EN 315) Dewey somewhat melodramatically thinks that makes art "the complete culmination of nature," and that science "is properly a handmaiden that conducts natural events to this happy issue." (EN 290) Science is an art, its practice is an art; it is simply another name for "the intelligent factor in art," that is, technology. (EN 298)

The important distinction in this neighborhood is not artificial versus natural or physical versus conventional. It is the distinction between modes of experience that are infused by art and those that remain deficient, unreconstructed, and an entrenched source of problems. Art again leads the way in distinguishing these. Dewey cites Matthew Arnold, "Poetry is the criticism of life." Yes, and not just poetry. The vocation of art is the criticism of life. "For art fixes those standards of enjoyment and appreciation with which other things are compared; it selects the objects of future desires; it stimulates effort . . . [It supplies] the meanings in terms of which life is judged, esteemed, and criticized." (EN 168-169)

The great lesson of modern thought was to universalize technology's artisanal perspective and treat all objects as indications of potential and none as finalities. We had to learn the difficult lesson of attending not to the *what* of experience—do we like it or not—but the *how* of its changes, how to control it. We turn away from those admirable (or terrible) qualities, and attend to the relations by which they are generated and through which they can be controlled and modified. Those relations are the proper object of science. As Dewey put it in *The Quest for Certainty*, "Reduction of experienced objects to the form of relations, which are neutral as respects qualitative traits, is a prerequisite of ability to regulate the course of change, so that it may terminate in the occurrence of an object having desired qualities." (QC 84)

Dewey thought that most of the problems of modern philosophy (and many of the problems of

modern society) arose from an incomplete, uneven institutionalization of this shift. We retained the idea of knowledge as the apprehension of the objectively real. If the proper objects of knowledge were mathematical and mechanical, it seemed to follow that nature was mathematical and mechanical and barren of consummatory qualities, which led to problems of subjectivism, relativism, and nihilism. The fatal premise, carried over into modern philosophy from antiquity, was that science grasps "reality in its final, self-sufficing form." (EN 113)

To relieve ourselves of practically the whole syllabus of "problems of philosophy" we needed to denounce the cataleptic phantasy of the Stoics, and acknowledge that "the objects of science, like the direct objects of the arts, are an order of relations which serve as tools to effect immediate havings and beings." (EN 113-114) The sciences were arts, they made instruments that mediated from where we were currently to conditions that we envisioned as preferable. They did not reveal the truth about things in themselves. They did not concern with things in themselves. They concerned things in relation, relations that always include us. That was "application"—in science, in philosophy, anything: To achieve a more extensive interaction of events with one another, overcoming distance, revealing new potentials previously hidden, opening the way to new beginnings and new ends.

Dewey is not tempted by the nominalism that Wilfrid Sellars and Richard Rorty urge as the alternative to an exploded myth of the given.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, we should not expect him to be tempted by the epistemological given. In what could pass as an epitome of Sellars' thesis Dewey says "I know nothing of a perceptual order apart from a conceptual order." Yet he affirms this in a way that suggests his eventual

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<sup>5</sup> See Wilfrid Sellars, "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind," in his *Science, Perception, and Reality* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963); and Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979).

divergence, since, for Dewey, perceptual and conceptual are “aspects, analytically arrived at, of the one existing reality—conscious experience.”<sup>6</sup> He anticipates Sellars’ “Myth of Jones” (Jones is the mythic inventor of the idea of inner experience): “This world of inner experience is dependent upon an extension of language which is a social product and operation.” (EN 143) He describes experience as “full of inference. There is, apparently, no conscious experience without inference; reflection is native and constant.”<sup>7</sup> “In a proper conception of experience,” he says, “inference, reasoning, and conceptual structures are as experiential as is observation.” (L 38) The same goes for knowledge. He writes against “the belief that there is such a thing as immediate knowledge,” or that it is “an indispensable precondition of all mediated knowledge.” All knowledge “involves mediation”; an “inferential function is involved in all warranted assertions.” (L 139)

When Dewey says, “the immediate existence of quality” is “the point of departure and the regulative principle of all thinking,” Colin Koopman detects a “quasi-foundationalist formulation,” and criticizes Dewey’s account of inquiry for reliance on “a deficient characterization of indeterminacies as given.” He thinks Dewey “lacked a full appreciation of the problematic of givenness” because “it was not until later decades that this problematic was rigorously laid out in all its thorny detail.”<sup>8</sup> Sellars’ paper is certainly thorny. It had to be, to be taken seriously by the logical empiricists he wanted to refute. But the argument does not require Sellars’ rebarbative clarity. It was already known to readers of Kant, or Hegel’s *Phenomenology*, to say nothing of T.H. Green’s withering analysis. Rorty pointed out how Sellars’ critique of givenness was “presaged by Green.”

<sup>6</sup> John Dewey, “Psychology as Philosophic Method,” *The Early Works* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969), 1:172.

<sup>7</sup> Dewey, “Need for Recovery in Philosophy,” *Middle Works*, 10:6.

<sup>8</sup> Colin Koopman, *Pragmatism As Transition: Historicity and Hope in James, Dewey, and Rorty* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 76, 78, 203; Dewey, cited in *ibid.*, 80.

He also notices “Dewey’s often-cited tribute to Green” and agreement with “the Kant-Hegel-Green critique of empiricism.” Rorty goes so far as to say that Sellars merely reformulated Green’s (and Dewey’s) “central point against Hume in modern dress.”<sup>9</sup>

Sellars’s argument refutes the idea of the *epistemological* given, the sensuous given that is tendered as the *fons et origo* of scientific knowledge. Dewey is obviously not lapsing into *that*. Even if Sellars’ argument can be generalized from sensation to other putative forms of cognitive immediacy, such as intellectual intuition or the *cogito* (as Robert Brandom has insisted that it does<sup>10</sup>), the argument still does not touch anything Dewey’s is trying to say about experience, or even about the place of the immediate and given in knowledge. In a striking passage he says, “The immediately given is always the dubious . . . it is a cry for something not given.” (EN 283-284) Experience begins not with presence but absence—precarious loss, stability lacking. *That’s* the sort of experience we learn from. Not “red here now.”

In a sentence that would set Rorty’s teeth on edge, Dewey wrote, “A universe of experience is the precondition of a universe of discourse.” He says of experience, “Without its controlling presence, there is no way to determine the relevance, weight or coherence of any designated distinction or relation. The universe of experience surrounds and regulates the universe of discourse but never appears as such within the latter.” (L 68) How does experience “control” discourse? By holding it to a logic of inquiry in which the feeling of problems and consummatory, aesthetic satisfaction were the beginning and end of knowledge.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Hill Green, *Hume and Locke* (1874; New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1968); Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 49n; and *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 80, 88n.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Brandom, “Vocabularies of Pragmatism,” in *Rorty and His Critics*, ed. Robert Brandom (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000).

Inquiry was a response at once logical and natural, stirred into motion by the feeling of difficulty, or a problem. A problem had to “be felt before it can be stated,” Dewey said. “If the unique quality of a situation is *had* immediately, then there is something that regulates the selection and the weighing of observed facts and their conceptual ordering.” What he called “the immediately given” was “an extensive and qualitative *situation*.” (L 517) From this given, felt qualities emerge as the result of operations of observation aimed at bringing problems into focus and developing hypotheses on how to address them. The given is not sensation or impression. It is the feeling, distinct yet obscure, of problem and difficulty.

A feeling for problems was a condition of prosperous inquiry. The most urgent problems of knowledge were often to find the problems, find what was making some situation problematic, illuminating a path to solution. It took the right feel. There was an art to it. Dewey said little about what problems were supposed to feel like, but we don't miss it. The point was not to unveil a mystery but to acknowledge an experience (difficulty, problem) we all feel. We could also ask why a certain audience feels a problem at a certain time. As historical, that must have a genealogy, which would expose its contingency and probably compromised politics. Dewey says nothing about that, though I am unsure how troublesome the lapse is, since merely to make the criticism confirms what Dewey is saying. The critic must feel something is wrong, something not working right in Dewey's argument. To criticize Dewey for not making a problem of the feeling of a problem is tacit concurrence that a problem is ultimately a matter of feeling and simply given (or not). Genealogical inquiry can investigate why others felt a problem when they did, but we cannot perform the genealogy upon ourselves because we cannot problematize the feeling of a problem without implicitly acknowledging that it is not really a problem at all. The feeling of a problem, given leave to develop its tendency, is the matrix of inquiry and the beginning of knowledge.

Experimentation, inquiry, and experience begin with feeling, immediate in the sense that any felt quality is. Nothing can “mediate” a felt quality because nothing is comparable to it. That is the nature of qualities. There is no comparison. Each one is different. So it is with the range of feeling that prompts inquiry. Like Bergsonian intuitions, these feelings do not give reasons for belief; they are rather an impetus to inquire, a lure to look into the problem we feel, like a pain that sets us in motion. Philosophy becomes logocentric or rationalistic in the way that it has traditionally fallen to empiricism to criticize when the theory of knowledge turns away from perception toward discourse and formal representations cut loose from control by experience. Philosophy then becomes useless for helping people find the problems they feel.

Not to feel problems is a kind of art. It is the art of Rorty's therapeutic (anti-)philosophy, as it was the art of Wittgenstein's philosophical analysis. Deflation and debunking seem to me latently nihilistic. An alternative is to bring art to the problems one feels, to become good at selecting problems, selecting what to inquire into, and how to organize the experiments. One does not want to eliminate problems but to become good at them, for life without problems is probably not life at all. The art of experience is the art of knowledge, which is also the art of art: To make learning by experience artful, disciplined, productive, creative, and aesthetically consuming.