

## THE QUEER PRAGMATIST AND EROTIC CONSCIENCE

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper seeks to correct the underdeveloped conversation between American pragmatism and queer theory. It proposes a functional distinction between erotic and sexual experience through the situational ontology of John Dewey, which emphasizes the primary character of the concrete event is temporal rather than spatial. Taking spatial relations as primary is the mental habit of modern philosophies that assume a physicalist view of nature, but it is also the approach of the queer phenomenology of Sarah Ahmed, who has presented the lived experience of sexuality as a way of being oriented in space which queer experience disorients. Granting that the sexual interaction may emphasize attention to the spatial dimension, it is offered here that the erotic situation could be understood as taking the temporal register of interaction as predominating. Time, for a human being, is first and foremost a lifetime, and it is in the context of this indeterminate length that erotic interactions are meaningful.

**Keywords:** Queer Theory, John Dewey, Process Philosophy, Eros, Temporality

Americans are frequently accused of being “puritanical,” both in the precise sense of having a significant cultural and intellectual history that involves an extreme form of Protestantism and in the more colloquial sense that indicates a pervasive retreat from eroticism and squeamishness around sexuality, at least when it is not confined to those containers—bedrooms, strip clubs, pornography—that have been set aside for just this purpose. Since I am a contemporary American philosopher, I am tempted to deny that I am informed by either sense of my puritanical inheritance, but this refusal would also be sophomoric, an obstinate denial from a scholar within a philosophical tradition that is ill at ease with itself, having hardly reached an adolescence. The healthier course is to acknowledge that the character of American thought includes idiosyncrasies, and insights often lurk in the space between the colloquial and the philosophical idiom. If I

am puritanical in my Americanness, then I am also pragmatic. Here is another word with complicated associations, the use of which in casual speech almost never suggests eroticism or its more insouciant cousin, “sexiness.” I’ve made the case elsewhere that Puritan thought might be more voluptuous than our caricatures would lead us to believe, but now I’d like to do the intellectual work to exorcise the prejudices that continue to influence even my own unreflective associations with American Pragmatism—and replace them with more ardent thoughts.

This is an inquiry to find a functional distinction between the sexual and the erotic. If I claim to do so as a pragmatist, I mean that I am interested in the possibilities for action and for practice that are revealed by this distinction. One of my aims is that this study should constitute a part of the groundwork to imagine “queer ecologies,” rather than sexual communities, who are not simply allied through a shared identity or sexual practice, but are erotically attuned within a shared “situation,” in the Deweyan sense. My interest is also that of American philosopher who has inherited a complex intellectual history along with a paradoxical culture that extends itself globally without knowing itself locally and must now have faith that philosophy offers us possibilities for recovering meaning where intellectual habits have narrowed through neglect.

Max Weber once characterized the United States as a place where “the imagination of a whole people has been turned toward purely quantitative bigness,” which is as devastating an assessment of a culture’s capacity for eroticism as I’ve ever seen. A preference for “keeping things simple” through detached and impersonal assessments of cost and benefit and a habit of tethering value to quantities of capital rather than things of direct enjoyment are sensibilities that run through American life; in this mode, the “good” action seldom admits of dispute. The good is whatever is most efficient, most profitable, is whatever the actuary says it is. In colloquial speech, pragmatism often implies narrow ways of thinking, a prefer-

ence for the expediency of identifying a narrow means to achieve a narrow end. This way of being pragmatic is at some distance from “pragmatism” as a name for an American philosophical tradition.

“Pragmatism” is related to the ancient Greek word *pragma*, which might be translated as “thing” or the “subject” of a study, an “action,” or, as I suggest, a “concrete event.” A thing that is also an action is an occurrence in time. Hence, an event that is also a concrecence. A philosophical approach that is devoted to concrecence as an existential value will have an inherent capacity for eroticism, whether or not it has developed a poetic sense for it. If we are permitted to regard John Dewey as a pragmatist (with caveats), then we have plenty of resources for regarding the erotic event pragmatically. Concrete events, for Dewey, are “situations,” which he defines as “complex existence(s) that are held together in spite of their internal complexity by the fact that they are dominated and characterized throughout by a single quality.” These complex wholes, which we encounter qualitatively, are singular and emergent. They give rise to their own logics and patterns of conduct, which may or may not resemble those of another situation that we have previously encountered. Intelligent conduct is successful insofar as it is sensitive to the qualitative situation in which it occurs.

If Platonic eros is the desire for the good, then a Deweyan-pragmatist view of erotic life could very well resemble the Deweyan-pragmatist view of ethical life. Insofar as our actions occur within a context that is qualitatively given, we must take a broad-minded view of the good. There is no *a priori* logic that we can import without risking a clash with the situation in which we find ourselves. If we refer to wisdom or knowledge that has served us well in the past, we must do so because our immediate experience invites it—and we must avoid reversing this order by attempting to mold our present situation to resemble the one we’ve known before. The good action is the one that is appropriate to our present

reality as it is qualitatively given, and the path to it must be discovered and re-discovered within our own present situation. The erotic event comes with the same requirements. To be *good* is to discover the habits that can be reconstructed by the needs of the present. The effort requires an attention to the whole situation in its qualitative aspect in order to see the possibilities for action that might enrich the meaning of the present moment. Seeing the possibilities and recreating our habits needs an open imagination, even a playful one, that is ready to experiment with new ways of releasing impulsive energy rather than falling back on the ruts of custom. There is no such thing as an encounter that is both erotic and pragmatic *in the colloquial sense of narrow thought* which functions by disengaging with qualitative life. There is no linear formula, no prescribed technique for the achievement of erotic satisfaction. On the other hand, it is certainly possible to have *sexual* encounters that are pragmatic in the narrow sense, but these will be lacking in erotic fulfillment, no matter how efficiently they discharge a buildup of organic tension. However, if the sexual encounter is experienced as a qualitative concrete event, as a complex whole that is connected to other complex wholes, if it is treated as an existential terminus, valued for its own sake as well as for the sake of its possible significance for other events, then it is erotic as well as sexual.

### To “Queer” Dewey

Since Dewey did not explicitly write a theory of erotic life, I will reconstruct the one that I find implicit within his aesthetics, ethics, and metaphysics. Conveniently, a path has been laid out for us by Thomas Alexander, who uses the word “erotic” to characterize Dewey’s philosophical project as a recovery of meaning within human life. Although I understand eros as primarily concerned with meaning, as Alexander does, he does not address its standard colloquial position as connected with sexual desire and romantic love—and it is sexual desire that

has been, up until this point, the essential starting point for theorizing queerness. For a fuller conception of eros in connection with sexual desire, I consult the classicist Anne Carson, and for a more contemporary vision of the erotic as connected to sexual experience without being circumscribed by it, I look to the philosopher-poet Audre Lorde. I will then return to “queer ecologies” as the pragmatic concern of this paper.

I advocate that we treat the erotic as wide category, describing relationships that foster the expansion of lived meaning, with the sexual as one possible mode of expression that exists alongside other expressive possibilities; I imagine the “queer ecologies” that are informed by erotic life as ways of nourishing and strengthening the bonds of groups, but also of pairs, families, and communities that have not been sufficiently recognized as genuine possibilities. My hunch is that, when we differentiate queer eros from queer sex, modes of connection from which we have become estranged become newly imaginable. The anti-queerness of the Twentieth and Twenty-first centuries, which is responsible for the creation of “straightness,” extended well beyond the prohibitions on sexual activity to set up strict expectations for a sequence of life events that coordinates productive labor with reproductive duty—the failure to achieve milestones or the rejection of the trajectory, in part or as a whole, is punishable by a demotion within the family hierarchy and alienation from community life. Where queer relationships have been admitted into community life (an admittance that has been largely limited to homosexual pairs), they have been required to approximate the productive and reproductive logic that governs the life of the straight couple. I see queer ecologies as answering a real contemporary problem: there is a lacuna we need to address as our disillusionment with the family romance deepens. The nuclear family, that central misery responsible for so many of the neuroses that Freud detected in his study of psychic suffering, has demonstrated its inadequacy to provide support the needs of the couple and

their children: children suffer from the limited availability of caretakers and archetypes, and the couple suffers at the limits of their own finite energy against the herculean task of prioritizing partnership, their livelihoods, and the immense dependency of offspring. On the other hand, the wholesale dismantling of the family is not a reasonable response: the primal processes of human concrecence—birth, sexuality, and death—are scenes of extreme vulnerability, and we cannot do without stable relationships that provide protection and stability through these phases. I also do not think that queerness can prevent the sufferings of attachment—some agonies are to be included in the list of “generic traits” that accompany all intimate bonds. All relationships are scenes of risk, rupture, and ultimately tragedy. But, as a Deweyan pragmatist, I see queerness as a kind of imaginative capability, a blossoming of possibilities amidst the wreckage of old customs that have failed to generate, sustain, and enlarge the scope of connective bonds.

In a sense, I am “queering” Dewey, much as Sarah Ahmed “queered” phenomenology. I feel somewhat hubristic in the attempt since phenomenology, particularly the fleshy, *French* variety developed by Merleau-Ponty, expresses itself in a language that accommodates the sensuous and passionate thrust of queer theory in a way that American Pragmatism generally does not. The phenomenologist attends to the “allure” in perception, a kind of desirousness that pulls us into the world. They describe our *Entrelacement*, or intertwining, which characterizes the flesh—a chiasmatic relationship between the visible and the invisible, the touching/touched, enveloping/enveloped. In short, they embrace a method of sensitivity to the minute nuances of sensuous life. Ahmed’s project describes sexual life as a negotiation of space and queerness as the experience of “disorientation” when our navigation systems (norms) fail to account for the arising of unexpected desire, drawing our body in unexpected trajectories. Ahmed explores how the horizon of sexuality is a way of navigating the lived body as posi-

tioned and directed toward other bodies, and how sexual desire, particularly queer sexual desire, defamiliarizes the bodily horizon, defying the expectations we have (often passively) adopted. The experience is particularly bewildering since desire awakens an acute mode of perception that is particular to the sensitivity of the intimate body. While Ahmed does not explicitly *limit* sexuality to spatial perception, she finds it particularly productive to investigate lived sexuality and queer politics as a navigation of space where “orientation” is an immediate factor directing us to some experiences and away from others. Since phenomenology takes intentionality as a central structure of consciousness (by holding to the notion that all consciousness is the *consciousness of* something), focusing on the allure of the lived body of the other as a sensuous gestalt within our scope of contemporaneous action is appropriate to that inquiry. Experiences in which sexual desires disorient the lifeworld present us with opportunities for creative novelty. In Deweyan language, they are possibilities presented to us by impulses that (if they are not ignored or denied) provide us with a valuable opportunity to reconstruct a habit that no longer sufficiently connects us with our lived environment. Ahmed’s study of the manifold meanings in the word “orientation” is very useful for understanding the confusions of desire as a shift in our experience of political and social life. I find it particularly significant that her work does not limit queerness to its negative formulation, as a mere politics of resistance in relation to a regime of enforced heterosexuality, but also values queer sexuality as a creative and positive re-negotiation of attention. This work connects well with Butler’s still timely theory that gender is maintained through a series of acts, words, and gestures that inscribe the *surface* of the body, making it socially and publicly intelligible; while drag subverts the logic of gender and reveals the contingency of the power structures that ensure it. Both Ahmed and Butler present queerness as a spontaneous intervention in space that appeals to desire.

Expanding queerness beyond sexual desire into the wider horizon of erotic life redirects our attention from the navigation of space to the experience of time. Certainly, the occasion to which queerness responds is still a lived body, and the question of how I might be oriented towards it outside of widespread norms or customs is the central question of queer life. However, I propose that if it is not simply sexual desire but erotic interest that characterizes my relationship, my perception of this other body is primarily *temporal* rather than spatial. For Dewey, the individual *can* be thought of as a physical body that moves through space, but we should *primarily* think of the individual as something that is qualitative and temporal, an event or a *process* with a singular character that develops continuously through its beginning, middle, and an end. Life, for human beings, is not so much a state of affairs as it is an experience of time. Time is first given as a lifetime, for a lifetime is the given context for those beings whose experience includes meaning. It is in the context of a lifetime that I wish to consider the question. If we focus only on queer life as constituted by the sexual encounter, spatial perception offers us *angles* that reveal the slant of queer sex, but in the erotic situation, sex is the node in which the *temporality* of eros find expression in the spatial register.

### **The Temporal Individual**

Thomas Alexander’s work has most prominently located *eros* within Dewey’s philosophy. Working from the Deweyan perspective of “cultural naturalism,” which he has also called “ecological humanism,” Alexander has argued that we ought to think of the human creature as primarily characterized by *eros*: “a drive for encountering the world and oneself with a sense of meaning and value realized through action.” Cultures are the collaborative manifestations of that drive when it is fulfilled, and we should understand them as both the accretion of created meanings and that which supports the active expansion

of emergent meanings. Alexander proposes we think of cultures as “spiritual ecologies,” not apart from the bio-physical environment, but as an inheritance of distinctive ways we have found to be present within it, ways of responding to and honoring the potentialities we find through our sharing of the world. To live a meaningful life means to participate in this cooperative process, and we experience the fulfillment of this drive through action in response to “the lure of the world.” Alexander’s project takes *eros* in its most inclusive sense, well-grounded in the Platonic thought that understood it as “desire for the good,” the drive that motivates human action. However, ancient Greek poetry emphasizes an aspect of *eros* that is understated within Alexander’s work: the archetypal experience of *eros* is a visceral experience of desire for, and attachment to, a *particular* other. For the lyric poet (and for Lacanians) it is also an experience of an ambiguous absence that throws the self into question as it throws the desired other into exquisite relief.

In *Eros The Bittersweet*, Carson interprets *eros* as a crisis of the uncertain boundaries that separate “you” from “me.” These are revealed particularly by *Aidōs*, which she translates as “shamefastness,” an affective “voltage of decorum” discharged between two people who approach one another for “the crisis of human contact.” There is an indeterminate reluctance that trembles between shyness and respect which pulls lovers back from enacting or speaking their desire with complete transparency. Erotic desire in the sexual encounter is a wish to close the gap between us, not merely for the sake of the sensuous pleasures that might then ensue, but also so that I can access the immediacy of your desire for me. If I could, I would sense what you cannot say because you do not have the words or because it violates a social code that forbids you to acknowledge the possibilities that you imagine. The erotic wish in sexual interaction aims at the renunciation of our individual selves for the sake of a merging of perspectives that synchronizes affective communion. At its most poignant, amatory desire demands

perfect access to the beloved, or is the wish to grant perfect access to the lover, so that we may find evidence that our intentions are perfectly matched, my consciousness of you and your consciousness of me are replaced by a consciousness of *us*. But, as Carson follows the development of *eros* in classical and contemporary poetry, she finds that it is in our experience of desire and in our yearning for fusion that we discover the adumbration of our boundaries. The desire that draws us together demonstrates the impossibility of its satisfaction—and a good thing too, because if we achieved such a union beyond the passionate fantasy and its poetic metaphor, desire would end. *Eros* seeks to decode and then reestablishes the ineradicable mystery of your desire. I can get closer, but I cannot fully reveal the contents of your sexual imagination just as I cannot intellectually decode the essence of the self that you are.

Carson invites the reader to consider Bruno Snell’s thesis that by attending to the transition from epic to lyric poetry, we can also see the transition in the Ancient Greek mind from a state of pure agency to an interior realm of thought that is separate from its deeds. The idea, however controversial, has some appeal for a Deweyan who sees the emergence of cultural forms in a reciprocal relation, and thus continuous with, the evolution of the organism. In theory, the Greeks underwent a transition from a state of complete sociality, a civilization of people who did not exist for themselves apart from their actions in a participatory world, to an awareness of themselves as individuals that can give voice to an inner experience of reflection, prior to and after the fact of action. Carson is interested in the way that introduction of the Phoenician alphabet in the 8<sup>th</sup> century inaugurated a transition from an oral to a written culture, and how this shift is accompanied by a reorientation of perception: “Complete openness to the environment is a condition of optimum awareness and alertness” for a person living in an oral milieu, “and a continual fluent interchange of impressions and responses between the environment and

himself is the proper condition of his physical and mental life.” Conversely, the person who reads and writes inhibits their senses in the effort to keep their attention on written words, which occasions the experience of thought as occurring separately from the concrete reality of their senses. It then becomes possible to conceive of the self as constituted by *interiority*. The newly self-reflective mind is underscored by new experiences of *ambivalence*. On the one hand, lyric, erotic poetry is the paradigmatic expression of a self that must develop relationships consciously and must seek itself through its relation to other selves. On the other hand, the addition of literacy has generated an individual that has learned to be protective of their hard-won interiority and its capacity to focus on its own self-directed thought. This is a fragile self who senses the potential for psychic disintegration posed by the potency of erotic desire. Eros is a risk of psychic loss, particularly in its frustrations, rejections, and disappointments. Carson speculates that the conception of eros as directed to or exposing a *lack* might reflect the way a self in a written culture (re)encounters an acute vulnerability when the interior self is flooded with sensual awareness in erotic desire.

Dewey is also sensitive to the ontological ambiguities that frustrate the effort to establish oneself when an individual understands in terms of a culture that includes, not only alphabetic literacy, but also emphasizes a scientific understanding of nature and an economic sensibility that prioritizes quantitative accounts as the *sine qua non* of empirical knowledge. The version of selfhood offered to us in this epoch is doubly alienated from immediate sensuous life in its zeal to replace sensation, not merely with language, but with data. If we insist upon the superior claim of quantitative methods to describe what is ultimately real, as a “pragmatist” in the colloquial and narrow sense would, and in so doing relegate quality to a merely subjective status, we will have also relinquished the individual—but not for the sake of a more thoroughly socialized agent. The devaluation of qualitative awareness

sacrifices our sensitivity to integrated wholes, which are meaningfully and intrinsically changed as a consequence of their interactions with other wholes, for the sake tracking change in terms of extrinsic relations—mere changes in space. The individual that I take myself to be not truly temporal at all because time makes no difference to what I ultimately am—compound physicality that is held together by physical laws and is ultimately destined for a dissolution then renders it into (and from the perspective of an atemporal logic, already *is*) piles of impersonal stuff. The changes of birth, health, disease, and death are attributable only to redistributions of particles in space, inert matter that briefly sustains the phenomenon of consciousness and the illusion of choice. Just after Michele Besso died, Einstein wrote to the family of his friend: “Now he has departed from this strange world a little ahead of me. That means nothing. People like us, who believe in physics, know that the distinction between past, present and future is only a stubbornly persistent illusion.” While I acknowledge that the sentiment conveyed when the text is read poetically reveals erotic attachment, when it is taken as a straightforward description of reality by a scientist to whom we grant this kind of authority, undermines the significance of any such attachments. Time and individuality are given to us qualitatively.

If we return to life as it is experienced and lived through, the individual is an *event* whose occurrence includes moments of significance and striving, bookended by its birth and its death, given to us as qualitative whole. To understand reality as primarily qualitative is to accept that things must be felt and sensed before they are known, and that insofar as we come to know them, our knowledge of them is had with respect to the way we continue to feel and sense them. An individual, particularly another self that I desire, is such a complex existence whom I experience in terms of the singular quality that makes them who they are and no other, and whose actions, speech, features, and gestures are coherent to me insofar as they are further revelations of this

same quality. I can comprehend the gesture of another as having meaning only when it is connected with the quality that characterizes the person with whom I am interacting. If I cannot understand a gesture, a word, or an action as emanating from the character with whom I am acquainted and who I immediately sense, then I am confused and struggle to ascribe a meaning to it. The quality of the individual is available to me immediately both in the sense that it is there at the instant of my first acquaintance (it is only on the basis of quality that I recognize any acquaintance to be made), and in the sense that it is the immediacy of the individual with which I might aim to become more familiar, and it is that which deepens and develops over the course of our relationship and throughout the lifetime of the individual. To relate to an individual, to experience a relationship with a pragmatist's attention to concrecence, is fantastically erotic. As a complex qualitative whole, my best access to you is there in my direct and immediate experience of you as a temporal, and therefore singular, being. Your potency, elusiveness, and mystery and is not a *lack* that indicates an emptiness or a truth that you withhold, it is instead a present fullness that is inexhaustible and dynamic. Even in your absence, temporary or final, you are a distinct absence, an absence that has the character of a particular absence that is unlike the absence of any other.

### **Erotic Consummations**

The qualitative dimension of experience is given its fullest expression in what Dewey calls "aesthetic experience," which he takes as paradigmatic for experience in general. The "aesthetic" refers to a *phase* of within experience, and a *kind* of experience, and a *potential* that is implicit within all experience. The "live creature" is a being that adapts and grows through its interactions with and attachments to the various things in its environment that it needs to survive; but it also becomes estranged and depleted through failures to complete its ventures.

Although we need regular contact with the things that provide nourishment, care, protection, and stimulation, we are often prevented from accessing them through distraction and interruption, through the persistence of habits that have outlived their usefulness, through institutions that compartmentalize our activity from our imaginations. When it comes, the recovery of ecological attunement is felt as a satisfying culmination, a "consummation," which is the hallmark of aesthetic experience. But these consummations are only possible when "the whole creature is present," when its attention is unified to the unfolding of its interaction with an environment, the phases of which are organized through the successive development of an underlying quality. The features of the experience may be intellectually distinguished, patterns of cause and effect may be identified, but the character that makes the experience singular and satisfying is not a determinate this or that, it is the directly sensed horizon that allows a dynamic and multifaceted event to unfold in with novel surprises, and for all that, still remain coherent.

An erotic relationship is an aesthetic experience that depends on our ability to perceive one another in our qualitative wholeness. Who "you" are to me is not an identity that can be decisively located within in a socio-cultural matrix that is adjacent or complementary relative to my position, nor a body whose spatial proportions and erogenous zones suit my preferred sexual practices. What distinguishes the erotic relationship is our capacity to experience each other as inexhaustible and singular wholes that flourish and fade in the temporal context of a lifetime—a duration that is made poignant by a tacit expectation of a relative length that can never be counted upon.

We might call it "love," (and certainly some will insist that we do) but "love" is a concept that has been spiritualized, thoroughly appropriated by a dualistic metaphysics that is intent on fixing it within the category of eternity. The aforementioned poignancy of the temporal

experience is only to be found within the “romance,” a narrative we might liken to a conversion story in which courtship functions as a test of faith that, when passed, sanctifies the bond of the couple because the lovers have proven their worthiness through their aspiration to eternity. Love, in the Christian, heterosexual imagination (and its dumbing down of Plato), understands its natural teleology in the reproductive project where the body is also redeemed from the sin of its demand for pleasure by its aspirations to procreative eternity. The couple that is in (this kind of) love believes that is sufficient unto itself, devalues (by some measure) relationships outside of its enclosure, raises its children, and tends to its property having received the benediction owed to it due to its spiritual blessedness. If it is queerness we want—or satisfying sex for that matter—we are better off with eros.

Audre Lorde understood the erotic as a “resource within each of us that lies in a distinctly female and spiritual plane,” the suppression of which is vital for the maintenance of racist and patriarchal power. She defined it as a non-rational wisdom, “the measure between our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings,” and “an internal sense of satisfaction” and a “requirement toward excellence,” that is less a question of “what we do” than “of how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing.” The resonance between Audre Lorde’s theory of eros and John Dewey’s theory of aesthetic experience is remarkable. For each, when one’s work has this character, it results in the enrichment of meaning rather than the depletion of resources. While Dewey mentions the institutional, systemic, and economic forces that prevent aesthetic experience, and while I cannot help but read *Art as Experience* as a blistering critique of culture under the conditions of capitalism, he is not a polemicist. Lorde names her targets. She writes: “the principal horror of any system which defines the good in terms of profit rather than in terms of human need, or which defines human need to the exclusion of the psychic and emotional components of that need” is that it “robs our work of its erotic value.”

Lorde argues that one of the cardinal strategies of oppressive power is its sequestration the erotic. In such conditions, eros is suppressed, disallowed from most dimensions of life. Its expression is confined to sexual activity, and then it is further deformed and exploited through its misrepresentation by pornography. Connecting with others in mutual acknowledgement of deep, primal feelings is a human need, and like other needs, it can be commodified or driven underground. Living in accordance with a patriarchal, racist, or extractive logic requires us to satisfy this need with “certain proscribed comings together,” irruptions of erotic life in the form of a riot, or a rave, or mass hysteria that are accompanied by a “simultaneous looking away,” and a tendency to misname and disparage them that prevents our recognizing their significance. In conditions where access to erotic experience is denied within daily life, Lorde explains, we use one another (frequently, men use women) as receptacles for feelings, like disposable tissues. But when we are able to access our own erotic capacities, she finds its power in “sharing deeply any pursuit with another person,” and it is the lens through which we evaluate aspects of our lives in terms of their meaning, preventing us from settling for pursuits and relationships that are merely conventional, safe, or convenient.

### The Need for Queer Ecologies

One of Dewey’s central concerns of *Human Nature and Conduct* is the interaction between habit and impulse. Habits are our tendencies, our “readinesses to act” that structure our perceptions and give shape to the world as we inhabit it. They are part of the dynamic tension that comprise the ordered parts of the self, especially as we relate to the other members of the culture that we have inherited. Impulse, on the other hand, is an unpredictable, disorganized response to an environment. When we do not know how to meet our needs, when we lack the resources to navigate the world around us, the need

expresses itself but cannot organize the creature's efforts into a coordinated response. Impulse is generally released as a reaction to a habit that has become ossified as an overly rigid custom, a habit that has become inefficient through its refusal to adapt to the complex ecosystem that has shifted since its origination. An impulse signals an unmet need and begins the search for a new habit. As impulse, it is an ateleological reaction that can only acquire meaning insofar as we are *cared for* by someone who is willing and able to interpret our needs, creatively and intelligently, in light of their capacity attend to us as a qualitative whole. This responsive care helps impulse find a habit and is most crucial when we are infants. But the needs that defined infancy do not vanish upon our entry to language, nor our mastery of locomotion. They persist throughout our lives in moments of struggle, confusion, illness, and crisis of all kinds.

Impulses can only have sense for someone who is aware of us, who is connected to us *erotically*. Dewey tells us that individuals are creative responses to their environment, but only insofar as they elicit meaningful responses from others. Sexual interactions are important because they can illustrate this process: the biological rhythms of arousal and disorganized, unpredictable, and confusing as they emerge and shift in accordance with indefinite life stages. In their nascence, they are also *inexpressible*, idiosyncratic, and extraordinarily diverse. The requisite conditions for such excitations are almost always a rigid habit against which we revolt, and the heightening of tactile sensations that rearranges the sensitivity of the body arrives as an anticipation of a liberation, the path to which is still unclear. These shifts become meaningful, generate possibilities, and discover novel ends when they elicit a response from another who helps us develop a new habit, or enrich an old one with new significance. *Mere* sex follows a narrow path to efficient discharge. *Erotic* sex is revelatory. It is also an arena where attentiveness, openness, and imagination will always matter a good deal more than skill. I

also do not mean to imply that sex is necessarily made more erotic by the length of an acquaintance or by an adherence to strict monogamy—although this may be the case for many of us—there is nothing to prevent relative strangers from sharing an illuminating and fulfilling rendezvous as long as they encounter one another as qualitatively given, dynamically complex wholes whose history and trajectory is implied and can be sensed, and perhaps imagined, even if it cannot be known. *I do* mean to explicitly state what I have already implied: queer sex, sex which is interested in the creative potential of the impulses that are released by an overly rigid custom, sex that is imaginative, developing the possibilities of the present so as to increase the meaning of a shared experience, is inherently more erotic than “straight” sex.

But sex is only an illustration: one way of engaging in erotic life. Impulses are released by crisis, by trauma, by any circumstance in which the ecosystem and creature cannot meet one another in a sustainable arrangement, where needs must be discovered and met with the help of another. We are all in the midst of such a crisis. Ecological degradation is nothing less than widening gaps between all creatures—human and non-human—and the environments they depend on. Contemporary human beings have skill sets that are more specialized and less relevant to the specific ecosystems in which they live than ever before. The pervasiveness of single family homes, the lingering social reticence from a quarantine and a long pandemic, the decrease in available “third spaces,” the privatization of convivial public space, mean we are more isolated from each other and more dependent on for-profit services provided by underpaid anonymous service workers to meet our needs. Queer sex is great, but queer eros is vital.

We need queer ecologies: individuals who are connected to one another through the awareness that we are *events*, unfolding over the indeterminate duration of a lifetime that will necessarily include crises, large and small, the consequences of which can only have mean-

ing insofar as we exist for one another qualitatively and respond to one another imaginatively. We need friends, communities, and publics as well—but we also need something like family that is more resilient and more creative than what has become of “family” for many of us. We urgently need a way to *grow* families, to sustain and nourish them, that is free from the productive and reproductive logic that has come to define the institution. We need to develop new habits for accepting and *valuing* unconventional arrangements: committed and sexless friendships that are also primary relationships, polyamorous groups of more than two adults, several couples or single friends who want to dwell under a single roof, groups of friends that raise children together, adult offspring who continue cohabit with parents and aunts and uncles, covens, clans, coteries, and combinations I have not yet imagined.

Tom Alexander called cultures “spiritual ecologies,” and so they are, but we also need queer ecologies of desire, collections of individuals who are committed to making meaning out of the coming madness by collaborating to develop new patterns for caretaking when and where larger systems break down. Ecological behavior involves bringing out the tacit presuppositions that shape the world for us and considering them together. The failures of habit that need intervention can tell us nothing if we are isolated in our suffering. An increase in the possibilities of deep connection is an increase in the meaning of our present experience, and an increase in the signifi-

cance of the qualitative reality of the complex whole, of the individual, of the environment, of the relationships that keep us bound to reality. Ecological responsiveness starts with an expansion of erotic life.

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