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# Experience and Inquiry in John Dewey's Contextualism

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Experience and Inquiry in John Dewey's Contextualism

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Works by John Dewey:

Southern Illinois University Press publishes a collection of John Dewey's complete works in 37 volumes. They are separated into three sections: *The Early Works*, *The Middle Works*, and *The Later Works*. My citations will follow the standard format of referencing the section, volume and page number in this collection, save for when the citation also can be found in a separately published volume. Then, I will include the following abbreviations.

<i>HWT</i>	<i>How We Think</i> (1910)(Rev. 1933)	(MW 6)
<i>DE</i>	<i>Democracy and Education</i> (1916)	(MW 9)
<i>RP</i>	<i>Reconstruction in Philosophy</i> (1920)	(MW 12)
<i>HNC</i>	<i>Human Nature and Conduct</i> (1922)	(MW 14)
<i>EN</i>	<i>Experience and Nature</i> (1925)	(LW 1)
<i>PP</i>	<i>The Public and its Problems</i> (1927)	(LW 2)
<i>QC</i>	<i>The Quest for Certainty</i> (1929)	(LW 4)
<i>ION</i>	<i>Individualism: Old and New</i> (1930)	(LW 5)
<i>CF</i>	<i>A Common Faith</i> (1934)	(LW 9)
<i>AE</i>	<i>Art as Experience</i> (1934)	(LW 10)
<i>LSA</i>	<i>Liberalism and Social Action</i> (1935)	(LW 11)
<i>LTI</i>	<i>Logic: The Theory of Inquiry</i> (1938)	(LW 12)
<i>EE</i>	<i>Experience and Education</i> (1939)	(LW 13)
<i>FC</i>	<i>Freedom and Culture</i> (1939)	(LW 13)

## EXPERIENCE AND INQUIRY IN JOHN DEWEY'S CONTEXTUALISM

Christopher C. Kirby

### ABSTRACT

This paper will focus on two elements, *viz.* experience and inquiry, which are central to John Dewey's philosophy and their relation to the movement known as "pragmatism." Although each of these concepts has received extensive treatment by other schools of thought, the pragmatists, and particularly Dewey, did much to redefine each in hopes of alleviating the tension between conflicting philosophical viewpoints. An explication of Dewey's view on experience is the first step in understanding his application of the pragmatic method towards reconstructing philosophical thinking. Therefore, this paper will explore the meaning that Dewey gave to each and how that meaning is helpful to the overall pragmatist project of reuniting philosophical speculation with practical consequences.

## PREFACE – THE METHOD OF PRAGMATISM

*Philosophy recovers itself when it ceases to be a device for dealing with the problems of philosophers and becomes a method, cultivated by philosophers, for dealing with the problems of men. [MW 10:46]*

### *A Method, Not a Theory*

Today's world is one of great uncertainty. We are faced with problems both old and new, and on a larger scale than our species has ever before witnessed. It could be said that the tools of philosophy, *i.e.* its theories and abstractions, were first forged by humanity's quest for safety against the uncertainty of life. But, if philosophy hopes to successfully address the problems facing it now, it may be forced to return from its theoretical abstractions to concrete life.

The American philosophical movement that thrived between the Civil War and World War II, commonly known as "pragmatism," was founded on this notion. Unfortunately, pragmatism has been mischaracterized by much of the philosophic community. And, although it *is* fairly well recognized that one of the main precepts of pragmatism is the call for philosophic endeavors to concern themselves with concrete problems rather than abstract speculations, there is nevertheless a public misunderstanding over the meaning of pragmatism.

While past philosophers have made similar claims about practicality, pragmatism is set apart by the gravity it placed on the notion. This has led to an unfortunate caricature of pragmatism as the philosophical endorsement of

opportunism, found in the worst parts of American industry and commerce. Yet, this is a point that nearly every thinker in the pragmatic tradition has explicitly denied.<sup>1</sup>

Even those who have some familiarity with pragmatism have tended to misjudge its most central tenets.<sup>2</sup> One of the most notable misunderstandings is perhaps the equation of pragmatism with what has been called the “pragmatic theory of truth.” The upshot of this confusion is the identification of the platitude “Truth is what works” as pragmatism’s major (and perhaps only) contribution to philosophy. However, such a depiction captures what many pragmatists would claim is perhaps only a consequence of pragmatism and not one of its central tenets. For instance, Charles Sanders Peirce, who coined the movement’s name, saw pragmatism as primarily a criterion for determining the meaning of words. Only through the work of his friend and colleague, William James, was a more general conception of pragmatism as a theory about truth offered. Yet, even James – as the subtitle of his 1907 work *Pragmatism* reveals – preferred to see pragmatism as “A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking.” As he put it elsewhere,

Philosophies, whether expressed in sonnets or systems, all must wear this form. The thinker starts from some experience of the practical world, and asks its meaning. He launches himself upon the speculative sea, and makes a voyage long or short. He ascends into the empyrean, and communes with the eternal essences. But whatever his achievements and discoveries be while gone, the utmost result they can issue in is some new practical maxim or

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<sup>1</sup> For example, consider James’ remark to H.G. Wells, “...the moral flabbiness born of the exclusive worship of the bitch-goddess SUCCESS. That—with the squalid cash interpretation put on the word success—is our national disease.” *The Letters of William James*, vol. 2 (1920). And, John Dewey’s assertion “Pragmatism is... far from being that glorification of action for its own sake which is regarded as the peculiar characteristic of American life.” (LW 2:5)

<sup>2</sup> Bertrand Russell’s indictment of Dewey’s notion of inquiry is arguably one instance of this. (cf. “Dewey’s New Logic,” In *The Library of Living Philosophers*, vol. 1. ed. By Paul Schilpp and Lewis Hahn. LaSalle, IL: Open Court, (3<sup>rd</sup> edition) 1989.

resolve, or the denial of some old one, with which inevitably he is sooner or later washed ashore on the *terra firma* of concrete life again.<sup>3</sup>

As James so poetically expresses in this passage, the main principle of pragmatism – finding the difference an idea makes to the real world – underlies *all* philosophical inquiry.

With this in mind, pragmatism ought to be seen *not* as North America’s attempt to replace old theories with new ones, but rather as an overhauling of the *method* of philosophical thinking through a coalescing of abstract reason with practical consequence. In this spirit, James, citing the Italian novelist Giovanni Papini, claimed that pragmatism “lies in the midst of [all] our theories, like a corridor in a hotel. Innumerable chambers open out of it.”<sup>4</sup>

#### *The Development of Pragmatic Method in John Dewey’s Work*

To attempt to address the above-mentioned mischaracterization as it applies to the entire tradition of pragmatism would present too large of a task to accomplish in this investigation. Therefore, this paper will focus mainly only on the philosophy of one of the “pragmatic” thinkers. And, although Peirce and James are pivotal figures in the development of pragmatism, their views differed to such an extent that to focus on either, in my opinion, would present only one pole of pragmatic thought.

Fortunately, there was a figure that coalesced the differences of Peirce and James while staying true to their shared desire to give a method for dealing with the potency

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<sup>3</sup> James, William. “Reflex Action and Theism,” from *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*. (Dover: 1956) pgs. 142-143

<sup>4</sup> James, William. “What Pragmatism Means.” from *Pragmatism and Other Writings*. (New York: Penguin Classics) 2000. pg. 26 [my brackets]

of ideas. This figure was John Dewey, Peirce's one-time student at Johns Hopkins and an admirer and avid reader of James' work.

Born in 1859 to a Burlington grocer, Dewey has been considered by many to be the most prolific philosopher the United States has ever produced, though he may have rejected that title in favor of being remembered as an "intellectual at large." For, on his view, it was the responsibility of the philosopher to be just as concerned with public issues as with esoteric ones. His work – which included an array of publications related to politics, pedagogy, logic, and even art – could be seen as the embodiment of this view. And, although Dewey preferred to call his philosophy "instrumentalism," because of its emphasis on the utility of ideas in explicating how human beings relate to their surroundings, he arguably did more to promote and sustain the ideas of pragmatism than any other thinker of his time.<sup>5</sup>

However, Dewey did not begin his career as a pragmatist. His mature position developed slowly over the course of his very lengthy career, which lasted for more than seventy years. His body of work is so prodigious that it has been divided into three periods – early, middle and late – roughly corresponding with what many consider the three major stages of his career – the idealistic, experimental and naturalistic.<sup>6</sup> It was in the second stage of his career that Dewey began to assert, like

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<sup>5</sup> Although James is considered by many to be the foremost pragmatist, because he died at the relatively early age of 62, as compared to Dewey's 93 years, and because Dewey traveled extensively, it could be said that Dewey's influence reached a broader audience and for a longer period of time. There are many excellent biographical works on Dewey that illustrate the range of his influence. A good introduction for those unfamiliar with Dewey's work would be Paul Strathern's *Dewey in 90 Minutes*. (Ivan R. Dee Press: Chicago, 2002.)

<sup>6</sup> In his introduction to Dewey's *On Experience, Nature, and Freedom*, Richard Bernstein identifies three distinct periods in Dewey's thought, each lasting approximately twenty years. In *Dewey's Metaphysics*. (New York: Fordham University Press, 1988) Raymond Boisvert labels the first of these

Peirce before him, that the method employed by the natural sciences (one that placed theories on “probation” until some practical data could affirm or refute them) was the method that needed to be applied in philosophy.<sup>7</sup> In subsequent years, once Dewey had been exposed to James’ “radical empiricism,” *i.e.* the belief that experience as a whole is more than the sum of its parts, he would revise that assertion to include all experience, not merely the reflective experience of philosophical inquiry.

The point of departure for this analysis will be the years just before Dewey penned *Experience and Nature* and thus completed his transition toward naturalism. It could be argued that his brand of naturalism consists in two basic criteria: that psychological states are reducible to terms about organisms interacting with their environment, and, that a form of inquiry patterned after science is the only way to utilize experience in dealing with the world. Taken together, these suggest that nature is a sort of context in which humankind finds itself embedded. It is my contention that the overarching theme of Dewey’s philosophy is, “that the most pervasive fallacy of philosophic thinking goes back to neglect of context.”<sup>8</sup> Although I believe that all of Dewey’s major works after his 1910 offering, *How We Think* (confer with the “Abbreviations” section above), address this theme to some extent or another, four titles in particular – *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922), *Experience and Nature* (1925), *Art as Experience* (1934), and *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (1938) – will

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periods “Dewey’s Idealistic Years”, which refers to the pivotal role of Kantian and Hegelian philosophy in this stage of Dewey’s development.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. “The Rules of Philosophy,” from *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*. ed. by Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press) 1934. pgs 156-158, in which Peirce wrote “In sciences in which men come to agreement, when a theory has been broached it is considered to be on probation until this agreement is reached.”

<sup>8</sup> LW 6:5

serve as my main focus. For it was in those four volumes that Dewey worked out the conceptual roots of his mature thought – referred to as contextualism.

While the notion of context was of the utmost importance to Dewey’s thought, oddly enough, he rarely wrote on the topic explicitly. This has lent some vagueness to this aspect of his thought and is typically treated by Dewey scholars with obscurity, if treated at all. That is a tendency I wish to avoid in this analysis, but since I will treat Dewey’s notion of context *in extensa* in the following chapters it will suffice in this preface to define contextualism as a philosophical emphasis on the environmental, historical and cultural frameworks of ideas. As I will contend, Dewey’s expression of the pragmatic method, in which he employed both Peircean and Jamesian elements, can be properly understood only when its backward-looking, contextual and forward-looking, instrumental components are understood. In this analysis, I will recount the core concepts that constitute Dewey’s version of the pragmatic method, *viz.* experience and inquiry, and analyze how they exemplify the union of his contextualism and instrumentalism. To sum up my goal in one sentence, I believe that Dewey’s work demonstrates that pragmatic method is the recognition of context.

In chapter one, “Experience: The Formation of Context” I will explore the features of Dewey’s conception of experience that set it apart from other accounts as well as discuss the implications this account has for Dewey’s conception of “context.” My second chapter, “Inquiry: The Enrichment of Context,” will focus on Dewey’s view of inquiry, which could be called the central mechanism of his entire corpus (with his 1938 publication *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* being the most

complete articulation of the concept.) I will examine the role inquiry plays, according to Dewey, in the formation of contexts. “Growth: The Outcome of Context and the Pragmatic Method,” my third chapter, will address the implications and byproducts of Dewey’s rendering of experience and inquiry by explicating Dewey’s term “growth” as it is expressed in what he called “habit reconstruction.” There, I will also address the anticipated tensions that might surround my reading of these conceptions as Dewey’s means for reconstructing the method of philosophical investigation that he called, alternately, pragmatism and instrumentalism.

## CHAPTER ONE – EXPERIENCE: THE FORMATION OF CONTEXT

*Reference to the primacy and ultimacy of the material of ordinary experience protects us from creating artificial problems which deflect the energy and attention of philosophers from the real problems that arise out of actual subject-matter. [EN, LW 1:26]*

### *The “Subject-Matter” of Philosophy*

Dewey was not the first philosopher to stress the importance of experience to philosophical study; neither was he first pragmatist to do so. In fact, both Peirce and James believed experience played a vital role in the application of the pragmatic method. In “The Development of American Pragmatism,” Dewey attributed the origin of pragmatism to a passage in Kant’s *Metaphysics of Morals*, happened upon by Peirce, wherein,

Kant established a distinction between *pragmatic* and *practical*. The latter term applies to moral laws which Kant regards as *a priori*, whereas the former term applies to the rules of art and technique which are based on experience and are applicable to experience.<sup>9</sup>

In a collection of his lectures, published under the title *Pragmatism* (1907), William James acknowledged the Kantian roots of pragmatism, but also pointed to the etymology of the word – one he attributed to ancient Greece – in order to show that pragmatism “harmonizes with many ancient philosophic tendencies.”<sup>10</sup> He hoped to

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<sup>9</sup> LW 2:3

<sup>10</sup> James, William. “What Pragmatism Means.” from *Pragmatism and Other Writings*. (New York: Penguin Classics) 2000. pg. 28 As James put it elsewhere, “There is absolutely nothing new in the pragmatic method. Socrates was an adept at it. Aristotle used it methodically. Locke, Berkeley, and Hume made momentous contributions to truth by its means.” pg. 27

identify philosophical investigation, as such, with the “empiricist attitude” that “unstiffens” theories and sets inquiry “at work” within the stream of [one’s] experience.<sup>11</sup> He dubbed his position “radical empiricism” and wrote that for those who would adopt it “the crudity of experience remains an eternal element [of the world] thereof. There is no possible point of view from which the world can appear an absolutely single fact.”<sup>12</sup> Any analysis of Dewey’s notion of experience must start from an explication of this position, for it was James’ sentiment that philosophical debates be reducible to terms about experience that was perhaps the single greatest influence on Dewey’s thought. James’ position might best be understood as the view that experience is something that we cannot go beyond, *i.e.* experience is all we have and there is nothing real outside of it. And, although James’ view of experience was now broader in scope than Peirce had originally seen it, it was based on a similar rejection of the Enlightenment view that saw experience as the locus of interaction between the objective world and the subjective perceiver – a distinction Dewey also rejected. As he put it,

What has been completely divided in philosophical discourse into man and world, inner and outer, self and not-self, subject and object, individual and social, private and public, etc. are actually parties in life-transactions. The philosophical ‘problem’ of trying to get them back together is artificial.<sup>13</sup>

He believed that experience and the problems that arise out of it are neither merely the beginning of knowledge, nor a useful tool for linking up mind with world, but rather, the *entire* subject-matter of philosophy. He hoped that he could save

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid. pg. 28

<sup>12</sup> *The Works of William James*. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 17 vol., 1975 – *The Will to Believe*, pg. 6

<sup>13</sup> LW 16:248

philosophy from itself by removing the various artifices of dualisms and, in this regard, his work on experience could be seen as a type of “prolegomena” to any future epistemology. Thus, what Dewey meant by the term “experience” differed significantly from the way many of his predecessors and contemporaries had used it, *i.e.* as the influx of sensory data.

In several of his early essays, Dewey laid the foundation for the more robust interpretation of experience, exemplified by *Experience and Nature* (1925) and *Art as Experience* (1934), which he hoped would redeem the term by having it “returned to its idiomatic usages.”<sup>14</sup> But here, idiom is not tantamount to vulgarity or simplicity. Rather, Dewey sought a return to thinking about experience in less dissected, philosophically abstract terms. Terms that would avoid many of the conceptual eddies that had plagued philosophy for centuries. For him, the progress of philosophy had been stagnated by those eddies, and he hoped to reconstruct it by reminding us “that philosophy must not be a study of philosophy, but a study, by means of philosophy, of life-experience and our beliefs about and in this experience.”<sup>15</sup>

Dewey’s project was aimed at this goal, and he sought to accomplish it by showing how experience is inextricably linked with context. By his lights, experience sets the stage for understanding context, *i.e.* a proper illustration of experience can

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<sup>14</sup> cf. LW 1:361-3

<sup>15</sup> John J. Stuhr, “John Dewey.” in *Pragmatism and Classical American Philosophy: Essential Readings and Interpretive Essays*. Ed. John J. Stuhr (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.) pg. 435

NOTE: “Philosophy,” as it appears in this sentence, refers to three separate human enterprises, each used by Dewey in a specific sense. The first refers to philosophy in its professional capacity; the second refers to the philosophical problems of history; and the third refers to the reconstructed endeavor that Dewey wanted to imbue with experimentalism.

disclose or “lay bare” contextual frameworks. Of course, in order to demonstrate such a thesis, more clarification of 1) Dewey’s account of experience and 2) what he meant by the term context are needed. I am confident that once these concepts are clear, we will see that experience is best understood as the opening up, or engendering, of contextual transactions. However, first it may be helpful to recount some of the major movements in Dewey’s thought that led to the development of the first measure of his naturalism, *i.e.* the casting of psychological states in terms of the interaction between organisms and environments.

### *Developing a Naturalistic Account*

Although Dewey’s account of experience could be characterized as a decisive break from previous outlooks, it did not arise in a vacuum. Throughout his lengthy career, Dewey came into contact with many different views, such as Darwinian naturalism, Kantian and Hegelian idealism, German romanticism, and perhaps most notably British empiricism. He tackled any new idea with enthusiasm, even in his later years, and was able to glean a great deal from each. But, the last twenty-five years of Dewey’s life, the period in which he most completely conveyed his version of pragmatism, hinged upon an empiricism that could be called “naturalistic” (though Dewey preferred the term instrumentalist) and which moved beyond any single influence, even beyond James’ radical empiricism. Briefly stated, Dewey’s naturalism hinges upon the notion that human beings can best be

understood through their relationships with their surroundings.<sup>16</sup> The upshot of this naturalistic empiricism is the belief that thought and action are two parts of a single process and that “mind” and “world” name philosophical abstractions rather than existent entities. As he put it, “The nature of experience is determined by the essential conditions of life. While man is other than bird and beast, he shares basic vital functions with them and has to make the same basal adjustments if he is to continue the process of living.”<sup>17</sup> In what follows, I sketch some of the major developments in Dewey’s thinking towards this position.

As an undergraduate at the University of Vermont, Dewey had been impressed with Kant’s philosophy. His earliest publication, “The Metaphysical Assumptions of Materialism”(1882), reflected the Kantian tendency to convert metaphysical problems to epistemological ones when he criticized materialists for being logically inconsistent, *viz.* that “They claim to possess a certain kind of *knowledge*, but are unable to explain the derivation of that knowledge on a strictly materialistic basis.”<sup>18</sup> However, Dewey soon came to move beyond this affinity for epistemologically grounded philosophy as he was introduced to Hegel as a graduate student at Johns Hopkins University. The time spent on Kant, though, was never fully forgotten, as became obvious in later writings where Dewey often returned to the notion of mediated knowledge.

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<sup>16</sup> Dewey’s brand of naturalism is a precursor to later versions, which argued for describing mental phenomenon in the terms of natural science, expounded by thinkers such as W.V.O. Quine and Donald Davidson.

<sup>17</sup> *AE*, LW 10:19

<sup>18</sup> Boisvert, Raymond. *Dewey’s Metaphysics*. New York: Fordham University Press, 1988. pg. 17

The individual who had the greatest impact on Dewey's thought as a graduate student at Johns Hopkins, and who helped him beyond Kant, was the neo-Hegelian scholar G.S. Morris. However, Morris' brand of Hegelianism was unique in that it rejected the dialectic of *Geist* in favor of a more biological description of the dynamism of nature. In other words, the traditional "subject" in epistemology became redefined as an organism fully immersed in and interacting with a dynamic, organic environment – *i.e.* one that incorporates the organism. This move, which was vital to Dewey's later thought, came to Morris from his mentor Trendelenburg, who had been sharply influenced by Aristotle's notion of potentiality-actuality and Darwin's theory of evolution. Trendelenburg synthesized these two ideas into what he called "constructive motion" which he saw as the common trait between thought and being. On one hand, thought moves from potentiality to actuality, per Aristotle, as it *becomes* the object that is thought, on the other hand, being moves from potentiality to actuality, per Darwin, through natural selection. This reading renders the notion of *telos* a type of biological end in both nature and organisms.<sup>19</sup> Dewey's teacher Morris, in turn, appropriated these ideas in his own work as he aimed at detailing the *meaning* of existence and the undermining of dualisms. Dewey later echoed the biologized Hegelianism of Trendelenburg and Morris in *Experience and Nature*, with passages such as,

If we consider the *form* or scheme of the situation in which meaning and understanding occur, we find an involved simultaneous presence and cross-reference of immediacy and efficiency, overt actuality and potentiality, the consummatory and instrumental.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> For a more detailed description of Trendelenburg's "constructive motion" see Boisvert, Raymond. *Dewey's Metaphysics*. New York: Fordham University Press, 1988. pgs. 22-24

<sup>20</sup> *EN*, LW 1:143

During these early stages in his career, Dewey's move from Kant to Hegel can best be characterized as a shift from epistemology to ontology. The difference is the way he dealt with the relationship between mind and world, *viz.* a shift from a dualistic view to a more holistic one.

In 1903, Dewey published *Studies in Logical Theory*, which is commonly taken to be his definitive break from idealism toward experimentalism. However, the foundations for this volume were worked out gradually over the course of the preceding years as Dewey became less captivated by Hegelianism. The two largest contributing factors in Dewey's empirical turn were his work at Johns Hopkins with the psychologist G. Stanley Hall, who showed him how scientific analysis could be applied to the humanities, and his later collaboration with J.H. Tufts at the University of Michigan. Dewey left Michigan to join Tufts at the University of Chicago and it was there that he developed a philosophical approach that coalesced pragmatism with his Darwinian leanings, *viz.* instrumentalism. Over the following ten years, Dewey flourished in this environment as he worked out the implications of combining Peirce's pragmatism, James' radical empiricism and Darwinian naturalism with a scientific approach. Briefly stated, the upshot of combining these three schools of thought was *that while nature was in constant change, human beings could still act in their environment by testing their beliefs and adjusting them according to usefulness in experience.* In other words, if human beings observe, through experimentation, what actions are best, then they will form "good laboratory habits." These habits share a normative feature with Kant's

universal maxim, *i.e.* those that can be applied by all inquirers, are best. Moral imperatives, then, refer to some tried and tested method, not “an ideal drawn from the blue.”<sup>21</sup>

Dewey’s work is unique insofar as it took these already established ideas, assimilated them with others, and built upon them an outlook that, when understood properly, coalesced the seemingly disparate functions of experience, inquiry, and learning. In this way, it could be argued, his mature view (exemplified by *Experience and Nature* and *Art as Experience*) aimed at giving insight into what it means to be human. Two early essays in particular laid the foundation for that more robust expression of experience.

When the first of these essays, “The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology,” appeared in 1896, it marked “one of the truly important turning points in the study of human behavior.”<sup>22</sup> There, Dewey attacked the mechanistic view of stimulus and response that dominated the psychological research of the period. On his view, the reflex arc concept only mimicked an older, and erroneous, mind-body dualism by placing stimulus in opposition to response. He wrote,

...we still incline to interpret the latter [i.e. response] from our preconceived and preformulated ideas of rigid distinctions between sensations, thoughts and acts. The sensory stimulus is one thing, the central activity, standing for the idea, is another thing, and the motor discharge, standing for the act proper, is a third. As a result, the reflex arc is not a comprehensive, or organic unity, but a

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<sup>21</sup> LTI, LW 12:108

<sup>22</sup> cf. EW 5:XVIII [William McKenzie’s introduction the fifth volume of Dewey’s Early Works] where McKenzie continued with, “It remained for decades one of the most influential works in the science of psychology and still retains that position among all students not dogmatically committed to some form, by whatever name, of the same mechanistic view that it attempts to correct.”

patchwork of disjointed parts, a mechanical conjunction of unallied processes.<sup>23</sup>

In this regard, Dewey complained, the reflex arc was inaccurate because it placed the parts of an act prior to the whole. It failed to recognize that stimulus, movement, and response only made sense as an interpretation of an event *after* it had occurred. Moreover, he claimed, that the notions of stimulus and response were non-existent entities that only gain meaning once placed in relation to one another. Simply put, Dewey argued that the reflex arc was an instance of the empiricist's fallacy of placing the parts prior to the whole.

Dewey offered a more naturalistic account, one that viewed stimulus and response in less mechanistic terms, *i.e.* as parts of a single process. On such a view, the reflex arc does not run in a linear direction from stimulus, through response, to movement. Rather, multiple stimuli, responses, and movements arise simultaneously and are experienced, in chorus, as a singular, unbroken act, "which is as experienced no more mere sensation than it is mere motion," and thus, when analysis dissects the reflex arc into separate states, "we have, only the serial steps in a co-ordination of *acts*."<sup>24</sup> Simply put, before an act can be divided into parts, its quality as a whole has to be explicated. But, the reflex arc concept offered no such explanation.

Toward the close of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as Dewey began to embrace pragmatism, he became enamored with James' radical empiricism and began to formulate his own version, which, by 1905, he had dubbed "immediate

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<sup>23</sup> EW 5:97

<sup>24</sup> EW 5:106

empiricism.”<sup>25</sup> His essay, “The Postulate of Immediate Empiricism,” which appeared in July of that year, reveals James’ influence on his thinking. Therein, Dewey’s postulate was aimed at framing all philosophical debate in terms of experience, on the one hand, and eradicating the notion that experience needs to be grounded in a transcendent reality or a transcendental truth absolutely free from time and contingency, on the other. As he put it, “things – anything, everything, in the ordinary non-technical use of the term “thing” – are what they are experienced as.”<sup>26</sup> To illustrate this, Dewey described a situation where a person, sitting in a dark room, might hear a noise that frightens them. When the lights are turned on and the harmless source of the noise identified, rather than saying that the noise *appeared* frightful and was *really* harmless, Dewey suggested that we ought to identify the noise as *truly frightful* when first heard, and later – because more information is available to apply to the gross experience – it is *truly harmless*. Saying the latter would be more useful than positing, as someone who used the former explanation would, a distinction between appearances and reality. Dewey wanted to make it clear that the experienced noise *was* just what it was experienced *as* at that time, namely frightening. On this account, “if one wishes to describe anything truly, his task is to tell what it is experienced as being.”<sup>27</sup> Compare this with a passage from James’ *The Meaning of Truth* (1909):

Radical empiricism consists first of a *postulate*... that the only things debatable among philosophers shall be things definable in terms of experience.... The generalized conclusion is that therefore

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<sup>25</sup> Although critical of some of its conclusions, Dewey had been particularly impressed with James’ *The Will to Believe* [1897], in which James first described his position as radical empiricism.

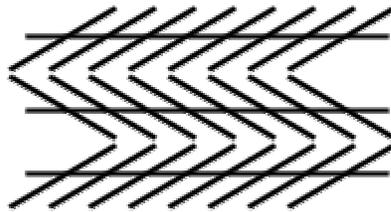
<sup>26</sup> MW 3:158

<sup>27</sup> MW 3:158

the parts of experience hold together from next to next by relations that are themselves parts of experience.<sup>28</sup>

This passage, on the one hand, illustrates the parallel between these two thinker's views. On the other hand, insofar as James had adopted Dewey's reference to a postulate, it may suggest the admiration that Dewey felt for James was probably mutual. In any case, what is clear is that by the release of the "The Postulate of Immediate Empiricism" Dewey's thought had come into its own.

Another example that Dewey used in that article was "Zöllner's illusion" – an optical illusion displaying lines that appear to be convergent, yet are "truly" parallel.



Opponents of Dewey's view might use this picture as an example of how describing something in terms of "experiencing as" does not do justice to the nature of the experienced object. To this Dewey responds,

*That* experience is that two lines with certain cross-hatchings are apprehended as convergent; only by taking that experience as real and as fully real, is there any basis for or way of going to an experienced knowledge that the lines are parallel. It is in the concrete thing *as experienced* that all the grounds and clues to its own intellectual or logical rectification are contained.<sup>29</sup>

The last sentence of this passage reveals that Dewey agreed with James that the generalized conclusion of this postulate was that "[t]he directly apprehended universe

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<sup>28</sup> *The Works of William James*. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 17 vol., 1975. – *The Meaning of Truth*, pp. 6-7 [emphasis added]

<sup>29</sup> MW 3:163

needs... no extraneous transempirical connective support.”<sup>30</sup> Thus, with the appearance of the “Postulate” paper Dewey had, once and for all, rejected the subjective, psychical view of experience and the subsequent division of knowing from the known that was prevalent in much of his early work. Elements of James’ view could still be found in Dewey’s work twenty years later when he wrote in the first chapter of his *Experience and Nature*,

When objects are isolated from the experience through which they are reached and in which they function, experience itself becomes reduced to the mere process of experiencing, and experiencing is therefore treated as if it were also complete in itself.<sup>31</sup>

Dewey warned against the enterprise of “selective emphasis” – *i.e.* the tendency to emphasize the parts of experience that are clearest or most important. When philosophers are not mindful of this tendency they may end up positing intellectual abstractions as absolute being. This “conversion of eventual functions into antecedent existence” is what Dewey called “*the philosophic fallacy*”.<sup>32</sup> In order to avoid committing this fallacy in regard to experience itself, Dewey sought to map out only its generic traits. Doing this, he believed would render a coherent account without spinning off into abstractions.

### *Mapping Out Experience*

For the last half of his life, Dewey aimed at reinstating a more natural, holistic view of experience that was rooted in the recognition of the interconnectedness of perceiver and surroundings. He believed this view of

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<sup>30</sup> *The Works of William James* Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 17 vol., 1975. – *The Meaning of Truth*, pg. 7

<sup>31</sup> *EN*, LW 1:13

<sup>32</sup> *EN*, LW 1:34 [Dewey’s emphasis]

experience and the problems that arose out of avoiding this view were the subject matter of all philosophical study.

Other [philosophic] methods begin with results of a reflection that has already torn in two the subject-matter *experienced* and the operations and states of *experiencing*. The problem then is to get together again what has been sundered – which is as if the king’s men started with the fragments of the egg and tried to construct the whole egg out of them.<sup>33</sup>

By his lights, a vision of experience that emphasized the interconnection of perceiver and world could answer the original, basic questions of philosophy (questions such as “Who are we?” “Where do we come from?” “Where are we going?” etc.) without drawing false distinctions between inner and outer realms. This had been the strategy adopted by many of the ancient Greek philosophers, and Dewey followed their lead, especially in his later writings. For it was the logical outcome of a metaphysical position that, *à la* Aristotle and many pre-Socratics, placed the concept of “being” in opposition to that of “becoming,” rather than “nothingness.” By the time Dewey began composing *Experience and Nature*, he had fully adopted this line of thought, as evidenced by his second chapter, “Existence as Precarious and Stable.” On such an account experience becomes a singular, holistic affair precisely “because the interaction of live creature and environing conditions is involved in the very *process* of living.”<sup>34</sup> However, according to Dewey, questions arose in the course of hundreds of years of philosophic inquiry because experience can always be turned inward on itself, it can be analyzed. “[T]he *act* of observation may be inquired into and form a

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<sup>33</sup> *EN*, LW 1:11 [emphasis added]

<sup>34</sup> *AE*, LW 10:42 [emphasis added]

subject of study and become thereby a refined object of study.”<sup>35</sup> As he charged, the result of such introspection, most often identified with Modern philosophy, is the tendency to draw distinctions, to separate experience into primary and secondary components, into the “experienced” and the “experiencing.” He rejected this tendency. As he wrote in 1917,

...it is just the inherited view of experience common to the empirical school and its opponents [i.e. the rationalist school] which keeps alive many discussions even of matters that are on their face quite remote from it, while it is also this view which is most untenable in the light of existing science and social practice.<sup>36</sup>

Therefore he argued, contra British empiricism, that primary experience alone (*i.e.* the stream of sensory perceptions) is, by itself, *ipso facto* insufficient for analysis because of the very capacity for reflection that human beings possess, and, contra rationalism, that the notion of innate ideas is merely the result of a “bias toward treating objects selected because of their value in some special context as the ‘real.’”<sup>37</sup> As he saw it,

For reflection the eventual is always better or worse than the given. But since it would also be better if the eventual good were now given, the philosopher, belonging by status to a leisure class relieved from the urgent necessity of dealing with conditions, converts the eventual into some kind of Being, something which *is*, even if does not *exist*... Reflection determining preference for an eventual good has dialectically wrought a miracle of transubstantiation...<sup>38</sup>

The traditional subject-matter of philosophy, then, has either been experience (as a result of philosophical reflection) or attempts to solve the subsequent splintering of experience at the hands of reflection. More importantly, the problem philosophy

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<sup>35</sup> *EN*, LW 1:21 [Dewey’s emphasis]

<sup>36</sup> *MW* 10:5

<sup>37</sup> *EN*, LW 1:33

<sup>38</sup> *EN*, LW 1:33

must solve, if it ever hopes to recover its grip on the real world, is how to reunite the pieces of experience that have been “torn asunder,” *viz.* perception and reflection. Dewey tried to reunite these two by mapping out the natural, or “generic,” traits of experience, which, “taken free of the restrictions imposed by other concepts, is full of inference. There is, apparently, no conscious experience without inference; reflection is native and constant.”<sup>39</sup> He hoped that these traits would show perception and reflection to be inseparable. For him, the “immense diversity of human affairs, interests, concerns, values which compartmentalists pigeonhole under ‘religion’ ‘aesthetics’ ‘politics’ ‘economics’ etc., etc.” all share the same character of a integrated, transactional relationship between human beings and their surroundings. And, it was this general character that Dewey wanted to capture with his use of the term ‘experience.’

To compose a complete list of the generic traits of experience that Dewey proposed would prove difficult. While perhaps the most extensive treatment of these traits can be found in *Experience and Nature*, Dewey never offered an exhaustive account. He would often seemingly create new ones, ad hoc, in order to make a point in some other line of argumentation. But, this may be explained when considered in light of the goal Dewey had in mind when introducing these traits, *viz.* to demonstrate how experience could be seen as inherently tied to culture. This point is of vital importance for his overall project, though one which has remained unclear in secondary literature. On one hand, Dewey’s seemingly egalitarian acceptance of cultures, even those wildly different from one another, might appear too culturally

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<sup>39</sup> MW 10:6

relativistic to potential critics. In this regard, his vague presentation of the traits of experience could be cited as evidence. On the other hand, to attempt a comprehensive list of such traits would undermine the naturalistic conception of experience that Dewey hoped to put on the gold standard. After all, if experience is a natural affair, then it *must* adapt to changes in the environment, which would amount to most of its generic traits being wholly contingent. When understood naturalistically, *i.e.* as an organism's method of negotiating its way through an environment, the once limited concept of experience could be tied together with the broader concept of culture. With this in mind, I will briefly list only those traits that Dewey emphasized most and were most central to his notion of experience, rather than attempt to enumerate each of the generic traits that he identified in experience.

Perhaps the two most important traits of experience for Dewey would be change and continuity. He characterized the first as being "eventful," "precarious," and "hazardous." I have chosen "*change*" as a catchall for these descriptions. This could best be summed up by the doctrine of universal flux attributed to the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus. However, it is important to note that the mantra "One cannot step into the same river twice," so often associated with this doctrine, only partially represents the Heraclitean view. This version of the statement lends itself to the interpretation that all things are changing at all times and that even those things which appear stable are merely in a slower process of flux, one that escapes observation. But, on such an interpretation, since a river is constantly changing, one could not even step into the same river *once*. As recent scholarship has suggested, what Heraclitus may have meant when he wrote, "On those stepping into rivers

staying the same other and other waters flow,” (Diels-Kranz B22) was that although different waters flow through a river, the river itself stays the same. And, more importantly, it is only by virtue of the flow that there is even a river at all instead of a pond or lake.<sup>40</sup> There is a governing form, in this case that of a river, that bounds the moments of change and connects them. When understood this way, the doctrine of universal flux jibes well with Dewey’s notion of change within experience. It is by virtue of the hazards and uncertainties that color experience, that the live creature has any experience at all. As Dewey put it,

The doctrine of [Heraclitus], while it held that all things flow like a river and that change is so continuous that a man cannot step into the same river even once (since it changes as he steps), nevertheless also held that there is a fixed order which controls the ebb and flow of the universal tide.<sup>41</sup>

This “fixed order” is what led Dewey to posit *continuity* as a generic trait of experience. On such a view, experience is not at all atomistic, but rather is “pregnant with connections,” *i.e.* experience continuously flows from one part to the next – it is not simply a succession of events. This continuity, or “stability,” is of vital importance to experience, without it the moments of change would spill over into chaos. As Dewey wrote in *Art as Experience*, “To overpass the limits that are set is destruction and death... In a world of mere flux, change would not be cumulative; it would not move toward a close. Stability and rest would have no being.”<sup>42</sup> But, this order is not fixed in the sense of being static; it is dynamic and rhythmic, “fixed” in

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<sup>40</sup> cf. Wheelwright, Philip Ellis. *Heraclitus*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1968. pgs. 29-36. and "Heraclitus," by Daniel W. Graham, *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, [www.iep.utm.edu/](http://www.iep.utm.edu/), February 4<sup>th</sup> 2005.

<sup>41</sup> LW 14:101

<sup>42</sup> *AE*, LW 10:22

the sense of being directed and connective. Again, Dewey wrote, “All interactions that effect stability and order in the whirling flux of change are rhythms. There is ebb and flow, systole and diastole: ordered change. The latter moves within bounds.”<sup>43</sup> Elsewhere, Dewey likened the notion of continuity to a variable that remains constant in a mathematical equation, and as it is in math, he claimed, “so it is in nature and life.”<sup>44</sup>

However, it is important to note that the movement “toward a close” to which Dewey alluded does not signify a move toward some ultimate end. Rather, for Dewey, it is a move toward an intermediate “end-in-view” which is itself, along with the means to attain it, still a part of experience. In this way, according to Dewey, experience is also *historical*, *i.e.* it has narrative characteristics which seem to raise particular events above the otherwise continuous flow of moments. An averted catastrophe, a meal enjoyed in Paris, a storm passed through on an oversea voyage, all exemplify the type of event which Dewey called, “*an* experience.” Such an event is historical insofar as, “the points of its incidence shift in successive observations of it... It carries on and is, therefore, instrumental as well as final.”<sup>45</sup> Each of these experiences has a unique quality that defies communication, some attribute that is wholly immediate and therefore not an object of knowledge. Compare this with the postulate of immediate empiricism that “things are what they are experienced as” and it becomes clear that these qualities are not subjective, they belong, as Dewey

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<sup>43</sup> *AE*, LW 10:22

<sup>44</sup> *EN*, LW 1:64

<sup>45</sup> *AE*, LW 10:144

asserted, both to the thing experienced and the one experiencing them. Dewey claimed that,

In such experiences, every successive part flows freely, without seam and without unfilled blanks, into what ensues. At the same time there is no sacrifice of the self-identity of the parts. A river, as distinct from a pond, flows. But its flow gives a definiteness and interest to its successive portions greater than exist in the homogenous portions of a pond. In an experience, flow is from something to something.<sup>46</sup>

Accordingly, experience consists, writ-large, of innumerable intertwined beginnings and endings in which these types of affairs may arise. Selective interest allows us to pick out which moments we will bundle up together out of the continuous flow to call *an* experience. When this happens, meaning is imparted to the event and it becomes *communicative* insofar as it directs us back to something beyond itself, namely the background of surrounding moments. Thus, another generic trait of experience is communication, or expression. The immediacy of the event is unified and heightened by the stable order of expression. Dewey tells us this is life in its most robust form.

Experience in the degree in which it *is* experience is heightened vitality. Instead of signifying being shut up within one's own private feelings and sensations, it signifies active and alert commerce with the world; at its height it signifies complete interpenetration of self and the world of objects and events. Instead of signifying surrender to caprice and disorder, it affords our sole demonstration of a stability that is not stagnation but is rhythmic and developing.<sup>47</sup>

Dewey refers to these heightened moments as “consummatory experiences.” But, the ambiguous verb “to consummate” and its noun derivative “consummation” can be

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<sup>46</sup> *AE*, LW 10:43

<sup>47</sup> *AE*, LW 10:25

misleading. On one hand, these can mean closure in the sense of completion or culmination as in “the consummation of marriage.” On the other hand, the verb can become an adjective that refers to something that is complete in the sense of needing no qualification, as in (pejoratively) “the consummate fool,” and it is this latter meaning, *i.e.* “without qualification,” that Dewey wished to evoke. A consummatory experience, on his view, is a grouping of moments that stand out from the rest of experience, like a great meal, a terrible storm, or a beautiful sculpture. Dewey called such a grouping “*an* experience” because it needs no further qualification. It stands alone as a representative of the rest of the moments surrounding it. These consummatory experiences serve as exemplars that structure our experience into manageable components, and since reflecting upon *every* moment in experience would prove impossible, we could not reflect upon anything at all without this ordered structure. That is not to say, however, that once an experience reaches consummation, that it has come to an end, but rather, as Dewey claimed, “The time of consummation is also one of beginning anew.”<sup>48</sup> Consummatory experiences, then, are pauses, not breaks, in the continuity of experience. This is how a rhythmic order is established.

In rhythmic ordering, every close and pause, like the rest in music, connects as well as delimits and individualizes. A pause in music is not a blank, but is a rhythmic silence that punctuates what is done while at the same time it conveys an impulsion forward, instead of arresting at the point which it defines.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> *AE*, LW 10:23

<sup>49</sup> *AE*, LW 10:177

But, this rhythmic order is not merely established temporally, “The proportionate interception of changes establishes an order that is spatially... patterned,” as well.<sup>50</sup> If musical rhythm is the temporal analog to consummatory experience, then the spatial analog might be the rhythm of ocean waves. Each trough delimits each wave crest, but to say that waves are separated by troughs would belie fluid dynamics. On the micro level, water molecules are all connected in a processional, circular movement, on the macro level, troughs flow into waves and call attention to them, giving significance to each. If we understand this connection and are able to internalize it, we will operate with our surroundings more harmoniously. As Dewey put it,

Contrast of lack and fullness, of struggle and achievement, of adjustment after consummated irregularity, form the drama in which action, feeling, and meaning are one... Inner harmony is made only when, by some means, terms are made with the environment.<sup>51</sup>

Because these consummatory experiences are dynamic, *i.e.* they move through experience with us, they can always be re-evaluated. The consummatory phase, therefore, is an ongoing process, it has duration and recurrence, and it can rise and subside in relation to the flow of experience. This feature of experience, that it can be consummatory, illustrates the formation of context. As Dewey wrote in “Context and Thought,” an essay that sits in his career roughly halfway between *Experience and Nature* and *Art as Experience*, “Context includes at least those matters which for brevity I shall call background and selective interest... *Background is both temporal*

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<sup>50</sup> *AE*, LW 10:22

<sup>51</sup> *AE*, LW 10:22-3

*and spatial.*”<sup>52</sup> In what follows I will explicate how consummatory experience leads to the formation of context and what Dewey meant by calling context a ‘background.’

### *Experience and Context*

What is of the greatest importance for Dewey’s account of experience is the context within which the experience takes place. But, what exactly is context? In Dewey’s philosophy it is,

...the whole environment of which philosophy must take account in all its enterprises. A background is implicit in some form and to some degree in all thinking, although as background it does not come into explicit purview; that is, it does not form a portion of the subject matter which is consciously attended to, thought of, examined, inspected, turned over.<sup>53</sup>

But, merely calling it a background, offers little in the way of clarification. Dewey identified three manifestations of the background he referred to as context, each corresponding to a particular type of interaction within experience.

The first manifestation of context, according to Dewey’s account, arises from the physical interaction of creatures with environments. The context of this interaction is the organism itself. As Dewey argued, the context of any experience is both organic, *i.e.* it is of and related to an experiencing organism, or “live creature,” as well as holistic, *i.e.* its organic aspects should not be separated from non-organic ones. He wrote,

The organism, self, ego, subject, give it whatever name you choose, is implicated in all thinking as in all eating, business, or play. Since

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<sup>52</sup> LW 6:11 [emphasis added]

<sup>53</sup> LW 6:11

it cannot in its entirety be made an explicit object of reflection and yet since it affects all matters thought of, it is legitimately called a phase of context.<sup>54</sup>

But, as we have seen, Dewey rejected the distinction between subject and object, and his use of terms commonly associated with subjectivity should therefore not be construed as a moment of hedging. He used these terms in this passage in order to distinguish between subjectivity understood as a kind of “view from nowhere” and subjectivity as a “determining attitude” or “interest.” Of the former he claimed, “A standpoint which is nowhere in particular and from which things are not seen at a special angle is an absurdity,” and of the latter, “Interest, as the subjective, is after all equivalent to individuality or uniqueness.”<sup>55</sup> The difference, according to Dewey, arises out of a special characteristic of subjectivity, *viz.* that although it is involved in all thinking it can never itself fully be made into an object of thought.<sup>56</sup> Subjectivity in this second sense, *i.e.* as selective interest, then, is a phase of context. Again, Dewey warns against letting selective interest run amok in philosophical thought,

Thinking is always thinking, but philosophic thinking is, upon the whole, at the extreme end of the scale of distance from the active urgency of concrete situations. It is because of this fact that neglect of context is the besetting fallacy of philosophical thought.<sup>57</sup>

But, as we saw above, selective interest is necessary in order to form a consummatory experience. So if we want to avoid letting selective interest run amok, it would seem, then, that selective interest is only desirable up to a limit. Dewey argued that selecting out of specific contexts, such as selecting a particularly good

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<sup>54</sup> LW 6:14

<sup>55</sup> LW 6:14-5

<sup>56</sup> Dewey followed Peirce in this regard. See for example Peirce’s “Some Consequences of Four Incapacities.” *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, vol. 2 1868, pgs. 140-157.

<sup>57</sup> LW 6:17

meal out of the context of a Parisian vacation, only becomes a problem when it is converted “into abstraction from all context whatsoever.”<sup>58</sup> This raises an issue of inclusion. Dewey implies that it is possible to select out of a particular context and yet still have that which has been selected be included within some still wider context. As we have seen, when the appropriate amount of selective interest is applied to the continuous flow of experiential moments “*an* experience” is formed. The ensuing background of *that* consummatory experience represents the second manifestation of context, *viz.* the background of consummatory experiences as such which arises out of the psychophysical interaction of experience that is known as reflection.

If selective interest leads both to the formulation of consummatory experience and to context, then it would seem that experience is, in the very least, intimately related to context. But, Dewey claimed that in the most general terms, they are not merely related but are actually identical. As he put it, “If the finally significant business of philosophy is the disclosure of the context of beliefs, then we cannot escape the conclusion that experience is the name for the last inclusive context.”<sup>59</sup> In this broad sense, experience and context are synonymous. However, since Dewey saw experience as a matter of interaction between organisms and environments, perhaps a better word for context in this regard would be “culture.” And, if we understand culture as any particular group’s body of knowledge and values, each of which involves belief, then the “business of philosophy” would be the disclosure of

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<sup>58</sup> LW 6:16

<sup>59</sup> LW 6:20

culture. Understood in this way, experience bestows meaning on an environment, meaning that can be transmitted to later generations. Once experience in general has gained these communicative, contextual qualities it can open up the possibility for new, less inclusive, contexts. As a result of this communicative interaction within experience, culture would represent the third and most inclusive manifestation of context. As Dewey wrote in an unfinished revision to the first chapter of *Experience and Nature*,

The name "culture" in its anthropological...sense designates the vast range of things experienced in an indefinite variety of ways. It possesses as a name just that body of substantial references which "experience" as a name has lost.<sup>60</sup>

And, elsewhere he wrote,

Were I to write (or rewrite) *Experience and Nature* today I would entitle the book *Culture and Nature*...because of my growing realization that the historical obstacles which prevented understanding of my use of "experience" are, for all practical purposes, insurmountable. ..."culture" designates...that immense diversity of human affairs.<sup>61</sup>

Thus, for Dewey, such a view can be summed up in the single word - "contextualism". By making human affairs the primary focus of his empirical method, Dewey alleviated the need for explaining reality in its absolute form. Accordingly, subsequent transformations within philosophic inquiry can be viewed within the context of whatever problems are most pressing. This led Dewey to formulate a detailed account of inquiry, and it is that concept to which I will now turn.

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<sup>60</sup> LW 1:363

<sup>61</sup> LW 1:361

## CHAPTER TWO – INQUIRY: THE ENRICHMENT OF CONTEXT

*The search for the pattern of inquiry is, accordingly, not one instituted in the dark. It is checked and controlled by knowledge of the kinds of inquiry that have and have not worked; methods which...can be so compared as to yield reasoned or rational conclusions. [LTI, LW 12:108]*

### *The Search for a Pattern*

In the preceding chapter, the first measure of Dewey's naturalism – that psychological states can be reduced to the interactions of organisms and environments within life-experience – was shown to be the genesis of what he called context. Furthermore, it was argued that context, in this naturalistic sense, is synonymous with a broad conception of culture. However, *prima facie*, this point is still lacking in several facets. First, it fails to explain, given that human beings are so nearly identical in biological terms, why there are a multitude of cultures throughout the world, often co-existing in the *same environment*. Second, if experience and culture are indeed interchangeable, then it remains to be seen how experience could be characterized in terms of environment manipulation/accommodation – something implicit in the notion of culture. Third, this account renders context a vague and amorphous concept, one hardly instructive enough to be called 'culture' in anything but the broadest sense. However, according to Dewey, accounting for how an organism probes into a particular problem, *viz.* a 'pattern of inquiry,' could assuage all of these concerns. Since solving problems, on his view, is itself a part of experience – albeit a specialized part – he first thought to explicate his theory of

inquiry by presenting how it showed up within the various functional conditions, or “modes,” of experience. These modes are, according to Dewey, natural conditions that determine how organisms deal with the “instability” and “precariousness” of experience.

In his earliest text concerning inquiry, *Studies in Logical Theory* (1903), Dewey set out on this project. There, he raised “important questions about the relations between dominantly aesthetic, moral and affectional modes and subject-matters of experience and the cognitional mode and its specific subject-matter.”<sup>62</sup> That volume marked the beginning of what Joseph Ratner, in 1939, referred to as Dewey’s recasting philosophy as a “general logic of experience.”<sup>63</sup> Although, in that volume, Dewey made mention of a number of modes, he never offered a comprehensive list. Just as was argued in the previous chapter in reference to the generic traits of experience, this lack should not lead us to call Dewey’s account patchwork; rather, it should be seen as an initial exploration into a new type of logic, the broad strokes of which needed to be worked out prior to the details. In fact, the majority of Dewey’s works between the 1903 *Studies* volume and his *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (1938) could each be seen as working out the details of one of the activities (ethics, art, religion, science, and politics) that arise out of the diverse modes of experience (the moral, aesthetic, religious, cognitive, and practical) all of

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<sup>62</sup> Anton, John. *American Naturalism and Greek Philosophy*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2004. pg. 138

<sup>63</sup> Cf. Ratner, Joseph. “Dewey’s Conception of Philosophy.” In *The Philosophy of John Dewey: The Library of Living Philosophers, vol. 1*. ed. By Paul Schilpp and Lewis Hahn. LaSalle, IL: Open Court, (3<sup>rd</sup> edition) 1989. pg. 71

which, taken together, comprise Dewey's "general logic of experience." "When we take Dewey's works severally," as Ratner put it,

they very naturally group themselves into special (or specific) logics of the typical (or distinctive) modes of experience. Thus to mention only some of his representative works: *Human Nature and Conduct* is the special logic of the socio-ethical mode of experience; *Art as Experience* is the special logic of the esthetic mode; *A Common Faith* – of the religious; ...*The Quest for Certainty* and *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* – comprise the special logic of the scientific mode of experience; *The Public and It's Problems, Individualism Old and New, Liberalism and Social Action* – comprise the socio-practical or utilitarian; ...And finally *Experience and Nature*. [Therein] All modes of experience are naturally interconnected, being socio-cultural differentiations of common experience.<sup>64</sup>

The insight of this passage deserves to be quoted at length. However, the last remark of the passage – that the diverse modes of experience are naturally interconnected – is perhaps the most informative. As Ratner explained, the modes of experience are, for Dewey, differentiations of a cultural kind, each of which imparts a specialized form of cultural "intelligence" interwoven into the fabric of common experience.

Although Ratner's account neatly ties together all of Dewey's works between 1903 and 1938, we are left wondering many things about the modes of experience. For instance, if we take seriously the notion that experience flows as a unified whole, then are the modes merely tributaries of this flow, and if so then how do they arise? Moreover, are the various modes on par with one another, or does any one in particular subsume the others? It seems that Dewey may have struggled with these questions as well. In 1934, Dewey published two major works, *Art as Experience* and *A Common Faith*, each devoted to a particular mode (the aesthetic and religious

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid. [sic.]

respectively) of experience. But, when read in tandem, these volumes could be viewed as slightly contradictory, *i.e.* each seems to laud its particular topic as the highest mode of experience. That is to say, one feasible conclusion that could be drawn from *Art as Experience* is that all experience is aesthetic. Likewise, it could be argued that one of the underlying themes in *A Common Faith* is that all experience is religious. However, these interpretations fail to account for the distinction Dewey made between general experience and *an* experience, *i.e.* those that are consummatory. A consummatory experience, as Dewey argued, serves as a representation of the surrounding moments of experience at large. A particular consummation may be valuable in relation to any one of the modes, it may be valuable within several, or it may change in time. For example, we may find a particular work of art important for aesthetic *and* religious reasons in our first encounter with it, and then only in some later encounter find some ethical or political value in it. With such a distinction between experience in general and *an* experience in mind, however, it becomes clear that each work is aimed at laying out the various features of the latter. Interestingly, however, it was only four years after the release of those two volumes that Dewey completed *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*. That volume contained a marked difference in its treatment of the modes of experience. On one hand, Dewey clearly had moved beyond discussing the modes of experience in detail, and, on the other, wherever he did allude to them, they were treated as a mere outcome of either “common sense” or “scientific” inquiry. The arguments put forward in *Logic* were, as he put it,

...intended to indicate that the different objectives of common sense and of scientific inquiry demand different subject-matters and that this difference in subject matters is not incompatible with the existence of a common pattern in both types.<sup>65</sup>

Thus, it would seem that by 1938 Dewey had abandoned the project of outlining the modes of experience, which had been initiated by *Studies in Logical Theory*. In response to Ratner, Dewey commented that, “Dr. Ratner has put his finger upon the main ‘shift’ in my writings.”<sup>66</sup> Later in his response, Dewey responded to Ratner by highlighting the vital role that solving problems played for the development of his later work.

... I should, from the start, have systematically distinguished between knowledge as the outcome of special inquiries (undertaken because of the presence of problems) and *intelligence* as the product and expression of cumulative funding of the meanings reached in these cases.<sup>67</sup>

Two points of clarification are called for here. The first is that there is a salient difference between knowledge and intelligence as “outcome” and “habit” of the cognitive mode of experience, and those that are the byproducts of non-cognitive modes. When taken as a product of these latter, non-cognitive modes, knowledge is strictly passive and intelligence manifests itself as a supplicatory method for dealing with problems, *viz.* “tradition” and all of the myths, rites, and superstitions that constitute it. On the other hand, when knowledge is the result of the cognitive (or scientific) mode, it is active, and intelligence manifests itself in the form of science and technology. This seems to answer the question of how different cultures can

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<sup>65</sup> *LTI*, LW 12:119

<sup>66</sup> Dewey, John. “Experience, Knowledge and Value.” In *The Philosophy of John Dewey: The Library of Living Philosophers, vol. 1.* ed. By Paul Schilpp and Lewis Hahn. LaSalle, IL: Open Court, (3<sup>rd</sup> edition) 1989. pg. 520 [LW 14:6]

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.* pg. 521

respond to the same environment. Simply put, there are innumerable ways of coping with precariousness, but only one means for transforming it.

The second point of clarification to be noted is that inquiry, understood in its broadest sense as the quality that all of the modes of experience share, only provides us with the type of intelligence that allow for the *accommodation* or *avoidance* of adversity. Although Dewey believed that everyday inquiry is continuous with the more specialized, cognitive type of inquiry, he argued that only the features displayed in scientific intelligence can “give expertness of dealing with materials and tools, and promote the development of the experimental habit of mind.”<sup>68</sup> In other words, only a cognitive mode of experience patterned after science can equip us with a means of transforming the environment and resolving its perils. This is the second measure of Dewey’s mature naturalism, and it serves as an answer to the concern that experience has no inherent feature of responding to environment. Dewey’s account of this pattern, like that of his conception of experience, developed gradually over the course of his career. Throughout his work after 1903, Dewey referred to it by several names, *e.g.* “the empirical method,” “the new logic,” “experimentalism,” and “the pragmatic method.” However, toward the end of his career, he returned to the generic term ‘inquiry’ to encapsulate all of these. By 1938, Dewey admitted in the preface of *Logic* that this account “does not have and *could not have* the finish and completeness that are theoretically possible.”<sup>69</sup> But, he was convinced that it was “so thoroughly sound” that anyone who entertained it would, “develop a theory of logic

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<sup>68</sup> *RP*, MW 12:86

<sup>69</sup> *LTI*, LW 12:5 [emphasis added]

that is in thorough accord with all the best authenticated methods of attaining knowledge.”<sup>70</sup> Unfortunately, his account of the modes of experience has, by and large, remained on the fringes of Deweyan scholarship. But, if we put stock in Ratner’s account, as Dewey himself seemed to, then we may view Dewey’s *Logic* volume as the culmination of a theme that ran throughout the last half of Dewey’s career, *i.e.* that inquiry leads to “a judgment of what to do, or what is to be done: a judgment respecting the future termination of an incomplete and in so far *indeterminate situation.*”<sup>71</sup>

#### *The Indeterminate Situation as Impoverished Context*

According to Dewey, everyday life is an activity that requires great skill, “We talk and read aloud, we get off and on street cars, we dress and undress, and do a thousand useful acts without thinking of them.”<sup>72</sup> As we saw in the previous chapter, it was in *Experience and Nature* that Dewey first detailed the precarious features of experience within a dynamic environment. As he put it,

Man finds himself living in an aleatory world; his existence involves, to put it baldly, a gamble. The world is a scene of risk; it is uncertain, unstable, uncannily unstable. Its dangers are irregular, inconstant, not to be counted upon as to their times and seasons.<sup>73</sup>

By the time he penned *Art as Experience*, nine years and four major works later, Dewey was willing to put it in more urgent language. “At every moment, the living creature is exposed to dangers from its surroundings, and at every moment it must

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> MW 8:30 [emphasis added]

<sup>72</sup> HNC, MW 14:124

<sup>73</sup> EN, LW 1:43

draw upon something in its surroundings to satisfy its needs.”<sup>74</sup> Perhaps it was this urgency that led him to move away from working out the various sub-logics of the modes of experience and turn to inquiry in general. Only four years later, Dewey presented his *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* in which he offered a concrete definition of the process of stabilizing the “aleatory world.” As he defined it,

Inquiry is the controlled or directed transformation of an *indeterminate situation* into one that is so determinate in its constituent distinctions and relations as to convert the elements of the original situation into a unified whole.<sup>75</sup>

In order to understand this definition, however, we must first determine just what Dewey meant by the term ‘indeterminate situation,’ which he referred to as “the antecedent condition” of inquiry.

Perhaps a good illustration of the indeterminate situation could be found in the activity of using a computer. As we type on the keyboard and click the mouse, opening and closing programs, doing what is now known as “multi-tasking,” we give little or no consideration to the physical interaction with the machine itself, only to that which appears on the screen. However, when something goes wrong, *e.g.* the screen “freezes” or an error message appears, we become acutely aware of those activities that were, just moments before, hidden in the background of experience. We are suddenly faced with a situation that irritates us (not just in the sense that we are left cursing the name of Bill Gates, but also in that the activity of life has suddenly ground to a halt) and we must employ a measure of thoughtfulness to

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<sup>74</sup> *AE*, LW 10:19

<sup>75</sup> *LTI*, LW 12:108 [emphasis added]

escape.<sup>76</sup> This example highlights the contextual features of the indeterminate situation, which Dewey pointed out early on in his *Logic*,

What is designated by the word "situation" is *not* a single object or event or set of objects and events. For we never experience nor form judgments about objects and events in isolation, but only in connection with a contextual whole...*an* object or event is always a special part, phase, or aspect, of an enviroing experienced world – a situation.<sup>77</sup>

The “situation,” then, is a unity of meaningful commerce between an organism and its environment, a totality of significant relations that stays in the background of experience; it is, in a word, a context. The organism continues to be taken up with its surroundings until happenstance interrupts the flow of experience with uncertainty. “The singular object stands out conspicuously because of its especially focal and crucial position at a given time in determination of some problem of use or enjoyment which the *total* complex environment presents.”<sup>78</sup> In other words, immediate objects within this situation seem to “object” to any sort of physical manipulation, and the organism no longer finds itself comfortably “situated” within the environment.

The problem, then, is that there is nothing within the context that can be applied to the situation in order to resolve indeterminacy; it lacks what could be called the “contextual cues” needed for further action. Simply put, the context lacks fullness, *i.e.* it is impoverished. Stating the matter in more personal terms, the organism is left flailing about, grasping at straws. As mentioned above, there may be many potential strategies for escaping the imposition of this impoverished context,

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<sup>76</sup> This example illustrates the striking similarities between Dewey and the early work of Martin Heidegger. (Cf. Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Translated by Joan Stambaugh. Albany, NY: SUNY Press. 1996. pgs. 72-76, wherein Heidegger discusses the breaking of a hammer.)

<sup>77</sup> *LTI*, LW 12:72 [Dewey’s emphasis]

<sup>78</sup> *LTI*, LW 12:108

*e.g.* supplication, accommodation, or tradition – such are the outcomes of the various non-cognitive modes – however, each is tantamount to avoidance. But, where these fail, the organism could be forced to employ what Dewey called “*discourse through use of symbols*” in order to escape.<sup>79</sup> On his view, interruption opens up a space that “is not only ‘open’ to inquiry, but it is open in the sense that its constituents do not hang together.”<sup>80</sup> This open space is the indeterminate situation. Dewey claimed that it was the “open” nature of an indeterminate situation that elicits inquiry to be “*questionable*; or in terms of actuality instead of potentiality, to be uncertain, unsettled, disturbed.”<sup>81</sup> It is important to note that, on Dewey’s account, it is the *situation* that exhibits these qualities. Indeterminacy is not simply a “personal state of doubt,” nor is it merely an affair of objects; rather, indeterminacy involves an interaction. “For Nature is an environment only as it is involved in interaction with an organism, or self, or whatever name be used.”<sup>82</sup> This is important because Dewey believed that when we move from indeterminate to determinate situations we are not merely “adapting” to meet the needs of the environment, nor are we “adjusting” the environment to meet *our* needs, but rather the result of inquiry is a “transformation” of both.

### *The Pattern Of Inquiry*

According to Dewey, transformation of the indeterminate situation to determinate is “active and operational” wherever,

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<sup>79</sup> *LTI*, LW 12:109 Dewey added, “In received logical terminology, propositions, or terms and the relations between them, are intrinsically involved.”

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.* [Dewey’s emphasis]

<sup>82</sup> *LTI*, LW 12:110

Organic interaction becomes inquiry when existential consequences are anticipated; when environing conditions are examined with reference to their potentialities; and when responsive activities are selected and ordered with reference to actualization of some of the potentialities, rather than others, in a final existential situation.<sup>83</sup>

Granted, that in responding to an indeterminate situation – like our computer example above – the desired outcome is an absence of irritation, however, the natural desire for a psychological state of comfort is only the mechanism that helps us stand up against indeterminacy. It is the employment of intelligence through inquiry that allows us to actually escape an indeterminate situation.

Dewey first outlined the pattern of inquiry in his *Democracy and Education* (1916), where he identified five constitutive steps:

- (i) perplexity, confusion, doubt, due to the fact that one is implicated in an incomplete situation whose full character is not yet determined;
- (ii) a conjectural anticipation--a tentative interpretation of the given elements, attributing to them a tendency to effect certain consequences;
- (iii) a careful survey (examination, inspection, exploration, analysis) of all attainable consideration which will define and clarify the problem in hand;
- (iv) a consequent elaboration of the tentative hypothesis to make it more precise and more consistent, because squaring with a wider range of facts;
- (v) taking one stand upon the projected hypothesis as a plan of action which is applied to the existing state of affairs: doing something overtly to bring about the anticipated result, and thereby testing the hypothesis.<sup>84</sup>

These could be summed up as doubt, interpretation, survey, elaboration and action.

He believed these steps could occur in sequence or “telescope together” in

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<sup>83</sup> *LTI*, LW 12:111

<sup>84</sup> *DE*, MW 9:157 [list format added]

simultaneity, depending on the complexity of the situation.<sup>85</sup> But, no matter how they occurred temporally, all five steps were required for inquiry to take place.

By 1938, however, Dewey had slightly revised these five steps. In his *Logic* volume, he outlined six steps, instead of the previous five – each of which can still easily be fit into the revised list.<sup>86</sup> The first of these he identified as the indeterminate situation itself, which, of course, includes the perplexity and doubt that comprise (i) in the above list. However, it also conveys the interactional aspects of indeterminacy that those earlier, more subjective terms lacked.

The second step in Dewey’s revised list was what he called the “institution of a problem.” Simply put, this refers to the clear statement of a problem and probably best corresponds to step (iii) in the above list. Dewey claimed, however, that it would have been proleptic to call the indeterminate situation a “problematic” one since it only “becomes problematic in the very process of being subjected to inquiry.”<sup>87</sup> Unfortunately in the academic world, as Dewey pointed out, too many “[p]roblems that are self-set are mere excuses for seeming to do something intellectual.”<sup>88</sup> Concerning this tendency, Dewey claimed, “It is a familiar and significant saying that a problem well put is half-solved.”<sup>89</sup> Dewey admitted, however, that clearly stating a problem would only get the inquirer so far, “the determining of a genuine

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<sup>85</sup> cf. *HWT*, LW 6:238

<sup>86</sup> cf. *LTI*, LW 12:109-120

<sup>87</sup> *LTI*, LW 12:111

<sup>88</sup> *LTI*, LW 12:112

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

problem is a *progressive inquiry*...where much prior ingestion and digestion have occurred”<sup>90</sup>

This led him to the third step in his 1938 account, *viz.* the “determination of a problem solution.” In this vein, Dewey claimed that any situation that is altogether indeterminate would not lend itself to transformation. In order to get from indeterminacy to determinacy, then, requires the recognition of those factors in the situation – or as Dewey put it, “the facts of the case” – that are still determinate. This amounts to what could be called the formulation of a hypothesis, and includes both steps (*ii*) and (*iv*) from above. Explicating this step led Dewey to define ideas as “anticipated consequences.”

Dewey simply called the fourth step in his revised account “reasoning.” His view of reasoning, however, was modeled after the Greek account of “logos,” insofar as it emphasized both rational and linguistic features. He argued that there was a double-aspect to experienced objects, since, on one hand, they are just what they are experienced as, and on the other, they indicate a relation to other objects in fulfilling some goal.<sup>91</sup> This latter is a process of operating with signs, *i.e.* it is inherently “logical.” As he put it,

When communication occurs, all natural events are subject to reconsideration and revision; they are re-adapted to meet the requirements of conversation, whether it be public discourse or that preliminary discourse termed thinking. Events turn into objects, things with a *meaning*... Events when once they are named lead an independent and double life.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid. [Dewey’s emphasis]

<sup>91</sup> cf. MW 6:458

<sup>92</sup> EN, LW 1:132

On his view, when a future possibility is seen as an anticipated consequence, “the conclusion reached is not grounded, even if it happens to be correct. The check upon immediate acceptance is the examination of the meaning as a meaning.”<sup>93</sup> In other words, the hypothesis that was formulated in the previous step of inquiry, Dewey argued, must be developed in relation to other conceptual structures. For him, even the “dumb pang of an ache” can achieve significance, *i.e. meaning*, when it becomes representational. This process of transforming events into signs is the consummation of experience *par excellence*, and illustrates one of the generic traits of experience, *viz.* the communicative.<sup>94</sup> When it occurs in the indeterminate situation, a prediction about the outcome of experimentation can be posited. And, as he put it, not following this step will be the end of inquiry insofar as the hypothesis “is not developed in terms of the constellation of meanings to which it belongs,” and such a failure “can lead only to overt response.”<sup>95</sup> This step best corresponds with the first part of (v) above, *i.e.* it consists in taking a stand on a projected hypothesis.

Because he believed that events held a “double life (the concrete one of existence and the abstract one of meaning), Dewey identified the fifth step in the pattern of inquiry as, “the operational character of facts-meanings.” *Prima facie*, it may appear strange to combine two seemingly disparate terms such as “fact” and “meaning.” However, Dewey believed that, within the process of inquiry, facts are

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<sup>93</sup> *LTI*, LW 12:115

<sup>94</sup> This sentiment perhaps is a precursor to the shift toward language in 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophy and is echoed in Wilfrid Sellars’ phrase, “all awareness... is a linguistic affair.” Cf. Sellars, Wilfrid. “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind.” *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press) vol. 1, §29

<sup>95</sup> *LTI*, LW 12:116, This will become important in following chapter in regards to distinguishing between cognitive and non-cognitive habits.

always “operational” in that they are selected with respect to a purpose or goal.

Dewey had this to say about facts in their capacity as meanings,

The operative force of facts is apparent when we consider that no fact in isolation has evidential potency. Facts are evidential and are tests of an idea in so far as they are capable of being organized with one another. The organization can be achieved only as they *interact* with one another.<sup>96</sup>

On this view, facts are tied to meaning through the process of inquiry. As Dewey put it, “Naming them ‘operational’ is but a theoretical recognition of what is involved when inquiry satisfies the conditions imposed by the necessity for experimentation.”<sup>97</sup> What this amounts to can best be summed up by the second part of step (v) above, *viz.* “doing something overtly to bring about the anticipated result, and thereby testing the hypothesis.” Dewey asserted that when inquiry is successful, the indeterminate is returned to determinate, but, if it is unsuccessful, then we must return to the third step, reinterpret the situation with this new information, and formulate a new hypothesis.

#### *The Determinate Situation as Enriched Context*

The sixth and final step in Dewey’s revised list is what he termed “common sense and scientific inquiry.” This step occurs only when inquiry successfully satisfies the problem at hand. In reference to this step, Dewey again distinguished between (common-sense) inquiry that is done within the non-cognitive modes of experience and the (scientific) inquiry that is done within the cognitive mode. Of the former, he wrote,

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<sup>96</sup> *LTI*, LW 12:117 [Dewey’s emphasis]

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

They form a system but the system is practical rather than intellectual. It is constituted by the traditions, occupations, techniques, interests, and established institutions of the group. The meanings that compose it are carried in the common everyday language of communication between members of the group. The meanings involved in this common language system determine what individuals of the group may and may not do in relation to physical objects and in relations to one another. They regulate *what* can be used and enjoyed and *how* use and enjoyment shall occur.<sup>98</sup>

So, the downside to common sense inquiry is that it yields a very narrow set of solutions, *i.e.* the traditions and techniques it produces will disclose only a limited number of possible solutions. Conversely, scientific inquiry, according to Dewey, frees meaning from the interests of a particular group and allows meaning to become more abstract where “semantic coherence, as such, is the controlling consideration.”<sup>99</sup> What issues forth is a pattern of reasoning that guides our inquiry *vis-à-vis* subsequent indeterminate situations. And, while this may also amount to a set of norms or imperatives, each is accepted or rejected only in terms of coherence with one another. This opens up the set of possible solutions to a problem.

The difference between these types of norms and the traditional type could also be seen as one of form versus content. While common sense inquiry might provide content that is specific to the immediate needs of a particular group, it lacks a definite, repeatable structure. Scientific inquiry, on the other hand, provides a definite structure, or form, that can be used over and over in conjunction with new contents. What is true of both forms of inquiry, however, is that the last step in each amounts to the assimilation of a solution back into the original context. In the former

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<sup>98</sup> *LTI*, LW 12:118

<sup>99</sup> *LTI*, LW 12:119

type, *i.e.* common sense inquiry, the assimilation is in reference to specific, immediate, environing conditions. It is a temporary solution; it is, in a very real sense, a “quick fix” to the problem at hand. In scientific inquiry, however, assimilation occurs on a more general, abstract scale. The solutions garnered from it may be applicable across an array of indeterminate situations. But, just as the traditions and customs that are the product of common sense inquiry can limit the set of possible solutions, so too can the norms of scientific inquiry whenever they are viewed as foundations. Dewey warned against viewing these abstractions as static, eternal and immovable entities. As he put it, “Every such interaction [*i.e.* inquiry] is a temporal process, not a momentary cross-sectional occurrence.”<sup>100</sup> Whereas common sense inquiry is a process of *accommodation* by the organism to *meet the demands of the environing conditions*, cognitive inquiry is a process of *adjustment in the situation*, in terms of *both* the environment and the organism.<sup>101</sup> The result of which is an increase in complexity for both. Dewey described it as,

The temporal quality of inquiry means, then, something quite other than that the process of inquiry takes time. It means that the objective subject-matter of inquiry undergoes *temporal modification*.<sup>102</sup>

Twenty-two years earlier, in *Democracy and Education*, Dewey had referred to this temporal modification as “plasticity,” and described it therein as “the capacity to retain and carry over from prior experience factors which modify subsequent

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<sup>100</sup> *LTI*, LW 12:110

<sup>101</sup> cf. *CF*, LW 9:12

<sup>102</sup> *LTI*, LW 12:122 [emphasis added]

activities.”<sup>103</sup> In his later work, Dewey would refer to this as the capacity for “habit-formation.” As he put it in *Experience and Nature*,

We find also in all these higher organisms that what is done is conditioned by consequences of prior activities; we find the fact of learning or habit-formation. In consequence, an organism acts with reference to a time-spread, a serial order of events, as a unit, just as it does in reference to a unified spatial variety. Thus an environment both extensive and enduring is immediately implicated in present behavior. Operatively speaking, the remote and the past are "in" behavior making it what it is.<sup>104</sup>

Thus, *any* transformation of the indeterminate into the determinate is a process of once again returning to a “unified whole,” except that, *qua* the outcome of cognitive inquiry, the determinate situation is a context that has been enriched, *i.e.* it has gained structure, through the development of a new habit. In the next chapter, this aspect of Dewey’s thought, *i.e.* the formation of habits, will be considered in detail.

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<sup>103</sup> *DE*, MW 9:47

<sup>104</sup> *EN*, LW 1:213

## CHAPTER THREE – GROWTH: THE OUTCOME OF CONTEXT AND THE PRAGMATIC METHOD

*We do not form habits, ordinarily, because we repeat, but we repeat because we have formed habits. A habit formed simply by repetition is very likely to be the undesirable sort of habit – that which is likely to be our master instead of being our servant. [LW 17:299-300]*

### *The Importance of Habit*

With the theoretical groundwork of Dewey's contextualism in place, we may now turn our attention toward the discussion initiated in the preface of this analysis, *viz.* how his notion of context relates to the pragmatic method. Dewey often treated the reconstruction of habit as synonymous with pragmatic method. In order to understand why Dewey held habits in such high regard, it will be helpful to trace some of the more important influences on his unique stance. Reconstructing habit for Dewey, however, involves the distinction, which was touched upon in the previous chapter, between habits as the product of cognitive inquiry (*i.e.* inquiry that is done within the cognitive mode of experience) and those that are the outcome of the other, non-cognitive inquiries (*i.e.* inquiries made from within the moral, practical, religious, or aesthetic modes of experience.) Establishing such a distinction will inevitably lead to Dewey's concept of "growth," which he considered to be dependent upon habit reconstruction. Arguably, the idea of growth (as the outcome of cognitive habit reconstruction) is both the single most important and most misunderstood strand running throughout Dewey's philosophical, psychological and

pedagogical interests, the one that ties these interests together in terms of context. Unfortunately, many Dewey scholars choose to cast aside his work on growth, and focus instead on the less amorphous concepts of experience and inquiry.<sup>105</sup> The final aim of this exegesis, therefore, will be to clarify how growth is the outcome of Dewey's context.

Just as Dewey's views of experience and inquiry developed slowly over the course of several decades of writing, so too did his notion of habit. Throughout his career, the three concepts evolved symbiotically alongside one another. His first philosophical treatment of habit appeared in the years just following James' release of *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), which made use of the term to undergird a type of psychological functionalism, and which Dewey admired for its rejection of many psychological dualisms. Simply put, functionalism is the theory that mental processes can be understood only in terms of usefulness. During the nine years after James' *Principles* and leading up to his own "Psychology and Social Practice" (1899), Dewey wrote about habits in a resolutely behaviorist tone. Viewing habits through such a lens led him to question traditional notions of self, freedom, and necessity via James' functionalist principles.

His 1893 essay, "The Superstition of Necessity," is an excellent indicator of this. There he identified the fallacy of the "necessitarian" as conflating what is "determinate," in the sense of fully defined, with the cosmological belief in causation frequently called "determinism." In this manner, Dewey characterized necessity as a

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<sup>105</sup> Cf. "Forget Emerson, Forget Growth, Embrace Anaximander: Pragmatism and the Tragic Sense" By Raymond D. Boisvert. *Proceedings of the 2002 Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy Conference*. [www.american-philosophy.org/archives/2002\\_Conference/2002\\_papers/boisvert\\_saito.htm](http://www.american-philosophy.org/archives/2002_Conference/2002_papers/boisvert_saito.htm), Mar. 6<sup>th</sup> 2005.

useful go-between term, *i.e.* one that was useful in explaining why two seemingly unrelated concepts were actually related, but “When it has succeeded, its value is nil.”<sup>106</sup> There, Dewey said of necessity,

When we say something or other *must* be so and so, the “must” does not indicate anything in the nature of the fact itself, but a trait in our *judgment* of that fact; it indicates the degree with which we have succeeded in making a whole out of the various elements which have to be taken into account in forming the judgment. More specifically, it indicates a half-way stage.<sup>107</sup>

On Dewey’s account, causal necessity is merely the connection we make between two seemingly unconnected ideas, it is a go-between, the “mid-wife” of judgment and is *only* useful insofar as it links up one part of a whole with another part, but once that link is made it is no longer helpful in our understanding of the whole. Like Hume before him, Dewey argued that necessity was the name for our habit of getting carried away by the constitution of a whole by its various parts and thus talking about the parts as *causing* the whole rather than merely *making it up*.<sup>108</sup>

Dewey claimed that this conflating of whole-part relationships with causal links can be a hindrance to human inquiry because, “objects as they are for us, as known, [must] change with the development of our judgments.”<sup>109</sup> But, when necessity is taken to be an essential component of the universe then, as he put it, “Once the Ptolemaic conception is well rooted, cycles and epicycles, almost without end, are superadded, rather than reconstruct the original object.”<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> EW 4:20

<sup>107</sup> EW 4:20 [Dewey’s emphasis]

<sup>108</sup> This is the tendency that Dewey labeled the “necessitarian fallacy.”

<sup>109</sup> EW 4:22

<sup>110</sup> EW 4:24

Dewey's proposal was that we strip the notion of necessity of any ontological (real world) status that it might enjoy and instead view it as a useful tool in helping us reconstruct theories whenever new data arise. He believed that it is often easier for us to form a new theory than to continue to heap exceptions-to-the-rules upon old ones.<sup>111</sup> He believed that if we could adopt this principle of action, then perhaps we could avoid the stagnations in thought, *i.e.* stagnations of convention, that have caused some of the greatest suffering in history. And, it was from within this Humean line of reasoning that Dewey first considered the "reconstruction" of habit. In that initial treatment, found in "The Psychology of Effort" (1897), he referred to reconstruction as a "process" of "adaptation to new conditions" by "bodily states" of action.<sup>112</sup> This accentuates the connotations of "habit" as it is used in its verb form, meaning "to dwell" or "to reside." And, Dewey's interest in "habit" becomes even more apparent when one considers its etymological connection with terms related to the notion of environment (terms like "habitat" and "inhabit") so prevalent in Dewey's work.

However, Dewey's work in education in the latter half of the 1890's, particularly his involvement in the "Laboratory School" at the University of Chicago, led him to develop this position even further before the turn of the century. Observing the difference that education could make on habituated conduct, Dewey rejected the one-directional view of habit, *i.e.* one that posited habit as merely the outcome of conditioning stimuli, in favor of a more dynamic and socially integrated

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<sup>111</sup> Thomas Kuhn's work in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* crystallized this sentiment in the concept of paradigm.

<sup>112</sup> EW 5:162

interpretation. This was the view he defended in “Psychology and Social Practice” (1899), “The School and Society” (1900), and “The Child and the Curriculum” (1902). In those essays, Dewey decried the prevalent psychological models for their failure to provide an intelligible account of child psychology. Those models, on his account, tried to explain the psychological disposition of children in reference to adult psychological standards. As he put it in “Psychology and Social Practice,”

[The child] is engaged in *forming* habits rather than in definitely utilizing those already formed. Consequently he is absorbed in getting that all-around contact with persons and things, that range of acquaintance with the physical and ideal factors of life, which shall afford the background and material for the specialized aims and pursuits of later life. He is, or should be, busy in the formation of a flexible variety of habits whose sole immediate criterion is their relation to *full growth*.

This suggests that, in a sense, habits can be seen as *prior* to stimuli, *i.e.* the child already possesses the capacity for habits before stimuli that bring that capacity into fruition ever appear. Habits, on this view, are pulled from the front by biological and social factors, rather than pushed from behind by factors that were traditionally explained in the language of physics or theology. In other words, Dewey believed that human beings were “creatures of habit,” but he saw habits as potentialities that were antecedent to experience rather than a byproducts of rote action. Habits, for Dewey, are “pulled from the front” insofar as they are only fixed by their fruitfulness in attaining future ends, much as genetic mutations in species are only fixed when they provide some marginal aid in adapting to environmental changes. This realization jibed well with Dewey’s already heavily Darwinian leanings and was reinforced by his rejection of the empiricist’s fallacy in his essay on the reflex arc

concept. He concluded that determinism and psychological functionalism were incompatible insofar as the latter portrayed habits as a sort of “feedback loop” that undermined the traditional view of causality on which the former depended by showing that habits and environment *shape one another*. For Dewey, this point further undermined the notion of causality, and he quickly ruled determinism out of court.<sup>113</sup> As Dewey would later write in *Experience and Nature*,

The reality *is* the growth-process itself; childhood and adulthood are phases of a continuity, in which just because it is a history, the later cannot exist until the earlier exists ("mechanistic materialism" in germ); and in which the later makes use of the registered and cumulative outcome of the earlier--or, more strictly, *is* its utilization ("spiritualistic teleology" in germ). The real existence is the history in its entirety, the history as just what it is. The operations of splitting it up into two parts and then having to unite them again by appeal to causative power are equally arbitrary and gratuitous.<sup>114</sup>

### *Forming Habits Through Inquiry*

By the time he had released *Democracy and Education* in 1916, Dewey had fully adopted a biological/social stance on habit formation, *i.e.* one that emphasized the feedback loop aspect of habits. There, he referred to the capacity to form habits as the innate “plasticity” of human beings and laid the groundwork for the distinction between cognitive and non-cognitive habits that would be the touchstone of his idea of inquiry. As he explained therein, responding to a problematic situation – like our

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<sup>113</sup> In *The Metaphysical Club*, Louis Menand speculated that the death of Dewey’s young son, Morris, was the main catalyst in his educational interests, since Dewey had written in some of his personal correspondence with family that he was becoming a student of his son’s growth. In a similar fashion, one could hypothesize that Dewey’s rejection of determinism, which followed on the heels of Morris’ death in 1895, was another outcome of the loss. Of course, such a claim can only remain purely conjecture, as Dewey was not prone to writing about himself in an emotionally revealing manner. What is clear, however, is that for whatever reason, by 1900 Dewey had begun to view habits as a fundamental part of human character and thus he set out to examine them in detail.

<sup>114</sup> *EN*, LW 1:210

computer example from the preceding chapter – is brought about by the natural desire to alleviate indeterminacy. In this regard, Dewey followed Peirce in the belief that uncertainty was an irritation that human beings were compelled to avoid. However, Dewey argued that the natural desire for a psychological state of comfort is merely a mechanism that helps us stand up against indeterminacy. In other words, instincts, on Dewey’s view, are not foundational; they are merely “elements in habits.”<sup>115</sup> What is needed in order to actually relieve the irritation, then, is a means of getting back in synchronicity with the environment. The natural way of dealing with objects that arise in the problematic situation is in terms of value, *i.e.* they either have positive or negative value in regard to escaping indeterminacy. For Dewey, value *is* a product of inquiry, yet it arises from an inquiry that is made from within a non-cognitive mode of experience. There is nothing – no fact, object, or entity – that has intrinsic value antecedent to whatever purpose the situation brings to the table. The philosopher, carpenter, artist, and environmentalist all view a particular tree in different ways, but it would be senseless to assert that any one of them sees the tree “as it is in itself.” The tree is valuable, of course, regardless of whichever view one takes, but its value is always dependent on a particular end. So, the environmentalist may value the tree because of its ability to slow erosion, the artist for its symmetry, the carpenter for the quality of the wood, and the philosopher because of the noise it might not make when it falls, but each values the tree for the function it fulfills in attaining some end. Dewey called this type of transaction with one’s surroundings, “valuation.” Simply put, valuation involves the habit, or capacity, of ranking several

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<sup>115</sup> *HNC*, MW 14:61

preferences in the order of which will be most beneficial in alleviating the irritation of indeterminacy. But, this habit is only a proto-process of means-ends manipulation, it lacks the more complex capacity of dealing with objects as abstract signs, and as such, Dewey saw it as *affective* rather than *cognitive*.<sup>116</sup> While the affective types of strategy toward indeterminacy may involve minimal cognitive capacity, since it gets “worked out in terms of concrete conditions available for its realization, *i.e.* in terms of *means*,” it still cannot provide knowledge, but only a type of repeatable norm, *i.e.* a “value” that can help avoid indeterminacy.<sup>117</sup>

On Dewey’s view, only the employment of a habit that has been formed by inquiry from within the cognitive mode of experience – the habit he called “intelligence” – can allow for an actual *transformation* of an indeterminate situation. The habits of valuation alone do not offer the requisite tools for transformation. But, against the traditional view which treated intelligence as synonymous with the faculty of reason and, subsequently, as inherent within human beings (*a priori* is the technical term), Dewey claimed that intelligence is not prior to experience. He often referred to intelligence in terms of ‘reasonableness’ rather than as an *a priori* faculty. This difference places emphasis on the *activity* of intelligence. On his account, an inquirer may do something reasonable, such as choosing to build a boat out of teakwood planks, or something unreasonable, such as crafting a similar vessel out of

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<sup>116</sup> There have been many thinkers who sought to cast aside the fact-value distinction. On such a view, there would be no clear delineation between “subject” and “object” or between “ought” and “is.” Dewey was one such thinker. He argued that the relationship between facts and values resembles a spectrum more than it does one of polar opposites. There are many things on the fact side of that spectrum. But, even those things have some value imparted to them by the organism, through the process of valuation. Likewise, those things that sit pretty far on the value side, *e.g.* the morally or aesthetically praiseworthy, still have some fact of the matter about them.

<sup>117</sup> *HNC*, MW 14:217 [emphasis added]

matchsticks. In either case, value has guided action, but only when judged against a particular end (in this case boat-building) is the reasonableness of an action demonstrable.

Knowledge, on the traditional view, is either something found in the world or in the mind. For Dewey, though, knowledge is the outcome of an inquiry wherein the habits of intelligence transform indeterminate situations into determinate ones. In other words, all knowledge – even that which has been traditionally termed “propositional” – is essentially a skill, one acquired through developing appropriate habits.

Perhaps Dewey’s most robust expression of habit can be found in his 1922 work, *Human Nature and Conduct*, a third of which was devoted to the topic. There, Dewey described habits in the same kind of interactional terms that he would continue to use in *Experience and Nature*, *Art as Experience*, and *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*. To illustrate, he wrote

...habits are like [physiological] functions in many respects, and especially in requiring the cooperation of organism and environment... habits are arts... They are working adaptations of personal capacities with environing forces.<sup>118</sup>

This echoes the view laid out in *Democracy and Education* that habits are social functions. Yet, in *Human Nature*, Dewey made strides to describe further the relation between the social function of habits and inquiry, which he accomplished by identifying it in terms of *meaning* rather than *value*. Talking about “meaning” allows for consequences of actions to be re-evaluated whenever necessary, whereas talking

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<sup>118</sup> *HNC*, MW 14:15-16

about “value” implies reference to a realm of transcendent essences that Dewey wished to avoid. As he put it,

[Children] owe to adults the opportunity to express their native activities in ways which have meaning. Even if by some miracle original activity could continue without assistance from the organized skill and art of adults, it would not amount to anything. It would be mere sound and fury. In short, the *meaning* of native activities is not native; it is acquired. It depends upon interaction with a mature social medium.<sup>119</sup>

This shift in emphasis from value to meaning is important for two reasons. First, because Dewey believed it better conveyed the formation of habits in a non-instinctual light, one that could more readily account for the diversity of cultures found in various environments. According to him,

Admission that the idea of, say, standing erect [an activity usually identified as completely instinctual] is dependent upon sensory materials is, therefore equivalent to recognition that it is dependent upon the habitual attitudes which govern concrete sensory materials. The medium of habit filters all the material that reaches our perception and thought. The filter is not, however, chemically pure. It is a reagent which adds new qualities and rearranges what is received. Our ideas truly depend upon experience, but so do our sensations. And the experience upon which they both depend is the operation of habits--originally of instincts.<sup>120</sup>

He saw the view that instincts were separable and thus antecedent to habits as yet another instance of the empiricist’s fallacy. On his view, it would be erroneous to believe that instincts precede habits simply because such seems to be the case when an individual is considered in isolation from society. For, he believed that “if an individual be isolated in this fashion, along with the fact of primacy of instinct we

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<sup>119</sup> *HNC*, MW 14:65

<sup>120</sup> *HNC*, MW 14:26

find also the fact of death.”<sup>121</sup> Diversity, then, comes from the fact that “native stock has been modified by interaction with different environments,” both natural and social, not from a difference in native capacities or instincts. Cultural differences can arise within the same natural environment because habits can be formed from within any one of the modes of experience, as our tree example above illustrated.<sup>122</sup>

But, as we have seen from Dewey’s view of experience, the difference among environments should be couched in temporal as well as spatial terms, since “the environment in which the act takes place is never twice alike.”<sup>123</sup> On Dewey’s account, the “differences of objective result” that stem from the differences in the surrounding environment (both living and non-living) “are the only *components of the meaning* of the act.”<sup>124</sup> As we saw in the previous chapter, Dewey claimed that the fourth step in cognitive inquiry involved “the examination of meaning as meaning.”<sup>125</sup> This presents the second benefit of shifting from “value” terms to “meaning” terms when talking about habit formation, *i.e.* the latter can better capture the fluidity of the interaction between organisms and environments insofar as meanings, like consummatory experiences, can always be re-evaluated as they move through experience with us. Realizing this, Dewey thought, could protect against the calcification of the means-end distinction. Thus, Dewey referred to all ends as “ends-in-view,” because, regardless of what mode of inquiry an organism employs, it can only respond to indeterminacy by surveying the possible outcomes that are “in view”

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<sup>121</sup> *HNC*, MW 14:68

<sup>122</sup> *HNC*, MW 14:67

<sup>123</sup> *HNC*, MW 14:105

<sup>124</sup> *HNC*, MW 14:105 [Dewey’s emphasis]

<sup>125</sup> *LTI*, LW 12:115

of its particular set of habits. Thus, we see the major difference between habits as the outcome of cognitive inquiry and those of the non-cognitive variety. The habits which are employed in the former, which Dewey called intelligence, involve manipulation of abstract symbols, or meanings, whereas the latter involve the manipulation of values, which are always more proximate than meanings. In other words, cognitive habits form the principles of thought, on which logic and mathematics are based. Non-cognitive habits form the principles of normativity, on which aesthetics and ethics are based. The former yield knowledge, the latter – attitudes.

#### *Habit Reconstruction and Growth*

Although both types of inquiry can lead to the formation of habits, only the cognitive variety can lead to the type of re-evaluation of its habits that Dewey referred to as “reconstruction.” It achieves this through the versatility of meaning. As Dewey put it,

The more numerous our habits the wider the field of possible observation and foretelling. The more flexible they are, the more refined is perception in its discrimination and the more delicate the presentation evoked by imagination.<sup>126</sup>

Because cognitive inquiry employs habits that deal with meaning, this type of inquiry can lead to the changing of those habits whenever they produce a solution that does not cohere with other meanings. This is where experimentation, which Dewey believed was merely a description of the default setting in which all “live creatures” operated, comes into focus within his account. As he had explained over a

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<sup>126</sup> *HNC*, MW 14:123

decade earlier, in his *How We Think* (1910), when any organism is presented with a series of events it will inevitably relate them to past experiences. Dewey claimed that the limitation of valuation within non-cognitive modes of experience is that it “affords no way of discriminating between right and wrong conclusions.”<sup>127</sup> Thus, by itself, it does not provide the habits of deciding between simple conclusions such as “phlogiston” or “opium’s dormative powers” against more complex explanations such as “combining oxygen with a combustible” or “a chemical reaction in the brain.” Cognitive inquiry, on the other hand, has an apparatus for distinguishing between competing theses. This apparatus is the *habit* of abstraction, or meaning manipulation. As Dewey put it, “Experiment is the chief resource in scientific reasoning because it facilitates the picking out of significant elements in a gross, vague whole.”<sup>128</sup> He thought new interpretations arose through experimentation in response to particular problems. The difference, in the end, between cognitive inquiry and non-cognitive valuation boils down to the ability to create new habits via new interpretations of the meaning of action. Thus, habit reconstruction amounts to the ability to create new habits through interpretation.

The creation of new habits is, in general terms, what Dewey referred to as “growth.” In his words,

Habits take the form both of habituation, or a general and persistent balance of organic activities with the surroundings, and of active capacities to readjust activity to meet new conditions. The former furnishes the background of growth; the latter constitute growth.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> *HWT*, MW 6:294

<sup>128</sup> *HWT*, MW 6:298

<sup>129</sup> *DE*, MW 9:57

As stated above, this general notion of growth was featured prominently in most of Dewey's writings, especially the moral and pedagogic ones. Perhaps a definition, in this general sense, could be found in *Democracy and Education*, where Dewey called growth the "cumulative movement of action toward a later result."<sup>130</sup>

This definition, however, is perhaps too vague. With it, Dewey did not mean to reinstate what he saw as "a false idea of growth or development, – that it is a movement toward a fixed goal."<sup>131</sup> And with this in mind, he claimed, "Growth is [mistakenly] regarded as having an end, instead of being an end."<sup>132</sup> On his view, then, growth "has no end beyond itself."<sup>133</sup> Throughout both *Democracy and Education* and *Human Nature and Conduct*, Dewey laid out many of the conditions of growth in hope of establishing a more detailed description.

Two of these conditions have already been discussed in this analysis, *viz.* the "need for others" and "plasticity." These are most visibly featured in *Democracy and Education* because of Dewey's belief that "both of these conditions are at their height in childhood and youth."<sup>134</sup> But, the primary condition of growth, for him, was "immaturity," which he claimed includes the notions of capacity and potentiality. According to Dewey, immaturity, like capacity and like potentiality, is not properly understood as a negative term.

Capacity may denote mere receptivity, like the capacity of a quart measure. We may mean by potentiality a merely dormant or quiescent state--a capacity to become something different under external influences. But we also mean by capacity an ability, a

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<sup>130</sup> *DE*, MW 9:46

<sup>131</sup> *DE*, MW 9:55

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>133</sup> *DE*, MW 9:57

<sup>134</sup> *DE*, MW 9:57

power; and by potentiality potency, force. Now when we say that immaturity means the possibility of growth, we are not referring to absence of powers which may exist at a later time; we express a force positively present--the *ability* to develop.<sup>135</sup>

The upshot of this view is not only process that growth is a process of “becoming,” but that it is a process of becoming that ought not reach a point of terminus.

Although growth is the transformation of the indeterminate to the determinate, this should not suggest once this transformation has taken place that growth has ended.

And, this point is the reason Dewey warned against interpreting consummatory experience as a break in the continuity of experience. Likewise, achieving a new power of interaction with the environment through the reconstruction of habit is best understood as a pause, not a break in the process of growth. This is the point that Dewey later developed in his 1932 *Ethics* text, where he wrote,

It is in the quality of becoming that virtue resides. We set up this and that end to be reached, but the *end* is growth itself. To make an end a final goal is but to arrest growth.<sup>136</sup>

With this statement, Dewey wanted to show that character (his expression for motives or intentions) and conduct (acts) are inseparable because they are only different sides of habit formation, and consequently, growth. Therefore, Dewey argued that the habits produced by cognitive inquiry provide freedom to individuals insofar as they open up the possibility for new interpretations, whereas habits formed through repetition, *i.e.* tradition, restrict freedom and often become our masters by restricting growth.

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<sup>135</sup> DE, MW 9:46

<sup>136</sup> LW 7:306

If experience is the formation of context, and inquiry enriches that context, then growth could be seen as the outcome of context. In this sense, it is noteworthy that the term ‘edification’ can be substituted for growth taken in the sense of habit acquisition, without a loss of meaning. It is common to refer to someone who has the refined habits concomitant with education as “edified,” and the relationship between this expression and the root it shares with “edifice” should not be overlooked. Those who have received an expansive education have “built up” their habits of interacting with their surroundings. Similarly, when a community permits individuals to grow, it will experience growth as well. Thus, it would seem that Dewey’s work on experience, inquiry, and growth illustrated the importance of context and offered us a rich and detailed understanding of culture.

#### *Pragmatic Method and Context*

One of Dewey’s most pressing concerns was that philosophy had become yet another tradition that arrested growth. Although most philosophical schools of thought employed empirical and critical methods, he saw the method of pragmatism as the only one that fostered growth through an orientation toward practicality. This is what led Dewey to devote so much time to the concepts of experience, inquiry, and growth. When empirical method is oriented in such a way, the active features of *experience* are highlighted and interaction becomes the most dependable model, which consequently blurs the distinction between the creature and its surroundings. When critical, or reflective, methods are pointed toward real world results, then *inquiry* takes on a decidedly experimental tone and the meaningfulness of actions

becomes easier to account for. And, when these concepts are combined, it becomes obvious that the notion of self is a byproduct of the *habits* acquired by the practical import of these dealings with surroundings. Therefore, on Dewey's view, the pragmatic method succeeds where other methods fail because it recognizes the importance of contexts and, when followed, can lead to a transformation of those contexts. Simply put, pragmatism makes philosophy relevant again; it gives it the power to affect its surroundings, whether natural or cultural, and Dewey's version of pragmatic method offers a means of improving culture.

First, his work on experience brought out its natural elements of interaction between organism and environment. We saw that, for him, experience is coterminous with context, and in a general sense, with culture itself. We also saw that experience is divisible into several modes, each with its own strategy for coping with the instability of the environment. Some of those modes, *i.e.* those which do not involve reflection, involve a type of coping that relies upon the principle of value. And, although these modes can provide the organism with helpful habits, the growth that derives from those habits is a spreading out, not a building up of culture. Context, in such an instance, is broad – but it has no depth – it is, in a word, superficial. One of the modes of experience, however, has proven to be successful in transforming indeterminacy, *viz.* the cognitive. When inquiry is made within this mode, cognitive habits are formed that can enrich the context. These habits provide the organism a chance to grow, and subsequently society and culture will grow as well.

By emphasizing pragmatic method, which excels in the capacity to identify and transform context, Dewey provided philosophy a powerful tool in critiquing culture. One of Dewey's most oft-quoted passages put it thusly,

Philosophy recovers itself when it ceases to be a device for dealing with the problems of philosophers and becomes a method, cultivated by philosophers, for dealing with the problems of men.<sup>137</sup>

And, although the intellectual climate in this country has changed dramatically in the eighty-odd years since Dewey penned those words, they seem just as appropriate now as they did when he wrote them. I submit that the rest of Dewey's thought could be useful in revitalizing American intellectual life, since, on his view, the responsibility of the philosopher is to be just as concerned with public issues as with esoteric ones. Social hope, *i.e.* the hope for a free and peaceful society, is consistent with Deweyan contextualism and, thus, his might be the position philosophy will have to adopt if it seeks to ever plunge back into the realm of public affairs.

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<sup>137</sup> MW 10:46

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