

A Brief Account of John Dewey's Ethics, Political Theory, and Philosophy of Art and Aesthetics

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Readers interested in other aspects of Dewey's work might consult my entry at the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2018/entries/dewey/>

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1. John Dewey's Ethics

Dewey wrote extensively on ethics over the course of his career, and the full scope is difficult to appreciate. While he published numerous articles and several books specifically focused upon ethics, he also engaged in detailed discussions of ethical topics in works with other foci.¹ As in other areas, Dewey criticized traditional views and then provides reconstructive proposals. At the heart lies his transactional views of experience, habit, inquiry, and the social self.² Over time, many of us become so used to our cultural environment that we forget how much our individuality comes from, and returns to, social relations. "Apart from the social medium," Dewey reminds us, "the individual would never 'know himself'; he would never become acquainted with his own needs and capacities" (*E*, MW5: 388). Because morality is bound up with inquiry—the forces which form inquiry, the purposes to which it can be put—it is nearly impossible to separate Dewey's moral views from those on education and political democracy.

Ethical systems, in Dewey's view, whether teleological, deontological, or virtue-based, are typified by a quest for certainty; they aim to be comprehensive, ultimate, and monocausal. But the obstinate complexity of morally prob-

¹A reasonable starting list of Dewey's principal ethical writings would include his *Ethics* (1908, MW5, revised 1932, LW7, co-authored with James H. Tufts) as well as *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922, HNC, MW14) and *Theory of Valuation* (1939, LW13); the essay "Three Independent Factors in Morals" (1930, TIF, LW5: 279–88) is also very significant. Dewey's writings cover a range of ethical approaches which cover descriptive ethics, metaethics, normative ethics, and applied ethics. Perhaps most distinctive among his efforts is his theory of moral experience.

²Dewey, along with his colleague G.H. Mead, developed a conception of the self as social. A cumulative process of socialization, involving many activities but especially discourse contributes to and constitutes who we are as individuals. Dewey writes, "Cooperation, in all kinds of enterprises, interchange of services and goods, participation in social arts, associations for various purposes, institutions of blood, family, government, and religion, all add enormously to the individual's power. On the other hand, as he enters into these relations and becomes a 'member' of all these bodies he inevitably undergoes a transformation in his interests. Psychologically the process is one of building up a 'social' self. Imitation and suggestion, sympathy and affection, common purpose and common interest, are the aids in building such a self" (*E*, MW5: 16).

lematic situations has shown them to be less than effective. Traditional systems also frame conduct as a largely individual affair, a choice of the self. Dewey rejected this; persons subsist and flourish in transaction with social and cultural environments. “Conduct is always shared; this is the difference between it and a physiological process. It is not an ethical ‘ought’ that conduct *should* be social. It *is* social, whether bad or good” (*HNC*, MW₁₄: 16).

1.1 Moral experience and situations

Perhaps the classic question of western morality has been “Why should one be moral?” The question assumes that morality is, inherently, a constraint imposed upon individual interest. Theory’s task, then, is to explain what kind of authority (God, Nature, Reason, Custom, etc.) can legitimately impose constraints, and why. Under this framework, moral situations are radically distinct from ordinary ones. In other words, for Dewey, the question sets up a fundamentally mistaken view of moral experience as its starting point. Moral concerns permeate experience and involve us in nearly constant deliberation, choice and action. But from the traditional point of view, this uncertainty is a defect in reality that theory must address. Dewey writes,

Whatever may be the differences which separate moral theories, all postulate one single principle as an explanation of moral life. Under such conditions, it is not possible to have either uncertainty or conflict: morally speaking, the conflict is only specious and apparent. Conflict is, in effect, between good and evil, justice and injustice, duty and caprice, virtue and vice, and is not an inherent part of the good, the obligatory, the virtuous. (*TIF*, LW₅: 280)

Dewey took aim at this fundamental metaphysical prejudice (equating what is real with what is certain) in *EN*. His naturalism accepts that existence (not just subjective perception) really is both “precarious” and “stable” (both terms which are important for the metaphysics in *EN*). Insofar as we are natural actors in a natural world, this is also where ethical theory should *start*. This

was also the key point, much earlier, of his 1896 “Reflex Arc” paper: if experience is a complex interplay of people-in-community, then moral theories which start from a concept of (preformed) individuals will mistakenly convert social conduct into happenstance. This theoretical starting point obscures the living complexity of moral issues, impairs empirical scrutiny, and disconnects ethical theory from everyday life.³

Moral progress, for Dewey, was a matter of *process*—the degree to which inquiry is conducted scrupulously and with nuance, that is, “the ability to make delicate distinctions, to perceive aspects of good and of evil not previously noticed, to take into account the fact that doubt and the need for choice impinge at every turn” (*TIF*, LW5: 280). Moral growth means finding ways to remain aware of choice as an ever-present obligation, and to develop reliable and creative distinctions that make a difference to future practice.

What makes an experience or situation particularly “moral”? It is not the stakes.⁴ Rather, moral experience is “conduct in which there are ends so discrepant, so incompatible, as to require selection of one and rejection of the other” (*E*, MW5: 194). In contrast to cases where stock actions suffice, “only deliberate action, conduct into which reflective choice enters, is distinctively moral, for only then does there enter the question of better and worse” (*HNC*, MW14: 193). A moral situation exists when there is perplexity—when the

³In *HNC*, Dewey writes, “Potentially conduct is one hundred per cent of our acts. Hence we must decline to admit theories which identify morals with the purification of motives, edifying character, pursuing remote and elusive perfection, obeying supernatural command, acknowledging the authority of duty. Such notions have a dual bad effect. First they get in the way of observation of conditions and consequences. They divert thought into side issues. Secondly, while they confer a morbid exaggerated quality upon things which are viewed under the aspect of morality, they release the larger part of the acts of life from serious, that is moral, survey. Anxious solicitude for the few acts which are deemed moral is accompanied by edicts of exemption and baths of immunity for most acts. A moral moratorium prevails for everyday affairs” (*HNC*, MW14: 194).

⁴A momentous decision (e.g., killing another person), in certain circumstances, may not constitute a moral situation, while a relatively inconsequential one (privileging one child over a sibling) may be intensely moral. In other words, the traditional alignment of a “moral” issue with high stakes must be abandoned; the difference depends upon the presence or absence of something problematic for action.

choice of action or ends is unclear. This should be understood not as a failure of reason but of habits. The habits needed for a resolution are missing, though there is awareness that a choice for the better must be made. What demands discrimination in ethical theorizing is “not between reason and habit but between routine, unintelligent habit, and intelligent habit or art” (*HNC*, MW₁₄: 55). Dewey detailed various habits to understand their effects on choice. Some of the more helpful habits are familiar in scientific practice, such as habits of suspending judgment, patiently reviewing evidence, and risking cherished beliefs, while others are at home in the arts, such as imagining possibilities, dramatizing consequences, and re-describing conditions.

1.2 Moral Inquiry

So far we see that a reconstructed ethics requires understanding that the starting point and site of ethical theory is perspectival and practical, and that traditional abstract, comprehensive, monocausal theories have denigrated as unreal the inherently uncertain nature of moral perplexity, disregarded the complexities of moral experience, and overestimated their own explanatory power. More positively, then, what should ethical theory be?

Ethical theory must be more than conceptual analysis or exhortation. It should, Dewey writes, “enlighten and guide choice and action by revealing alternatives... [including] what is entailed when we choose one alternative rather than another” (*E-rev*, LW₇: 316). Theory cannot make reflective and personal choices for us, but it can serve as “an instrument for rendering deliberation more effective and hence choice more intelligent” (*E-rev*, LW₇: 316).

The question becomes, how is inquiry and deliberation made more effective? One suggestion, hinted at earlier, was that ethics become more scientific. By this Dewey meant that ethics would be “concerned with collecting, describing, explaining and classifying the facts of experience in which judgments of right and wrong are actually embodied or to which they apply” (“Ethics,” MW₃: 41). And beyond emulating the sciences’ methods, ethics would seek to consider the *content* of scientific discoveries, too. Given the stakes and complexity

of contemporary moral problems, this seemed an epistemic necessity. Areas Dewey mentioned as potentially contributing include “biology, physiology, hygiene and medicine, psychology and psychiatry, as well as statistics, sociology, economics, and politics” (*E-rev*, LW7: 179). (Dewey’s suggestion now seems painfully obvious given the default *modus operandi* of fields such as biomedical or environmental ethics, which must always integrate theory and practice to be the fields they are.) But theory would not be exclusively drawing on science—this would not be scientism. Theory could also incorporate lessons from social custom, jurisprudence, and biographical texts. Finally, theory would continue to consult philosophy’s great moral systems because of their ability to cast light on present problems.⁵

1.3 Deliberation and dramatic rehearsal

Discussion about Dewey’s theory of moral inquiry has been fairly abstract—the structure of moral inquiry, its basic methodology, and the various intellectual resources useful for its reconstruction. Before leaving the topic of moral inquiry, there is one more resource to mention—deliberation, and specifically Dewey’s idea of “dramatic rehearsal.”

Deliberation is typically portrayed as a kind of reflective response to a problem, an intervention which uses analysis or calculated projection (of consequences, on duty, for character) to estimate which course of action to choose. Dewey expanded the depiction of calculation beyond the analytical/calculative, adding dimensions both creative and dramatic. Such deliberation might proceed by visualization, imagined role play, or anticipation of feeling. Dewey called this “dramatic rehearsal” because of its capacity to illuminate the emotional weight and color of various possibilities. Dewey writes,

⁵Philosophers such as Plato, Hume, and Kant (to name three) reward inquiry with their ability to “reveal the complexity of moral situations...[so as] to bring to light some phase of [our] moral life demanding reflective attention, and which, save for it, might have remained hidden” (*E-rev*, LW7: 180).

We give way, in our mind, to some impulse; we try, in our mind, some plan.... [W]e find ourselves in imagination in the presence of the consequences that would follow; and as we then like and approve, or dislike and disapprove, these consequences, we find the original impulse or plan good or bad. Deliberation is dramatic and active, not mathematical and impersonal. (*E*, MW5: 292, 293)

Clearly, one advantage to dramatic rehearsal is that hypotheses can be “tested” without provoking irrevocable consequences. But most important is the way rehearsal can induce a more self-conscious empathy about what feels valuable; it evokes and makes explicit one’s reaction. By testing out how I would feel if I did X, I have a more intimate confrontation with what sort of person I might become if I did X.

1.4 Values

Perhaps the greatest objection to Dewey’s ethical theory was its lack of any terminal or final moral end(s) or value(s). What is Dewey’s definition of “good”? What is “justice” for Dewey? What is his comprehensive theoretical answer? He did not have one, and we should not be surprised. Given his description of how ethical theory arises from experience—as an intellectual intervention needed *just because* fixed ends or customs are inadequate—looking to a typical solution violates his basic claim about the very nature of moral experience in problematic situations. The expectation that novel moral perplexities could be solved with renewed appeals to standard ethical systems was, in Dewey’s view, regressive and unscientific. In the case of values, as well as in the case of actions, the proper response to a perplexity is inquiry, which can reconsider and reconstruct goods, values, and ends. (*E-rev*, LW7: 164)

Dewey thought it was important to distinguish between the immediate experience of value and reflective judgments of value. From the starting point of experience, we already value many things without needing to investigate them first. (In ordinary language, one “has values.”) What is valued has, Dewey says,

“a certain *force* within a situation temporally developing toward a determinate result” (“The Logic of Judgments of Practice,” MW8: 29). The crucial point, for Dewey, was to *not* overestimate what this immediate sense of value portends for ethical inquiry. The “had” *experience* of a good or value is different from an *endorsement* of it. “To say that something is enjoyed is to make a statement about a fact, something already in existence; it is not to judge the value of that fact...But to call an object a value is to assert that it satisfies or fulfills certain conditions” (QC, LW4: 207–08).

This key difference—immediate experience vs. reflective endorsement—is the difference, Dewey noted, between “*valuing*” (or “prizing”) something and “*evaluating*” (or “appraising”) it. But inquiry *can* reflect on what is immediately valued and question it as something *worth* valuing. “The fact that something is desired only raises the question of its desirability; it does not settle it” (QC, LW4: 208). Many of us love sweets and value the cake before us; but those concerned about our health also know that we can contextualize that value along with other ones—nothing automatic about what to do is entailed by the immediate love of cake.

Dewey’s prizing/appraising distinction is a rebuke to the traditional wall between “is” and “ought.” Whereas is/ought was traditionally demarcated, categorically, non-moral (descriptive) from moral (prescriptive) statements, Dewey argued that the distinction delineated the degree to which someone regarded “some desires and interests as shortsighted, ‘blind,’ and others, in contrast, as enlightened, farsighted” (TV, LW13: 214). There is no intuitive way to identify *is* or *ought*; what one can or must do depends on what is worse or better, shortsighted or farsighted; since these will only occur within some specific, problematic situation, they can only be determined by intelligent inquiry using, as partial guides, the implications of what is already considered valuable.⁶

⁶Dewey writes, “In short, a truly moral (or right) act is one which is intelligent in an emphatic and peculiar sense; it is a reasonable act. It is not merely one which is thought of, and thought of as good, at the moment of action, but one which will continue to be thought of as ‘good’ in the most alert and persistent reflection” (E, MW5: 278–79).

1.5 Growth

While Dewey rejected philosophical prescriptions of goals, ends, or values, Dewey did have strong convictions; after all, he took moral stands and political stands throughout his life, sometimes exposing himself to serious personal and professional risk. What did Dewey believe in, after all? How can it be summed up without contradiction? If pressed, then, for some culminating mark of the moral, Dewey would point to *growth*. The worth of a person's character or action must be assessed *not* by reference to static outcomes but to whether the *process* exhibits growth.⁷

Many find this answer unsatisfyingly relativistic or subjectivistic. Dewey cannot respond to that complaint by offering, instead something specific, definitional, and ultimate. Again, the reason is that those sorts of answers ignore perspective, ignore experience of the ongoing process, ignore the radically novel nature of situations, and ultimately shut inquiry down. These are, so to speak, fundamental tenets of pragmatism, and they cannot be relinquished.

2. John Dewey's Political Philosophy

Dewey's political philosophy is continuous with his views on psychology, education, and ethics. Individuals subsist in and through their social environment; through experience, they develop the critical ability to hypothesize, experiment, and test new courses of action. Dewey's instrumentalism sees concepts (and theories) employed in every field of inquiry as fallible tools or instruments, capable of reconstruction. Thus, he rejected the tendency of traditional political theories to start from un-empirical, *a priori* assumptions (e.g. about human nature, historical progress, etc.) and to end with monocausal, often ul-

⁷In morals, Dewey writes, "The end is...the active process of transforming the existent situation. Not perfection as a final goal, but the ever-enduring process of perfecting, maturing, refining is the aim in living. Honesty, industry, temperance, justice, like health, wealth and learning, are not goods to be possessed as they would be if they expressed fixed ends to be attained. They are directions of change in the quality of experience. Growth itself is the only moral "end" (*Reconstruction in Philosophy*, MW12: 181).

timate, explanations. Important terms or concepts must be traced back to their function in *particular* circumstances in order to understand their meaning in any present inquiry.

Because the meaning of ethics' central norms and rules depends upon their expression and implementation by social institutions (especially economic, governmental, legal, educational, and journalistic), Dewey strove to reconstruct political theory's core concepts—individual, freedom, right, community, public, state, and democracy—along naturalist and experimentalist lines. In addition to a number of articles (for both academic and public audiences), Dewey's political analyses can be found in books such as *The Public and Its Problems* (1927, LW2), *Individualism, Old and New* (1930, LW5), *Liberalism and Social Action* (1935, LW11), and *Freedom and Culture* (1939, LW13). Because it emphasizes the profound connections between education, society, and democratic habits, Dewey's *Democracy and Education* (1916, DE, MW9) deserves study as a “political” work, as well.

Motivation to write political theory also came from the times in which Dewey lived. Enormous changes took place during Dewey's lifetime—population growth, the rise of industrial, scientific, technological, and educational institutions, the American Civil War and two world wars, and a global economic depression. Such changes strained against liberal theory's core assumptions; to remain useful for practice, Dewey believed those assumptions required critique and reconstruction. “The frontier is moral, not physical” (“Creative Democracy,” LW14: 225). The overarching concept for America and much of the west was “democracy,” and Dewey believed that general expectations needed to be changed; in particular, people needed to expect, more consciously, of democracy's inherent need to be continually renewed.

By 1930, Dewey was also inspired by his sense of the profound crisis engulfing modern persons, the “lost individual” of his famous chapter in *Individualism*. (ION, LW5: 66–76) A number of impingements—mass production and consumption, the hegemony of business institutions, exponential increases of information produced by journalism, e.g.—were speeding up the pace of life,

fomenting economic insecurity, and undermining “the loyalties which once held individuals, which gave them support, direction and unity of outlook on life” (*ION*, LW5: 66). Writing just after the Great Depression, Dewey diagnosed these corrosive conditions as “an acute maladjustment between individuals and [their] social conditions.” “Where fears abound,” he wrote, “courageous and robust individuality is undermined” (*ION*, LW5: 68, 66–67).

2.1 Liberalism

Central to Dewey’s political philosophy is his critique of classical liberalism and his proposals for its renewal. While early versions of liberalism (e.g. Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Immanuel Kant, J.S. Mill) vary in many ways, they all start from a definite, theoretical, conception of human nature as individual and rational. While individuals do associate, associations are ad-hoc to what traditional liberals took as fundamental—needs, interests, desires, capacities—for human flourishing. Within this “atomic” individualism, agents were *natural* egoists, bent upon maximizing individual standing. Accordingly, liberal theory’s values, problems, and methods were designed to address problems as encountered by this model of political agency. Because liberal theorists differed over the *exact* nature of rationality, some stressed the import of individual freedom from coercion and autonomy, while others emphasized pursuit of fulfillment or self-interest. Whatever their specific recipe, all agreed that the fundamental prescription for political institutions was to respect individuals’ dignity by allowing each the maximum freedom from interference from others. In brief, humans are by nature free individuals and it is institutional constraint (upon speech, property, contract, commerce, travel, worship, education, etc.) which requires justification.

Dewey was skeptical that classical liberalism (which he called “delusive” and “degenerate”) succeeded in securing the values for which it supposedly stood. Early America’s distrust of government power, perhaps serviceable once, had inculcated too deep a suspicion of government (as “the chief enemy of liberty”) and had over-identified freedom’s preservation with the individual’s

“jealous fear of and opposition to any and every extension of governmental action” (“Freedom,” LW11: 247, 248). However, Dewey argued, this opposition to government had backfired on liberalism, because merely arguing for lack of restraint had the effect of elevating the “wants and endeavors of private individuals seeking personal gain to the place of supreme authority in social life” (“Authority and Social Change,” LW11: 136). Thus, liberalism, “in the very act of asserting that it stood completely and loyally for the principle of individual freedom, was really engaged in justifying the activities of a new form of concentrated [economic power, which]...has consistently and persistently denied effective freedom to the economically underpowered and underprivileged” (“Authority,” LW11: 136). The remedy requires that the earlier attitude of wariness toward government be relinquished so that more effective forms of governance could *truly* liberate individuals.⁸

To survive, liberalism had to become flexible enough as a theory to address social change; this meant rejecting an ahistorical starting point, shelving tired metaphysical disputes about human nature, and investing newly available energies in *hypothetical* and *empirical* inquiries about presently experienced problems. A truly renascent liberalism would become experimental and humane. (“A Liberal Speaks Out for Liberalism,” LW11: 287) It would not be aligned with any particular political agenda, but rather with intelligent method. Dewey referred to this as “the mediating function” of liberalism, the attempt of direct social action to effect “a working connection between old habits, customs, institutions, beliefs, and new conditions” (*LSA*, LW11: 37). Intelligent method was nothing mysterious; as we have seen elsewhere, it consists in collaborative inquiry (observation, discussion, hypothesis, imagination, testing), and could, accordingly, draw upon extant scientific knowledge and specific method as needed.

⁸Dewey writes, “Social changes that are revolutionary in effect are in process in every phase of life. Transformations in the family, the church, the school, in science and art, in economic and political relations, are occurring so swiftly that imagination is baffled in attempt to lay hold of them....[Such change] has to be so controlled that it will move to some end in accordance with the principles of life, since life itself is development. Liberalism is committed to an end that is at once enduring and flexible: the liberation of individuals so that realization of their capacities may be the law of their life” (*LSA*, LW11: 41).

2.2 Individualism

The notion of the individual also changes in Dewey's nascent liberalism. Individuals are not ontologically prior to social groups but exist *in and through* transactions with them. "Assured and integrated individuality is the product of definite social relationships and publicly acknowledged functions" (*ION*, LW5: 67). While everyone has private thoughts and experiences, these are not proofs against the sociality inherent in individual experience for it is "only in social groups does a person have a chance to develop individuality" ("Individuality in Education," MW15: 176). Nevertheless, Dewey guarded against the absorption of the individual into the larger social collective, which he sees as destructive of individuals-as-such.⁹

2.3 Liberty, freedom, and rights

Dewey's rejection of liberalism's core version of "individual" informed his reconstruction of other central notions such as "liberty," "freedom," and "rights." These terms must be understood instrumentally and empirically; their meanings depend upon their past and intended uses, in concrete situations. (*LSA*, LW11: 35, *E*, MW5: 394) For example, a "right" is no longer a *possession* of individuals, something justifying why individuals deserve to be free from state interference; rather, rights are fundamental powers which are "social in origin and intent," expressed in particular, concrete situations. (*E*, MW5: 394)¹⁰ In a changing world, there can be no final list of *essential* rights (or liberties), nor can they be determined abstractly. Generalizations about what has or what

⁹Against domineering social systems, Dewey writes, "Individuality is inexpugnable because it is a manner of distinctive sensitivity, selection, choice, response and utilization of conditions. For this reason, if for no other, it is impossible to develop integrated individuality by any all-embracing system or program" (*ION*, LW5: 121).

¹⁰Dewey writes, "A right is never a claim to a wholesale, indefinite activity, but to a defined activity; to one carried on, that is, under certain conditions....The individual is free; yes, that is his right. But he is free to act only according to certain regular and established conditions. That is the obligation imposed upon him. He has a right to use public roads, but he is obliged to turn in a certain way. He has a right to use his property, but he is obliged to pay taxes, to pay debts, not to harm others in its use, and so on" (*E*, MW5: 394).

might work best must be gleaned from present, concrete circumstance, be they economic, political, institutional, personal, cultural, etc.

2.4 Community and Public

Dewey also reconstructed two complementary notions to the individual: “community” and “public.” “Community,” first of all, is prior to “government” or “state” insofar as communities create and preserve human values, while states and government are technologies or implementing those values.¹¹ Political forms, states and governments cohere, ultimately, only if their communities do; their structures survive if they can adapt to serve communal, non-political bonds (*PP*, LW2: 306). Dewey described the features defining a community: they must have an associative or *interactive* nature and hold *shared values*, values which develop from *shared inquiry and action* (*PP*, LW2: 328). Crucial to all of these activities are habits of flexible and imaginative communication.

A second notion related to the social aspect of political life was the “public.” A “public” is a social group which forms to conduct inquiry. (A “community” is not tied to problem-solving, and so their bonds are not contingent on the course of any inquiry.) “Public” has a specific meaning for Dewey; it does not refer indiscriminately to the population at large; rather, a public forms in response to problems which cannot easily be solved and which have consequences that have an impact outside one’s immediate group. That is, conditions necessary for the formation of a public exist when consequences are “indirect, extensive, enduring, and serious” enough to constitute a socially problematic situation exists (*PP*, LW2: 314). The common perception of the problem’s significance spurs collective action, especially the public’s reaching out to elected representatives or other experts. (Whether this was a realistic aspiration or not was a

¹¹This “subordination of the state to the [free and self-governing] community” is, Dewey says, the “great contribution of American life to the world’s history” (“James Marsh and American Philosophy,” LW5: 193).

point of contention between Dewey critics such as Walter Lippmann.)¹² Finally, a dialogue is instituted which must remain responsive to this public's final control.

There can be many "publics." For example, a public might be neighbors concerned about impending commercial developments; factory workers worried about new technologies; students anticipating steep increases in tuition. All such publics, small or large, exist contingently, and no two publics will be exactly alike. Finally, publics can be "self-conscious" or "inchoate." The former is composed of citizens who understand that part of their identity *as* citizens is to engage with others in inquiry about common problems. They are educated with all the habits of inquiry mentioned previously. The "inchoate" public was what Dewey saw, increasingly, around him. They lacked the critical education, time, and attention necessary to engage in inquiries about their own problems.¹³ And too many educated professionals (e.g. in journalism, business, advertising, etc.) had little interest in changing the status quo of the inchoate public.

¹²The degree to which citizens could have a direct role in their own governance was a major point of contention between Dewey and critics. Walter Lippmann, for example, argued against Dewey's call for a self-conscious public as unrealistic. In Lippmann's view, people are too busy, distracted, uneducated, immoral, or apathetic to conduct the vigorous inquiries Dewey envisaged. Democracy was much better off, Lippmann argued, in the hands of disinterested experts charged with making decisions for the public, with elections from time to time to throw out any bums. See Lippmann's *Public Opinion* (Lippmann, 1922) and *The Phantom Public* (Lippmann, 1925). For his part, Dewey never gave up his conviction that it was immoral to relinquish the care of the public's interests in this way; questions regarding which values to prioritize must remain with the public.

¹³"The members of an inchoate public have too many ways of enjoyment, as well as of work, to give much thought to organization into an effective public...At present, many consequences are felt rather than perceived; they are suffered, but they cannot be said to be known, for they are not...referred to their origins. It goes...without saying that agencies are not established which canalize the streams of social action and thereby regulate them. Hence the publics are amorphous and unarticulated." (*PP*, LW2: 321, 317)

2.5 Democracy

Democracy was central to Dewey's philosophical thought from the 1880's through the 1950's. While there is not space here to do the concept full justice, several ideas should be mentioned. First, Dewey sought to correct what might be called the "narrow" sense of democracy, the notion that democracy consists in certain logistics or political machinery—universal suffrage, recurring elections, political parties, trial by peers, etc. Such mechanisms, by themselves, do not uncover what is morally and philosophically important about democracy. For Dewey, "A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience" (*DE*, MW9: 93). It is an idea that is "wider and fuller... than can be exemplified in the state even at its best. To be realized it must affect all modes of human association, the family, the school, industry, religion" (*PP*, LW2: 325).

What did Dewey mean by these sweeping statements? If one considers that the problem of self-governance is ultimately one of publics continually engaging in inquiry, it becomes easier to why all the major institutions of society are ingredient to democracy. Not only must children be trained with the abilities (emotional and rational) to inquire, but there must be, shall we say, a scientific ethos reinforced and expected in citizens approach to disagreements and problems. Simply leaving other people alone is not enough, as it does not create the bonds or the habits of communication necessary to figure out new, shared problems or negotiate differences about values in conflict. Participation is essential to democracy because only this way can individuals and groups transcend their provincial views and achieve a more "total attitude," one which offers a wider and more sympathetic standpoint. (*DE*, MW9: 336)

Democracy, then, requires a lot. It requires, reconceiving the meaning of individuals, communities, and publics—and measuring existing institutions' capacity to provide the conditions necessary for flourishing. Most of all, perhaps, it requires faith—faith that experience and not some external authority is a sufficient resource for our aims, methods, and values. Dewey wrote,

Democracy is the faith that the process of experience is more important than any special result attained, so that special results achieved are of ultimate value only as they are used to enrich and order the ongoing process. Since the process of experience is capable of being educative, faith in democracy is all one with faith in experience and education. All ends and values that are cut off from the ongoing process become arrests, fixations. They strive to fixate what has been gained instead of using it to open the road and point the way to new and better experiences. (“Creative Democracy,” LW14: 229)

Dewey knew the bar he set for democracy was high. He understood, too, the precarious status of many of the existing democratic government around the world. Still, he thought that by identifying what was epistemically and morally indispensable about democracy he could help citizens better recognize which aspects of their society to strengthen and why.

3. John Dewey’s Philosophy of Art and Aesthetic Experience

Art is the living and concrete proof that man is capable of restoring consciously, and thus on the plane of meaning, the union of sense, need, impulse and action characteristic of the live creature. The intervention of consciousness adds regulation, power of selection, and re-disposition. Thus it varies the arts in ways without end. But its intervention also leads in time to the idea of art as a conscious idea—the greatest intellectual achievement in the history of humanity. (AE, LW10: 31)

3.1 Art and the recovery of aesthetic experience

Dewey began writing about aesthetics from early in his career—on art’s relevance to psychology (1887, *EW2*) and education (1897c, *EW5*), on why the

distinction between “fine” and “practical” art should be rejected (1891, EW3: 310–311), and on Bosanquet (1893, EW4). A more full-fledged theory of aesthetic experience really begins to emerge in *Experience and Nature* (1925, *EN*, LW1) and then, fully, in *Art as Experience* (1934, *AE*, LW10). Art and aesthetics became increasingly germane to what philosophy ought to *do*, as Dewey saw it: namely, render everyday experience more fulfilling, more meaningful.

More specifically, we can identify four basic objectives of Dewey’s aesthetics. First, as aesthetic theory, more strictly, Dewey examined art making and appreciation, the definition of art, interpretation, and criticism. Second, he looked at the moral functions of the arts in presenting, reimagining, and projecting new ideals of identity. Third, he discussed the political functions of art, particularly its uses to manipulate opinion. Finally, his aesthetic theory examines art’s (potential) transformation of experience into something so vivid and integrated that he called it “consummatory” experience. This degree of fulfillment exists, occasionally, for human beings and is life at its fullest. The question becomes, how can more of life be consummatory? Answering that is the main purpose of Dewey’s aesthetics.

The main problem posed and answered in *AE* is this: why has such a large gulf arisen between the arts, artists and ordinary people? How have aesthetic theories, especially as embedded in society’s institutions and habits, worked to “isolate art and its appreciation by placing them in a realm of their own, disconnected from other modes of experiencing”? (*AE*, LW10: 16) By making explicit the continuities which connect art with everyday life, via aesthetic experience, aesthetic theory could facilitate art’s contribution to more widespread occasions for meaningful and happy experiences, while preventing art from being reduced to mere entertainment or “transient pleasurable excitations” (*AE*, LW10: 16).

The strategy, then, of *AE* is to critique traditional aesthetic theory’s main objective—to analyze and define art as a categorically distinct kind of object and value. That objective has typically been pursued from an intellectual and spectatorial point of view; it has produced interminable debate and has con-

tributed, unfortunately, to the isolation of art and aesthetic experience. As *AE* moves past critique to give positive, experiential accounts of art making, appreciation, expression, form, and criticism, the goal is to provide a new theory which helps recover “the continuity of esthetic experience with normal processes of living” (*AE*, LW10: 16).

What is Dewey’s strategy for recovery? As with psychology, education, morality, and other subject matters, Dewey looks to organic sources to understand functions and effects. Art engages our physical, sensory, and psychic abilities, and what we call an “aesthetic experience” is the result of an organism-environment transaction.¹⁴ Aesthetic concepts and fine-grained meanings are rooted, then, in the organism’s rhythmic and ongoing adjustments of sense. This supplies aesthetics with a natural basis and sets the task for a theory of art: explain how aesthetic phenomena (including artworks) are implicit in everyday experience, and how they might be expanded.

Given this organic basis, Dewey advanced a wholesale reconsideration of aesthetic objects and events. He began, in a radically empirical fashion, by examining aesthetic experience. What is experienced in sophisticated works of art that is aesthetic? Where else is such experience found? To find it, one should focus first on experience, “in the raw...in the events and scenes that hold the attentive eye and ear of man, arousing his interest and affording him enjoyment as he looks and listens: the sights that hold the crowd—the fire-engine rushing by; the machines excavating enormous holes in the earth; the human-fly climbing the steeple-side; the men perched high in air on girders, throwing and catching red-hot bolts” (*AE*, LW10: 10–11).

His point was that the patterns of aesthetic experience can be found, at least potentially, in much so-called “ordinary” experience. One implication is that the usual opposition between “aesthetic” and “useful” objects is invalidated,

¹⁴“In a growing life,” Dewey writes, “the recovery [of unison with the environment] is never mere return to a prior state, for it is enriched by the state of disparity and resistance through which it has successfully passed” (*AE*, LW10: 19). These facts, he says, “reach to the roots of the esthetic in experience,” for when life is able to survive and grow, “there is an overcoming of factors of opposition and conflict; there is a transformation of them into differentiated aspects of a higher powered and more significant life” (*AE*, LW10: 20).

and it becomes necessary to question the theories and institutions based upon it. In addition, this claim— that beauty, harmony, and aesthetic experience are not isolated to a special class of objects (or events) but are endemic to much outside that class—explodes the range of the sources of aesthetic experience and art. *AE* describes the details of this expansion.

3.2 *An* or Consummatory experience

Aesthetic experience is not yet the highest form experience can take. At the center of Dewey's aesthetics was his account of aesthetic experience at its zenith: “*an* experience” or “consummatory experience.” In such experience, there is a consciously experienced and deeply meaningful whole or unity, one with a character so unique and self-sufficient that it is marked out as special and separate. The opposite kind of experience he called “anesthetic,” and it is marked by a dispersed, inchoate, or even hum-drum quality.¹⁵

The value of contrasting “*an* experience” with the “anesthetic” is to point out that while both kinds of experiences are present in life, there no predetermined *allotment* of either—we can control the conditions which lead to more aesthetic experience, of which “*an*” or “consummatory” experience is the epitome. But we must understand the various ways each can manifest, and how a great plurality of forms and contexts shape the outcome of experience.¹⁶

¹⁵He contrasted the two by starting with the anesthetic before moving on to “*an* experience.” Dewey writes, “Oftentimes...the experience had is inchoate. Things are experienced but not in such a way that they are composed into an experience. There is distraction and dispersion; what we observe and what we think, what we desire and what we get, are at odds with each other...because of extraneous interruptions or of inner lethargy. In contrast with such experience, we have an experience when the material experienced runs its course to fulfillment. Then and then only is it integrated within and demarcated in the general stream of experience from other experiences. A piece of work is finished in a way that is satisfactory; a problem receives its solution; a game is played through; a situation...is so rounded out that its close is a consummation and not a cessation. Such an experience is a whole and carries with it its own individualizing quality and self-sufficiency. It is an experience...[and in it]...every successive part flows freely, without seam and without unfilled blanks, into what ensues” (*AE*, LW10: 42)

¹⁶“The enemies of the esthetic,” Dewey writes, “are neither the practical nor the intellectual. They are the humdrum; slackness of loose ends; submission to convention in practice and

In sum, we have *an* experience when we undergo a series of events that hang together (unity), exhibit character (possess a theme or pervasive quality), and finish with some drama (consummate not just terminate). *An* experience results from a coordination of doings and undergoings, and may flower in many media (sights, sounds, smells, tastes, textures, symbols, etc.). It should be noted that it is not a foregone element of such experience that it be something we want—Dewey offered the example of a turbulent ship voyage which is nevertheless *an* experience. Still, understanding the structure and qualities of *an* experience sets forth a general ideal which could help attain desirable experiences.

3.3 What is Art?

While the traditional question, “What is art?” was not Dewey’s main emphasis in *AE*, it nonetheless provides an answer. Dewey rejected essentialist answers requiring a property (or properties) common to all artworks, based on his view that art-as-experience is not simply locatable in an object, event, or subject. Rather, “art” denotes a process, the *interaction* of (a) making (artist activity), an (b) event or thing (song, painting, etc.) and (c) an appreciator (listener, viewer, etc.). He distinguished (b) as “art products” (the physical object, e.g.) but says that “the real work of art” is (a)+(b)+(c): “the building up of an integral experience out of the interaction of organic and environmental conditions and energies.” (*AE*, LW10: 70; see also 167, 223) This work, he said, “takes place when a human being cooperates with the product so that the outcome is an experience that is enjoyed because of its liberating and ordered properties” (*AE*, LW10: 218).

3.4 The Nature and Purpose of Criticism

Pragmatist aesthetic criticism cannot offer final, definitive judgments about the meanings of various works or about how to hierarchize their aesthetic value.

intellectual procedure. Rigid abstinence, coerced submission, tightness on one side and dissipation, incoherence and aimless indulgence on the other, are deviations in opposite directions from the unity of an experience” (*AE*, LW10: 47)

Since art is a genuinely interactive process, created and enjoyed by specific people in specific historical circumstances, no final critical theory about art's meaning, nature, and value can be fixed. There are no ultimate, abstract universals or essences available for fixed determinations; as a phenomenon of human communication, art is informed by biological, historical, and cultural factors, and criticism must approach it as such.

How, then, does pragmatic aesthetic criticism operate? By what standards? And, second, what is it supposed to achieve? First, it approaches criticism experimentally. As with other kinds of judgments (logical, moral, etc.), aesthetic judgment looks first to practical experience for subject matter, criteria, and experimental validation of any conclusions. This is a practical repudiation of exclusive reliance on the usual authorities (curators, auctioneers, journal critics, etc.) as determiners of what should be considered aesthetically beautiful or good. The function of art in experience is the overriding measure; this helps foment more open-mindedness toward new forms of art. In the end, the "truth" of criticism's propositions lies in its instrumental ability to enrich the extent and quality of future aesthetic experience—not in correspondence with "the object itself." Critical judgments are corroborated or corrected by the experimental testing of others in their experience.

Second, the purpose of criticism is to help widen and deepen our aesthetic experience. "The function of criticism," Dewey writes, "is the reeducation of perception of works of art; it is an auxiliary in the process, a difficult process, of learning to see and hear....The way to help [someone seeking to understand art] is through the expansion of his own experience by the work of art to which criticism is subsidiary." (*AE*, LW10: 328) The pragmatist critic reeducates by steering students away from "conventional wisdom" toward experimental, active engagements with art. Dewey called such criticism "moral" because it encourages open-mindedness, removes prejudice, and enriches the general capacities for experience.¹⁷

¹⁷"The moral function of art itself," Dewey writes, "is to remove prejudice, do away with the scales that keep the eye from seeing, tear away the veils due to wont and custom, perfect

In brief, then, pragmatic aesthetic criticism has several pedagogical goals: retrain eye and ear, heighten sensitivity to the actual play and presence of artworks' qualities, and elucidate ways an artwork emerges from and responds to the cultural arenas producing it. These goals, too, may be said to characterize Dewey's aesthetic theory overall. He believed that improvements in public understanding and receptivity to art could allow a greater level of sensitivity and creativity when it came to the kinds of experience present in economic, educational, and even religious practices. He writes, "Only imaginative vision elicits the possibilities that are interwoven within the texture of the actual. The first stirrings of dissatisfaction and the first intimations of a better future are always found in works of art" (*AE*, *LW*₁₀: 348). By seeking out more aesthetic experience and denying more of the anesthetic, the present would be less inured to routine and more alive to designing future consummatory experience.

the power to perceive. The critic's office is to further this work, performed by the object of art" (*AE*, *LW*₁₀: 328).

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- [E] Dewey, John and Tufts, James H., 1908, *Ethics*, in MW5.
- [HNC] Dewey, John, 1922, *Human Nature and Conduct*, in MW14.
- [ION] Dewey, John, 1930, *Individualism, Old and New*, in LW5: 41–124.
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