

John Dewey's Theory of  
Art, Experience, and  
Nature

*The Horizons of Feeling*

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State University of New York Press

# Introduction

The last decade has witnessed the gradual but steady revival of interest in the philosophy of John Dewey, whose thought had suffered virtual total eclipse since his death at the age of ninety-three in 1952. The man who was the most actively involved and widely read professional philosopher in the first part of this century in America survives only as a dim memory in the popular mind. He is hazily recalled as an educator (or, worse, as the culprit responsible for the progressive education disaster), while Christian fundamentalists and right-wing demagogues still link his name with those of Darwin and Marx. Until recently, his fate was hardly better in academic circles. I have seen tenured philosophy professors struggle to associate his name with a library cataloguing system or with the opponent defeated by Truman. Aside from the handful of scholars who continued to be engaged by his thought and The Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy's tenacious and revitalizing presence, the revival of interest in Dewey is largely attributable to the sudden appearance of his name in a provocative work by a widely respected thinker within the analytic tradition. Ever since the publication of Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* in 1979, followed three years later by a collection of his essays, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, Dewey's name, along with those of Wittgenstein and Heidegger, has been invoked in the crusade against "foundationalism." These thinkers constitute the anti-essentialist, anti-systematic, anti-Cartesian, anti-speculative triumvirate who have "deconstructed" the absolutist pretensions of "the Tradition." "In our time," Rorty asserts, "Dewey, Wittgenstein, and Heidegger are the great edifying, peripheral thinkers"—"peripheral" because they work from the "margins" of the Tra-

dition in their efforts to dissolve or undercut the authority of the central text of Philosophy, which has been its claim to Truth. "All three make it as difficult as possible to take their thought as expressing views on traditional philosophical problems, or making constructive proposals for philosophy as a cooperative and progressive discipline."<sup>1</sup> They are not thinkers in the traditional sense, but rather types of high-grade intellectual acids to be used for dissolving, not solving, philosophical problems.

All of a sudden, then, we are given a new picture of Dewey as a protodeconstructionist, a quiet, subversive thinker silently eroding the foundations of the ancien régime. This is the sort of popular image destined to be attractive to academics, projected as it is upon the blank screen of wide-spread, fundamental ignorance of his work. In contrast with this rather unconvincing "new look," there have been several recent serious scholarly and philosophical studies of Dewey's thought. These include James Gouinlock's *John Dewey's Philosophy of Value*, Victor Kestenbaum's *The Phenomenological Sense of John Dewey*, Ralph W. Sleeper's *The Necessity of Pragmatism* and Raymond Boisvert's *Dewey's Metaphysics*.<sup>2</sup> In addition, mention should be made of course of the monumental project now nearing completion, the publication of the works of John Dewey by Southern Illinois University Press under the editorship of Jo Ann Boydston. The physical presence of these volumes and their high quality of scholarship and editorial skill alone will revolutionize Dewey research. They have already inaugurated a new era in assessing Dewey's stature as a philosopher. Maverick interpretations as well as glib dismissals of Dewey are becoming less and less possible. Like Homeric warriors battling for the fallen, the struggle over Dewey's corpus has begun in earnest.

This work is meant to enter the fray. Dewey's work is a sprawling vista both in terms of sheer quantity and in the intricacy and subtlety of his thought. Aside from the demand to ingest so much written material, one of the major problems to overcome in treating Dewey as a philosopher is his own style. To read Dewey, someone once said, is like swimming through oatmeal. A better comparison might be that of Heidegger's "woodpaths." There are tremendous views to be had by following Dewey through the circuitous, tangled underbrush of his prose, but they can only be reached by following those paths carefully. Added to the problem of the order of Dewey's presentation is that of his deceptive effort to speak plain English. Here his manner of approach is quite the opposite of someone like Heidegger, who forces the difficulty of his thought upon the reader by a bewildering technical style. Dewey's thought is equally difficult and elusive, I believe,

but this fact is often hidden by Dewey's conscious adoption of terms with an established meaning, both in popular as well as philosophical senses. Dewey, in other words, sought to reconstruct an existing language rather than fabricate a new one. There were serious reasons for this choice, I think, namely, Dewey wanted his thought to reach and affect a widespread audience rather than merely an academic few who were the "elect." Dewey wanted his philosophy to transform the culture itself, and so he attempted to co-opt its language. This is a dangerous game, as he found out. The predictable result was that Dewey's genuinely novel ideas were translated back into the pre-established habits of understanding, where they then either seemed to be patently false or trivial. A prime instance was the term "experience," the very heart and center of Dewey's thought. Ever since Locke, the term had come to mean a subjective event, a constellation of "ideas" lodged inside a "mind" brought about by the operation of certain physical powers upon us. From the start, Dewey's philosophy was opposed to such a theory. "Experience" for him meant a process situated in a natural environment, mediated by a socially shared symbolic system, actively exploring and responding to the ambiguities of the world by seeking to render the most problematic of them determinate. The persistent failure of his critics to adapt themselves to these new meanings had Dewey so frustrated by his eighties, that he toyed with dropping the term "experience" altogether, along with several others. *Experience and Nature*, his major work, was to be retitled *Nature and Culture*.

The primary task of this work, then, is to undertake a systematic thinking-through of Dewey's philosophy. Instead of providing a survey of the numerous topics of his thought, such as his ethics, his theory of inquiry, his views on education, and so on, I propose to investigate what I consider to be the central, guiding thought in his philosophy: the aesthetic dimension of experience. It is the thesis of this book that the best approach to what Dewey means by "experience" is not to be gained by focusing primarily on the theme by which Dewey is generally known, his "instrumentalism," but instead by looking at experience in its most complete, most significant, and most fulfilling mode: experience as art. In short, I claim that when we explore experience which has been shaped into an aesthetically funded process, into "an experience," we will discover Dewey's paradigmatic understanding of experience. And this, in turn, may lead to a more coherent understanding of the rest of Dewey's philosophy. Experience as artistically shaped and aesthetically funded gives us also Dewey's paradigmatic understanding of meaning. Instead of taking

scientific discourse or formal logic as constituting the paradigms of meaning and communication, Dewey explicitly selects art and the aesthetic. This is a radical and relatively ignored theme in treatments of Dewey's philosophy. By focusing on "instrumentalism," Dewey was read as a proto-positivist who sought to reduce meaning to scientific procedure. Seen in this light, not only did Dewey seem to be saying much the same thing as his fellow philosophers in Vienna or Cambridge, but he didn't seem to be saying it half so well. Instead of arguing that philosophy ought to concentrate on the cognitive value of experience, however, Dewey in fact maintained exactly the converse. The primary fallacy of Western philosophy, he states, is "the intellectualist's fallacy" which reads all types of experience as ultimately a form of cognition (EN, 24; LW 1:28-29). To be sure, Dewey does give emphasis to the idea of experimental inquiry when he comes to treat the problem of knowledge. Not only did Dewey locate the project of human knowledge within the wider and richer context of the project of human life, but his treatment of knowledge as a process of learning rather than a body of "facts" points to his understanding of science as an artistic and creative enterprise. In contrast with most philosophies of experience, which begin by focusing on highly constrained, determinate moments of conceptual certainty (whether these be "impressions," "sense data," or intuited "essences"), Dewey's empiricism rejects such thin, watery instances as paradigmatic and looks instead for thick kinds.

Instrumentalism was a tool, an organon, built to serve a far more general theory of experience. If instrumentalism argued for a conception of experience in which experience was intrinsically capable of intelligent transformation, one is still left with the question, transformation to what? To expose the teleological possibilities of experience is not enough; a treatment of ends is also required. The telos of experience is the aesthetic. The aesthetic marks the fulfillment of the possibilities of experience for funded expressiveness and intrinsic value. The aesthetic becomes, then, the ultimate concern for any philosophical understanding. Dewey explicitly states this in *Art as Experience*: "To the aesthetic experience, then, the philosopher must go to understand what experience is. For this reason, . . . the theory of esthetics put forward by a philosopher . . . is a test of the capacity of the system he puts forth to grasp the nature of experience itself. There is no test that so surely reveals the one-sidedness of a philosophy as its treatment of art and esthetic perception" (AE, 274; LW 10:278). Given this, is it an excessive proposal to urge that the test of Dewey's

philosophy to grasp the nature of experience lies in his treatment of art and aesthetic perception?

Unfortunately, Dewey's aesthetics has been subjected to a harsh battery of criticisms which render its connection to the rest of his philosophy suspect. It has been argued that the doctrines of *Art as Experience* rely upon premises more in keeping with idealism than with Dewey's professed naturalistic empiricism.<sup>3</sup> These commitments have made the work internally inconsistent as well as contrary to the spirit of his thought as a whole. Stephen Pepper was the first to raise this objection and he was immediately followed by Benedetto Croce. For this reason I have labelled the criticism "the Pepper-Croce thesis," though it has been taken up and expanded by a number of other critics as well. Dewey, of course, responded to both Pepper and Croce with dismissals which did nothing toward dissuading either critic from his convictions. Thus, before one can securely point to the theory of aesthetic experience as the central idea in Dewey's philosophy, the charges of the Pepper-Croce thesis must be laid to rest.

The problems exposed by the debate take on a twofold character, one with respect to the development of Dewey's ideas and the other with the systematic nature of his mature philosophy. The first is a fairly limited issue. The claim that Dewey's aesthetics relies subversively upon certain idealist assumptions is not altogether implausible when one recalls that Dewey began philosophizing in the Hegelian mode and continued to do so well into his mid-thirties. One can suspect that after Dewey abandoned absolute idealism, he focused on developing his instrumentalism without any further thought about the higher stages of Spirit. As he got around toward systematizing his philosophy in old age, he decided to round it out with an aesthetics (not to mention a philosophy of religion). To do this he had to dredge up from the murky, undisturbed depths of his memory various ideas on art and the aesthetic. The problem was that "instrumentalism" was a philosophy of experimental inquiry and really had little to do with the topic of art. And so we are presented with the case of a philosopher of Dewey's acumen badly bungling when it came time for him to produce an aesthetics.

This is a possibility, of course, though not a very desirable one for anyone wishing to preserve Dewey's stature as a philosopher. It becomes incumbent, at least, to explore Dewey's early idealism for any telltale similarities it may reveal with his mature philosophy, especially in the area of aesthetics. By examining the articles of the 1880s and his first systematic work, the *Psychology* of 1887, a number of striking

comparisons do come to light, in fact. These comparisons coincide, furthermore, with the problematic topics discovered in *Art as Experience*. Initially, it would seem that the Pepper-Croce thesis is vindicated. A more important finding also comes to light. From the start, Dewey was intensely concerned to develop a philosophy which would treat experience in all its richness, complexity, and ambiguity without forcing it into some sort of reductionistic schema. This is what attracted Dewey to idealism in the first place and never allowed him to be tempted with the dreary, mercantile scientism of British empiricism or the constricting, dogmatic moralism of Scottish realism. Dewey commenced his philosophical life as a radical Hegelian, and as his Hegelianism became more radical it began to butt up against the fundamental commitments of idealism. It was in the name of his original concern for articulating a theory of experience that Dewey left the Hegelian fold and struck out on his own. From this perspective, it should not surprise us to find certain similarities between the early idealist writings and the key ideas of *Art as Experience*. Indeed, the fact that these similarities exist argues for the importance of this book in interpreting Dewey's mature thought, for it would be there that Dewey would, as he said, have presented his answer to his original demand for a theory that could treat experience as fully as possible. This, at any rate, is my proposal. The search for an adequate aesthetics of experience is what drives the development of Dewey's philosophy.

This does not resolve the problem of consistency, of course. The Pepper-Croce thesis exposes a more wide-ranging problem: is Dewey's mature philosophy as a whole troubled with the problems of a double allegiance to idealism and naturalism? Did Dewey, in other words, fail to work out the truly conflicting nature of his philosophical commitments? It is one thing to argue that *Art as Experience* is inconsistent with the masterpiece of his later thought, *Experience and Nature*, but what if the same riddling inconsistencies are found in the latter work as well? This prospect offers to view a fault-line of gigantic proportions running through Dewey's most significant philosophical achievements. There is a wide-ranging critical literature suggesting just this, extending from 1905 to, once again, Richard Rorty.<sup>4</sup> The critics, coming from a number of philosophical positions, wish to save whatever part of Dewey's thought they regard as valuable, but to remove the part which seems an undesirable dead weight, or even a malignant growth. This part is what is regarded as responsible for Dewey's desire to do metaphysics. Generally he lived an upright philosophical life, but then the old Adam (or old Hegel) would grab

hold of him and he would go off on a speculative tear. It is necessary, therefore, to come to grips with what is probably unhappily called Dewey's "metaphysics of experience."<sup>5</sup> This area of his thought involves a number of issues, such as the relation of experience to nature, the status of knowledge, and the proposed aims and methods of metaphysics.

Here, once again, I believe that the importance of Dewey's theory of aesthetic experience comes to the fore. For those who believe that "experience" must refer to some sort of immediate perceptual event causally arising from nature or for those who hold that the primary relation of experience to nature is determined in terms of knowledge, Dewey's attempt to construct a metaphysics must appear to be incomprehensible and unnecessary. But when experience is understood from the Deweyan standpoint, as an involved, meaningful, and shared response to the world and to each other, the possibility of such a project not only is recognized but is seen to be necessary. To keep experience from being taken in a subjective or reductionistic manner, one requires a theory which will maintain its situational and transactional features in full view. To keep experience from being treated always as a form of cognition (or even primarily as a form of cognition), one needs to articulate a position where the larger issues of human meaning and value contextualize the pursuit of knowledge. Knowledge is only possible because we can respond to the world as a dramatically enacted project in which meanings and values can be won, lost, and shared. The fundamental "impulsion" (as Dewey calls it) of human beings is to engage the world with a heightened sense of meaning and the realization of value. This is precisely what is illuminated in aesthetic experience.

Dewey's metaphysics articulates a philosophical theory which attempts to give a comprehensive, critical view of the human project of making sense. One problem with the traditional view of reality is that it has sought to suppress the elements of chance, indeterminacy, and potentiality. While I argue that in many ways Dewey relies on an Aristotelian form of naturalism, it is one which does not share Aristotle's bias against the potential or his prejudice in favor of fixed forms. With the restoration of the status of the potential, Dewey presents us with a view of reality as a developing continuity rather than as some sort of self-same identity. The "principle of continuity," in other words, is the key to Dewey's metaphysics. It is also the underlying idea in Dewey's conception of "an experience" in his aesthetics. By connecting potentiality with naturalism, Dewey successfully allowed for the realization of human meanings, values, and ideals as genuine

possibilities of nature. In this manner he avoids a reductionistic naturalism by espousing an emergentism. In Dewey's metaphysics, as in Whitehead's or Heidegger's, the concept of time as a teleologically determined structure is essential. Once again, *an* experience reveals the temporality as well as the continuity of experience.

Dewey's metaphysics establishes the context for his understanding of meaning as a transactional event mediated by symbolic communication. Although experience arises from the interaction of the organism with its environment, for human beings it is primarily an event within a social or cultural context, a "lifeworld." The world of human activity constitutes the matrix within which any symbol system must function. The body provides the primary structures for meaning in its capacity for organized action. Dewey severely criticizes the sort of behaviorism which sees the live body as a passive or reactive stimulus-response mechanism. The body is better regarded as a center of life activity, as a developer of experience, an explorer of its world. It is the central instrument in organizing the world into an integrated order through its own activity. As William James said, "The body is the storm centre, the origin of co-ordinates, the constant place of stress in all that experience-train."<sup>6</sup> The primary demand is for experience to grow in a dynamic but coherent way. There is a general impulsion for wholeness in all activity, according to Dewey, and art and aesthetic experience are but refined developments of this essential desire to make sense of the world. In this manner, the live body connects the creature with its environment actively and thereby provides for the very possibility of meaning.

Because human beings are social, they require a shared world which allows for common ends to be articulated and for cooperative activity to be regulated so that they may be attained. Symbolic interaction arises from this need. Meaning, in other words, originates in the act of communication. Communication is a process involving members as participants; the members, moreover, understand themselves as conjoint participants and use that understanding as part of the regulative meaning of the situation. Individuals become aware of their individuality only through a social context and the ability to regard themselves from the social perspective. The theory of meaning which emerges from such a view is far removed from that which attempts to see meaning in purely formal terms, as a timeless, impersonal structure. Meaning is rather the very struggle to make the world coherent; it is the on-going process of trying to make sense. This is a communally shared task or project. In such a theory, meaning includes the ambiguous as well as the clear, the indeterminate as well as

the determinate. The activity of communication is a constant process of interaction, adjustment, determination, and development. Instead of seeking a paradigm of meaning in fixed categorial structures or in logical or syntactic laws, Dewey looks toward the narrative, dramatic, and expressive modes of communication. Meaning inhabits the dramatic universes of human action and interpretation which are called "culture." The body is born into a social or cultural environment as much as an organic environment. From the moment of birth, the body is trained to become a medium for expressive activity; the body becomes cultured or civilized by the education of its talents. As the body becomes "encultured," to coin a term, so culture becomes embodied.

Because the body becomes the event of meaning, consciousness must be understood functionally within this transactional process. It is a field-event in which the transformations of meaning are possessed and directed. Consciousness appropriates meaning in a variety of ways. As a field-event, it is characterized by an immediate focus of intensive concern, a proximate sense of context, and a tacitly felt horizon which provides the ultimate determining ground of meaning. This horizontal aspect is largely ignored in ordinary experience, but it is made manifest in those moments which are peculiarly aesthetic. In this manner, then, art and the aesthetic provide a unique and central instance of meaning for Dewey's philosophy. The aesthetic marks the realization of the impulsion for wholeness rendered conscious through the expressiveness of a medium transformed through activity.

Thus, when one comes to treat aesthetic experience for Dewey, it is hardly an issue of peripheral concern, illuminating as it does the central themes of his philosophy of experience. The tendency of philosophy to displace aesthetics for epistemology reflects the dualistic habits of a culture which displaces art from life. Dewey is forced to search for the aesthetic initially by conscientiously ignoring works of fine art. The origin of art is not to be found in the desire to become housed in a museum. Instead, art originates when life becomes fulfilled in moments of intelligently heightened vitality. When the potentialities of experience are intentionally utilized toward such a complete end, the sense of its own meaning becomes intrinsically present as a consummation of the event. This is what Dewey calls "*an* experience." In *an* experience, we genuinely come to inhabit the world; we dwell within the world and appropriate it in its meaning. The human impulsion for meaning and value is manifestly fulfilled.

Several dimensions of *an* experience can be noted: expression, form, and quality. The artistic-aesthetic event, *an* experience, is a

primary instance of expression for Dewey. To the extent, however, that expression theory of art has come under a good deal of criticism, it is necessary to distinguish its claims and problems from the theory Dewey holds. Dewey likewise has a radical theory of form. Instead of regarding form as the abstractable Platonic skeleton of a work of art, Dewey construes it functionally, as the "working" of the work of art. Form becomes the temporal process through which the "substance" of the work, what the work is ultimately about, shows itself. Not only is form the enactment of the work in individual experience, it is also the *historical* enactment of the work by the culture. The work of art is a social event, and it lives a life within a culture. The immanent, guiding presence of the quality of the experience as a whole turns out to be the most crucial feature of *an* experience, however. Aesthetic quality is the integrating and sense-giving horizon of the work which brings forth the consummatory value of the work. As the realization of the ideal possibilities of experience to embody meaning and value, it reveals at the same time the possibility for experience to be rendered luminous by ideals. Aside from the intrinsic value of aesthetic experience, in other words, art teaches the moral that experience can be transformed toward fulfilling human ends. This has political implications.

Art is by its very nature bound up with the human ability to create ideals which can become controlling forces in culture. Art is social not because it occurs within culture, but because in a very real sense art is culture. It becomes one with the community's ability to realize itself in a significant manner. Culture is the artistic appropriation of the ideal possibilities for human life, the creative endeavor to live with meaning and value. Dewey calls this project "democracy." The democratic community is consciously founded on the recognition of the possibility for the perpetual liberation of life. It is the community which understands itself in terms of the art of conduct. The arts of inquiry, intelligence, and communication are directed toward this end. In doing so, they point to the paramount importance of the ideal of education, which is the means whereby the community brings itself forth into existence. Democracy is not founded on a fixed ideology for Dewey, but on a collective recognition of our Socratic ignorance. The democratic community recognizes the human situation as inherently problematic, something ever to be inquired into, ever sought out, and ever submitted to criticism for reconstruction. In short, it is the community dedicated to life as art. This is the utmost creative task human existence can set for itself, offering as it does the possibility of a genuinely shared, consummatory life. Democratic life realizes itself as

the expression of utmost care for the significant possibilities of human existence. As a form of life, democracy is the progressive liberation of man. This includes the articulation of those horizons of human care which provide the meaning-determining contexts of culture. Democracy is therefore an inherently philosophical mode of life so understood.

At a time when the humanities have faltered and given themselves over to projects of deconstruction or the negation of their own histories, Dewey's philosophy offers an alternative. Between naive optimism and cynical despair there are courage and commitment. These must be based on intelligence and faith as well as on a sense of human limitation, a tragic self-consciousness. I contend that if Dewey has truly succeeded in providing a coherent theory of aesthetic experience he has accomplished a good deal more than to allow room for an academic "conversation," as Rorty would have it. Instead of deconstruction, Dewey's is a philosophy of reconstruction. He exhibits the possibility of a meaningful response to the world which refuses to gloss over ambiguities, conflicts, or problematic depths; nor does it hold itself hubristically above self-interrogation. In *The American Scholar*, Emerson said, "The office of the scholar is to cheer, to raise, and to guide men by showing them the facts amid appearances." The central fact by which Dewey sought to offer cheer was that of art as experience.