

HALF-HEARTED NATURALISM? PAUL B. CHERLIN'S METAPHYSICAL GROUNDING OF DEWEY'S PHILOSOPHY

Louis Guichard

Jean Moulin University - Lyon 3

louis.guichard@univ-lyon3.fr

Paul B. Cherlin, *John Dewey's Metaphysical Theory*,
Cham, Springer Nature Switzerland, 2023

John Dewey's Metaphysical Theory by Paul Benjamin Cherlin offers for the first time a comprehensive, technical yet accessible synthesis of John Dewey's metaphysics, proposing fresh insights into its genesis, empiricist method, content and practical consequences. It sheds a new light on the role of metaphysics in Dewey's work, challenging its marginalization by some of his commentators. This work adds a new stone to an ongoing debate from the 1980s about the possibility of a pragmatist, and in particular Deweyan, metaphysics. R. Rorty's 1982 article on "Dewey's metaphysics" (Rorty 1982) sparked a long-running controversy by judging Dewey's proposal of a metaphysics to be contradictory with his "anti-foundationalist" rejection of the quest for certainty. In response, many commentators attempted to minimize this contradiction and circumvent this anti-foundationalist ban. Thus, R. Boisvert's previous work on Dewey's metaphysics (Boisvert 1988) invited us to move away from the analytical grid proposed by Rorty, in conclusion of a book that followed the evolution throughout Dewey's work of a single metaphysical scheme, that of the tension between change and permanence. In many respects, the present work follows in the footsteps of Boisvert's, while adding much to it. In terms of content, Cherlin takes up the idea of the centrality in Dewey's work of the tension between change and permanence, but generalizes it into a metaphysics of "double movements", or dialectical tensions between contradictory tendencies, in the tradition of Hegel. In terms of method, the book takes up a historical approach that seeks out the "prefigurations" and sub-

sequent traces of Dewey's metaphysics before and after the publication of *Experience and Nature* in 1925. But it reinscribes this approach in a "naturalistic" metaphysics that builds on the works predating 1925, generalizes them beyond human experience, to ultimately return to it in the form of practical consequences. This methodology ultimately leads Cherlin to take a stand in favor of a non-pragmatist naturalism, against a radically anti-foundationalist reading of Dewey. But before returning to this proposal (which has the merit of being clear), let's take a closer look at the book's content.

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Its first chapter aims to present the "metaphysical orientation" of Dewey's metaphysics, in other words, to justify its general necessity within his work and to outline the originality of its method. Metaphysics, like the whole of philosophical discourse, does not take place in a vacuum. It always emerges from a state of human experience in a given society, and hence from its knowledge, artifacts and institutions, which reflect a way of situating oneself in the universe. But whereas metaphysics has traditionally isolated certain features of experience to turn them into metaphysical foundations, metaphysics as Dewey conceives it must take "empirical data" in its entirety as its starting point, without introducing dualisms. Metaphysics will thus be based on a "new theory of experience", which maintains that experience must neither be separated from the rest of nature, nor reduced to one of its aspects, such as cognitive experience (p. 11). On the other hand, it will draw on a "new approach to the empirical method": the continuity of nature and experience implies that the features of experience reveal something about nature itself. Thus, for Dewey, "metaphysical inquiry becomes a matter of expanding what counts as 'empirical data' to what is yielded by and through every type of experience — the spiritual, the political, the quotidian, our dreams, nightmares, anxieties, and our

moments of elation — and drawing from these varied experiential fields in order to determine what nature is and does.” (ibid.)

However, according to Cherlin, this implies that we cannot see Dewey as a pragmatist metaphysician, for whom “truth is shaped by what works in practice, and what shapes future practice” (p. 15). Indeed, “Dewey’s own ‘pragmatism’ is most squarely located in his work on ‘logic’, his theory of inquiry”, which focuses only on that part of experience that is cognitive, whereas metaphysics seeks to grasp experience in its entirety (p. 16). On the other hand, it is only thanks to a “theory of experience” that pragmatism can extend beyond the realm of knowledge, so as not to be reduced to a narrow-minded positivism (p. 18). Finally, pragmatism is judged incapable of grasping on its own the continuity of experience with the whole of nature that metaphysics aims at (p. 25). Dewey’s metaphysics is therefore not pragmatist but empiricist, or better still, naturalistic: “For Dewey, a naturalistic metaphysics was that which opposed a dualistic metaphysics. Nature is inclusive and pluralistic, not exclusive and dualistic.” (p. 20) This inclusiveness enables nature to contain qualitatively plural existences within itself, a continuous emergence of human experience without recourse to supra-natural factors, and a naturalized religious experience. Methodologically, this naturalism calls for a “direct realism” that dissolves the false problem of the possibility of knowledge and takes experience as a source of knowledge of nature (pp. 22-23).

Chapter 2 moves on from the method to the content of Dewey’s metaphysics, outlining its “prefigurations” in his middle works. The point is to show that Dewey’s metaphysics did not suddenly appear in 1925 with *Experience and Nature*; rather, it is a “continuation” of his earlier, more specialized philosophical writings, or even a metaphysical “response” to them (p. 30). At the very least, Dewey’s metaphysical theory cannot be understood without reference to the empirical materials he gathered in his “logical theory” of inquiry in the years

1900-1910, on which his metaphysical generalizations are partly based. This continuation concerns content more than method, since the logical writings prefigure a central metaphysical scheme in Dewey, that of “double movement” or “dyadic pairing”, understood as “a general term that marks a tensional exchange between two co-determinate tendencies, functional phases, or qualitative characteristics of some event or particular process that results in some augmented or transfigured identity” (p. 35). This metaphysical scheme has developed steadily since the 1896 article on the reflex arc (Dewey [1896] 2008), to the point of appearing as what holds Dewey’s work together as a system (p. 29).

This general thesis is justified on the basis of Dewey’s logical writings from 1900-1916. Here, the author offers a challenging interpretation of several key works from that period, arguing that both the scheme of “double movements” and a metaphysical ambition emerge in them. Cherlin identifies in Dewey’s contributions to the 1903 *Studies in Logical Theory* a distant call for a metaphysics that brings the “double movements” of inquiry — for example, between the precariousness of new hypotheses and a stable foundation of beliefs, or between the factual given and the ideal inferred — down to the generic traits of nature that make them possible. The list of these double logical movements grows longer in the 1910 version of *How We Think*, where Dewey proposes to conceive of thinking as a rhythmic alternation between direct grasp and understanding mediated by ideas, or between abstraction and reintegration within a synthetic grasp. Finally, the introduction to 1916’s *Essays in Experimental Logic* makes every investigative situation a tension between a qualitative “focus” and a “context” cognitively grasped in terms of relationships.

Chapter 3 dives into the study of the content of Dewey’s metaphysics, understood as “cognizance of the generic traits of existence” (Dewey [1925] 2008, 50). Its genesis is first traced back to the famous 1915 paper, “The Subject-Matter of Metaphysical Inquiry”. Whereas

scientific inquiry deals only with causal relations, which are always singular, metaphysics is necessary to know the most generic traits of existence, without any conditions of duration or context. This radically “ineluctable” character of generic traits leads the author once again to take a clear stand against a pragmatist conception, which would conceive of these traits as contextual and fallible tools (p. 54). The other important moment in the genesis of generic traits is found in (what remains of) the typescript of the *Carus Lectures* of 1922, which would eventually provide Dewey with the material for *Experience and Nature*, and of which Cherlin seems to be the first to propose a study. Here we find a prefiguration of “double movements” through the tension between “provinces”, both relatively individualized and continuous in their interactions, and “borders” dynamically determined by the “resistances” that these provinces mutually oppose (p. 56-57). This may allow us to see “provinces and boundaries” as the generic, architectonic features from which all the others derive. And if, in 1925, it is the double movement of “stable-and-precarious” that becomes primary and paradigmatic, it is because it strategically enables Dewey to oppose the reduction of all existence to the stable (metaphysics of the eternal), the precarious (metaphysics of flux), or to a dualistic “conjunction” of the stable and the precarious (ibid.).

However, the chapter does not linger in its study of the “stable-and-precarious”, but continues its study of generic traits in their very genericity, that is, as “dialectical rhythms”. In case the terms “dyadic pairings” and “double movements” didn’t make it clear enough, Cherlin is among the commentators who see Dewey as a continuator of Hegel. He nevertheless brings home the idea that, in Dewey, the naturalization of the Hegelian dialectic is not only logical or methodological (inquiry as a reconciliation between conflicting tendencies) but also ontological: “Dewey’s understanding of identity, interaction, change, and growth are all infused with a naturalized application of Hegel’s dialectic. (...) Dewey never ceased to think in

terms of dialectical oppositions and tensional movements, even if the specific character of these oppositional relationships was Dewey’s own unique contribution.” (p. 60) While offering an impressive list of these dialectical oppositions in Dewey (p. 62), the author suggests linking them to the philosophy of rhythm presented in *Art as Experience*. Drawing on a few key pages from the second chapter of *Experience and Nature*, Cherlin argues that, for Dewey, nature is fundamentally “syncopated”; it is made up of the conjunction of opposing tendencies according to different “modes and tempos” of interaction¹. This is what is clarified in *Art as Experience*, which “should be treated as a work about metaphysics more so than about ‘art’ as narrowly defined” (p. 64): art is a culmination of nature because the explicit rhythmicity of aesthetic experience manifests the implicit rhythmicity of all reality.

In Chapter 4, this study of generic traits leads to the study of the emergence of human experience from these traits of existence. Experience is not an empire of subjectivity within an empire of materiality; rather it is a “foreground” continuous with the “background” of nature; as such, it constitutes a guide for discovering its traits (Dewey [1927] 2008). And experience is all the less a sphere of subjectivity when it is duly identified with the whole of culture (p. 83). The link between existence and experience can then be clarified through the notion of emergence, once this notion has been linked by Cherlin to “double movements”. Considered as a process, emergence can be characterized as the appearance of an irreducible novelty within a “series” (and not a mere “succession”) of which it is a “refinement”, i.e. “a transformational movement toward some provisional terminus” (p. 89). But we can also consider emergence through the notion of “field”, understood as “a dynamic environment comprising relations that are loosely grouped in accordance with a common function” (p. 90). Emergence isn’t the appearance of new types of substances but rath-

¹ See (Dewey [1925] 2008, 6667), cited by (Cherlin 2023, 63).

er of new “fields” and modes of interaction, which are also new ways of instantiating the generic traits of stability-and-precariousness, individuality-and-relationship, etc. Thus, the mind is not a substance but an “emergent field”, a new and irreducible way in which the body interacts with its environment when this interaction comes to be organized around a system of symbols (p. 95). Similarly, consciousness “is not a faculty or a special part of the brain. Rather, it is an emergent field, entailing a serial system of transactions and events that operates in conjunction with mind”, appearing when the latter is confronted with a new environment requiring renewal (p. 97). Finally, cognition as an “emergent field” becomes a way for consciousness to use and update the meanings guiding the body-mind in the transformation of its environment. At this level of interaction, double movements take on the special form of a tension between subject and object. This pervasiveness of double movements provides new evidence that “Dewey’s conception of experience can only be accurately and meaningfully understood in connection with his theory of emergence” (p. 102) and thus his metaphysics of generic traits.

The fifth and final chapter discusses the ethical implications of the metaphysical study of the generic traits. Whereas philosophy is a “criticism of criticisms”², i.e. the self-critique of the ability to trace values back to their conditions and consequences, wisdom is more precisely the philosophical ability to trace them back to their metaphysical conditions: “Wisdom provides a way of seeing every relation in terms of its contingencies and stabilities, its unique characters and relations, the present factors and their possibilities. Moreover, wisdom entails an additional capacity to balance relations in ways that engender human flourishing, enrichment, progress” (p. 108). Wisdom’s generic way of posing any practical problem — as a work of rebalancing “double movements” — must then become the canvas for creating new values and new ways

of living, as Cherlin insists in his conclusion (p. 137).

The first example of this understanding of wisdom relates to personality. Ethics, concerned with the consequences of the social environment on the development of personality, can usefully refer to the “tensional circuit” formed by the dual tendency of all existence towards individuation and relation (p. 115). Personality then becomes the “refinement” of this tension within the new “emerging field” that is the social; it is individuality endowed with a recognized communitarian office. This avoids the devastating consequences of a “bad metaphysics of personality” regarding for instance the question of the personality of human fetuses, or the management of the Covid19 pandemic (p. 121). The second example, concerning the relationship between metaphysics and democracy, deepens the first, since through the democratic ideal we achieve what constitutes a *good* personality. The democratic ideal is a faith in individual possibilities, a faith “grounded in those features that are identified through a proper metaphysical inquiry” (p. 127). Indeed, metaphysics reveals a world that rejects absolute fixity, hierarchy and isolation — in other words, a world of freedom, equality and fraternity (Dewey [1918] 2008, 49–53). The metaphysics of “generic traits” definitively settles social criticism in favor of democracy, and provides once and for all a foundation for the effort to subvert all absolutism and authoritarianism (p. 131) and to criticize institutions that prevent the development of capacities for relating and listening to others, for example in the context of concentration camps (p. 133-134).

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This summary does not pretend to fully do justice to the book’s density and erudition. One of its most remarkable contributions lies in the effort to restore in a single movement both the genesis of Dewey’s metaphysics from “empirical data”, its content, and its ethical and political consequences. The author convincingly shows that the

² See (Dewey [1925] 2008, 298), cited by (Cherlin 2023, 107).

scheme of the “double movements” partly originates in Dewey’s logical studies, and that his metaphysics generalizes it to the scale of existence. It also shows that, for Dewey, metaphysics is not an end in itself, but a means of drawing practical consequences from experience. Overall, Cherlin’s effort to show how central “double movements” are to the content of Dewey’s metaphysics is impressive. On the other hand, the clearly anti-pragmatist form he gives to this metaphysics seems to us open to criticism in several respects.

First, let’s return to this “prefiguration” of the metaphysics of double movements in the logical writings of the years 1900-1916. We may well wonder about the choice of logical writings as the main source of these empirical “prefigurations”, since the first chapter invited us to draw on empirical material broader than that of knowledge. But in any case, the term “prefiguration” should be considered with greater caution than Cherlin perhaps does. In works on the history of philosophy, the use of this term always runs the risk of sounding a bit suspect. Whether it is called retrospective illusion or “historical fallacy” (Dewey [1896] 2008, 105), the suspicion is, in short, that of an undue projection of what comes after onto what comes before. Yet although Cherlin claims he does not want to “conflate Dewey’s earlier theory with what would come later” (p. 34), he sometimes seems to be moving away from what these “prefigurations” really are according to his own methodology, namely mere empirical material that *can* be metaphysically generalized *when* it comes to metaphysics. On the contrary, Cherlin seems to argue that these “prefigurations” contain something like a latent metaphysics, as if logic itself required a metaphysical extension in order to justify why it is effective (ibid.; see also p. 39, p. 42). But why should this justification come from metaphysics rather than evolutionary biology, or social sciences, placing knowledge within the framework of organic and social interactions? What need did Dewey have to “fully answer” the question of the “relationship between the world and the results of inquiry”

(p. 46)? Was he too succumbing to a quest for certainty, that of an integral justification of inquiry procedures by their inscription in the rhythms of all existence? Reading Cherlin, one sometimes gets the impression that the metaphysics of *Experience and Nature* does not arise in response to a specific cultural problem — that of naturalism and nature-culture dualism — and that it does not mark a qualitatively new stage in Dewey’s philosophical growth, but only responds to a purely speculative concern for completeness and justification.

Another point of criticism concerns the “ineluctability” of generic traits, on which Cherlin bases his anti-anti-foundationalist position. According to him, Dewey aims at something “ultimate” in genericity or ineluctability, something without any causal or contextual conditions. This supposedly leads to the conclusion that generic traits should not be conceived as “provisional assumptions” that are subject to the test of experience (p. 54). However the conclusion does not follow from the premise, which is problematic in itself.

Turning first to the conclusion, Cherlin seems to gradually shift from the absolute necessity of generic traits to their irrevisability. He confides that he “cannot make sense of the thought that ‘contingency-and-stability’ or ‘relation-and-individuation’ are provisional assumptions about nature, or contingent features of nature” (ibid.). But contingency and provisionality are certainly not the same thing. Even supposing that generic traits are “non-contingent ontological constants”, why shouldn’t the way of knowing them be provisional? This brings us to the more general problem of the methodology of Dewey’s metaphysics and its empiricism. For by refusing to recognize that Dewey’s metaphysical statements are subject to the test of experience, the author is led to lend Dewey a “new empiricism” (p. 25) that breaks with the experimental method Dewey promotes. It also reintroduces new dualisms between science and philosophy that Dewey sought to avoid, and that “double movements” were supposed to combat. Finally, he is led to

make these double movements the object of a certainty exempt from any possible revision, even though Dewey intended to break with such a claim. He is thereby led to sacrifice Dewey's experimentalism, which is methodologically integral to his naturalism, to a metaphysical ambition. Yet such departures from canonic aspects of Dewey's thought seem insufficiently justified. On the contrary, Dewey stresses in *Experience and Nature* that general relations or correlations are an essential object of scientific knowledge³. If science deals with genericity while being experimental, why should metaphysics be any different, even supposing we demand that this genericity be "ultimate"? If this is a way to bring experimental logic back to its "existential" conditions of effectivity, we see no reason why this justification should not itself be subject to test and revision. In short, Dewey's metaphysics could well retain its aim of absolutely "ineluctable" features and its experimental method.

Nevertheless — to move on to the premise of the reasoning above — is Dewey really aiming for traits that are so "ineluctable"? Cherlin points out that "Dewey never, in any of his works, proposes that generic traits of existence come into being or pass out of being. Accordingly, he never suggests that they are contingent or situated" (p. 52). But one wonders whether these "metaphysical" traits can be separated in this way from Dewey's writings as a whole, especially from his logical writings on the role of genericity in inquiry. Take, for example, the "logical reconstruction" sketched in chapter 6 of *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (a text virtually absent from Cherlin's book, as is *The Quest for Certainty*). Here, Dewey conceives of the generic as an empirical instrument that is produced and tested empirically. It is not an absolute that exists prior to any context: it is a fallible tool, produced and summoned

contextually, helping to analyze singular problematic situations. We do not need to know if generic traits are absolutely necessary in order to draw practical conclusions from them, whether we're talking about anchoring logic in the traits of nature, shedding light on the analysis of new moral and political situations through "double movements", or inventing new arrangements on this basis. For this, they don't need to be cut off from a metaphysics that itself claims that nothing is absolutely stable and necessary⁴: the fact that double movements *almost* are (and experimentation won't be able to prove anything else anyway) is enough to make them relevant philosophical tools.

But, finally, why see them as radically more than tools? The question we raise here is not one of realism, for Dewey's metaphysics can be pragmatic without renouncing its realism, its adequacy to reality. All that pragmatism requires is that the criterion of this adequacy be sought in practical consequences rather than in a correspondence to a prior reality. No, the question raised is that of foundationalism. By considering generic traits as removed from all contingency and revision, Cherlin returns to a quest for certainty from which, in response to Rorty's initial criticisms, it should rather be shown that Dewey's metaphysics manages to distance itself. Certainly, Cherlin insists on the need to draw practical consequences from this metaphysics, and to do so, to seek out and even invent singular instantiations of "double movements". But he draws these consequences in a foundationalist way, i.e. from something that is assumed to infallibly guide the criticism of methods and institutions, while itself being exempt from all criticism. And certainly, he seeks to reduce generic trait's prescriptive character to a minimum, by opening up the margin of "creativity" in the social inquiry they are supposed to ground. But the generic features still seem to impose unsurpassable

³ This is a point that Cherlin obscures by referring to "relation" sometimes as interaction, sometimes as internal tension in the rhythm of double movement, but never in the sense it takes on in *Experience and Nature* and *The Quest for Certainty*, that is, as uniform and constant correlations in tension with qualitative uniqueness. On this point, see chapters 5 and 6 of Boisvert's book cited above.

⁴ Dewey noted that the assertion of the universal existence of process leads back to the quest for certainty traditionally associated with a metaphysics of the eternal (Dewey [1925] 2008, 49) cited by (Cherlin 2023, 57). The same is true of a metaphysics that would posit a universal, de-contextualized tension of the precarious-and-stable.

limits on the latter, making every problem a question of dosing and balancing between double movements.

Why then not embrace the pragmatist alternative to this foundationalism, which is more consistent with Dewey's work? Contrary to Cherlin's assertion, pragmatism is able to justify by itself, though fallibly, its extension beyond knowledge; nor is there anything preventing it from adopting the naturalistic hypothesis of a continuity between nature and experience in order to seek its own grounding in existence. On the contrary, everything in Dewey's work invites us to build a pragmatist metaphysics of pragmatism, naturalistic because it postulates *experimentally* a continuity between experience and nature. The content of Cherlin's metaphysics of "double movements" could then be retained, but it would become revisable, experimental and naturalistic in this sense, and would be tested based on its ability to effectively guide criticism. The challenge would then be to more precisely establish what this critical — now pragmatic rather than foundational — function of double movements might be. This would make it possible to put an end to the doubts raised by Rorty over 40 years ago, and which Cherlin sometimes confirms in spite of himself.

But this difference in method or attitude, important as it is, in no way detracts from the interest of Cherlin's

study of the content of Dewey's metaphysics. On the contrary, even those pragmatist readers of Dewey whom Cherlin opposes will wish to retain the essence of that content, albeit to take it in a different direction. For this reason, this remarkable work is highly recommended to anyone interested in Dewey's metaphysics or, more broadly, in the unity of his work.

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