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Dewey and the Empirical Unity of Opposites

I

This paper concentrates on a single paragraph in John Dewey's *Experience and Nature,* one that introduces an important and vital principle for the development of his thought. Although this principle is well known to Dewey scholars, its full significance has not always been adequately appreciated. In writing this paper I hope to establish this theme as crucial to a proper understanding of Dewey's empirically grounded naturalistic metaphysics.

II

The paragraph in question occurs in the context of Dewey's rebuttal of those philosophies intent on "denying to the universe the character of contingency. . ."[2] These philosophies "range from spirtualism to materialism, from absolutism to relativistic phenomenalism, from transcendentalism to positivism, from rationalism to sensationalism, from idealism to realism, from subjectivism to bold objectivism, from Platonic realism to nominalism" (EN 46). A most diverse and exhaustive list of philosophies, yet for Dewey their differences amount to little more than "family quarrels." Dewey writes:

> As against this common identification of reality with what is sure, regular and finished, experience in unsophisticated forms gives evidence of a different world and points to a different metaphysics. We live in a world which is an impressive and irresistible mixture of sufficiencies, tight completenesses, order, recurrences which make possible prediction and control, and singularities, ambiguities, uncertain possibilities, processes going on to consequences as yet indeterminate. They are mixed not mechanically but vitally like the wheat and tares of the parable. We may recognize them separately but we cannot divide

> them, for unlike wheat and tares they grow from the same root. Qualities have defects as necessary conditions of their excellencies; the instrumentalities of truth are the causes of error; change gives meaning to permanence and recurrence makes novelty possible. A world that was wholly risky would be a world in which adventure is impossible, and only a living world can include death. Such facts have been celebrated by thinkers like Heracleitus and Laotze; they have been greeted by theologians as furnishing occasions for exercise of divine grace; they have been elaborately formulated by various schools under a principle of relativity, so defined as to become itself final and absolute. They have rarely been frankly recognized as fundamentally significant for the formation of a naturalistic metaphysics. (EN 47)

Dewey goes on to remark that "Aristotle perhaps came the nearest to a start in that direction;" yet although "Aristotle acknowledges contingency . . . he never surrenders his bias in favor of the fixed, certain and finished" (EN 47). More of the relation of Dewey to Aristotle anon. Exactly what is it in the preceding passage that is of such fundamental significance to naturalistic metaphysics? Clearly it is not merely "a principle of relativity."[3] Certainly it is not that it provides an occasion for the exercise of divine grace. The reference to Heracleitus and Laotze makes the correct answer strikingly clear. The theme that Dewey is introducing here as so significant to his metaphysics is *the inherent unity of opposites.*

Let us pause briefly, before continuing, to place the theme of the unity of opposites in historical perspective. A thumbnail sketch will have to suffice. I ignore, for the sake of brevity, Laotze and the Eastern tradition. In the West it was indeed Heracleitus of Ephesus who introduced this motif into western culture. Heracleitus, Fragment B50 may be translated "Listening not to me but to the logos it is wise to agree that all things are one." In antiquity it was the neo-Platonists who made the most use of this motif. The theme was suppressed in the scholastic middle ages to resurface only in the early fifteenth century

in Nicholas of Cusa's doctrine of the "coincidentia oppositorum." The dialectical philosophy of Hegel gave the theme a fresh new direction. In America the neo-Platonic tradition emerged amongst the New England transcendentalists, while neo-Hegelianism flourished in the West, most notably in St. Louis. Eventually both traditions converged in the so-called "Concord School" where many prominent American philosophers of the day delivered summer lectures between the years 1879 and 1887. Among the founders of this school was W. T. Harris, former superintendent of schools in St. Louis, who, with the help of the other St. Louis Hegelians, founded *Journal of Speculative Philosophy,* for many years the only distinctively philosophical publication in the United States. It was Harris who first published Dewey in his journal and whose encouragement was instrumental in Dewey's decision to continue his philosophical studies at Johns Hopkins. Also included amongst the lecturers at the Concord School was George Sylvester Morris, Dewey's friend and teacher. It was Morris who encouraged Dewey's interest in neo-Hegelianism during his graduate years at Johns Hopkins.

III

The above reference to the unity of opposites is far from an isolated passage. Other unified opposites mentioned elsewhere in *Experience and Nature* include "a union of necessity and freedom, a harmony of the many and one, a reconciliation of sensuous and ideal;" as well as "the intersection in nature of individual and generic; of chance and law, . . . of instrumental and final" (EN 269-70 and 293). All of these opposites are drawn together and united in experience. The fabric of experience is woven out of the warp of the unique, individual, indeterminate, uncertain, incomplete, chaotic, alterable, potential, and imperfect, as well as the woof of the repeating, universal, determinate, certain, complete, ordered, fixed, and perfect.

For Dewey, philosophy originates in the existential unity of these opposites: "We are here concerned with the fact that it is the intricate mixture of the stable and the precarious, the fixed and the unpredictably novel, the assured and the uncertain, in existence which sets mankind upon that love of wisdom which forms philosophy" (EN 55).

The original sin of metaphysics lay in forsaking its origins. Dewey continues, "Yet too commonly, although in a great variety of technical modes, the result of the [philosophical] search is converted into a metaphysics which denies or conceals from acknowledgement the very characters of existence which initiated it, and which gives significance to its conclusions" (EN 55). Further, "the form assumed by the denial is, most frequently, that striking division into a superior true realm of being and lower illusory, insignificant or phenomenal realm. . ."[5] (EN 55).

The temptations that led to the sin of ignoring "the ineradicable union in nature of the relatively stable and relatively contingent;" are characteristically human and reveal a profound unity of opposites that cuts to the moral and metaphysical quick, "We long, amid a troubled world, for perfect being. We forget that what gives meaning to the notion of perfection is the events that create longing, and that, apart from them, a 'perfect' world would mean just an unchanging brute existential thing" (EN 58).

The initial diablerie that separated Being from becoming, to the detriment of the latter, evolved in the modern period into the separation of subject and object. The result has been a tendency to pursue epistemology rather than metaphysics as first philosophy. Little has changed, in Dewey's opinion, since the Classical and Medieval period except that the ancient bifurcations have been supplemented by a plethora of even more alienating and equally untenable dualisms.[5] The most vicious of these bifurcations is the separation of mind and matter, the consequence of which has been to all but eradicate human purpose from the natural realm. Before considering how Dewey proposed to reconcile thought and action within experience we must first consider more precisely just what Dewey took experience to be.

IV

"Mundane" is the term philosophers pejoratively use to describe "coarse everyday experience" (EN 366). Such "vital experience is Protean; a thing of moods and tenses" (EN 367). To this experience Dewey assigns the term "Existential." This is the only soil of exper-

ience fertile enough to cultivate the unity of opposites. Opposites are united in existential experience "not as marbles are in a box but as events are in history, in a moving, growing never finished process" (EN 224).

Existential experience is a "gift;" one that "can *only be* and be *had*," it is an immediate occasion of either joy or sorrow (EN 378). Only later may it "be pointed to in reflection" (EN 378). The existential in one sense is prelogical, even pre-epistemological: "For it indicates that *being* and *having* things in ways other than knowing them, in ways never identical with knowing them, exist, and are preconditions of reflection and knowledge" (EN 377).

Knowledge too is "immediately present" in existential experience. Moreover, when it is present under these circumstances it is invulnerable to the usual sceptical criticisms: "While scepticism may be in place at any time about any specific intellectual belief and conclusion, in order to keep us on the alert, to keep us inquiring and curious, scepticism as to things we *have* and *are* is impossible" (EN 379). Sceptical epoche is beyond the radius of all but the most radical and methodological of doubts. Ultimately existence forces even these doubts aside for it presents us with experiences that "*have* to be dealt with" if we are to maintain our own continued existence.[6] Radical scepticism is peculiar to philosophers, but even the best of them cannot maintain the sceptical attitude unrelentingly. Dewey quips, "No wonder Hume's doubts vanished when he played backgammon and made merry with his friends. Not that many of his doubts of doctrines were not suitable, but that in his companionships he was involved in another world from that to which he confined his philosophizing" (EN 374).

Beyond the prelogical and those objects of immediate knowledge, existential experience also presents occasions for obtaining mediate knowledge; "There are two dimensions of experienced things; one that of having them, and the other that of knowing about them so that we can again have them in more meaningful and secure ways . . . . Hence there *is* a problem of knowledge; namely, the problem of how to find out what it is needful to find out about these things in order to secure, rectify and avoid being and having them" (EN 379). On

this view there are two modes of knowing inextricably united in experience; their separation can only be effected by deliberately ignoring one or the other.

Existential experience is thoroughly temporal: "The denotations that constitute experience point to history" wherein "the *taking* of some objects as final is itself an episode in history" (EN 384 and 385). If the final is an episode in history, then indeterminate events are themselves the transitions: "Anything denoted is found to have temporal quality and reference; it has movement from and towards *within* it; it is marked by waxings and wanings" (EN 385). History for Dewey is not unlike a Bach Fugue; a contrapuntal balance between final and consummatory objects and transitive and effective events, with more than a few discordant notes.

The most remarkable quality of existential experience is its infinite semantic density, "its potential meanings are endless" (EN 241). On this view, "The same existential events are capable of an infinite number of meanings" (EN 241). Yet all of these meanings merely express different perspectives on "the one world that is."[7]

Quite justifiably the proper attitude toward the existential is that of respect: "Respect for experience is respect for its possibilities in thought and knowledge as well as an enforced attention to its joys and sorrow" (EN 392).

The unity of existential experience divides, *in thought only,* into two distinguishable aspects – aesthetic or absolute experience and artistic or finite experience. It is the reification of what was originally only a methodological distinction that brings about the metaphysical error mentioned earlier.

Aesthetic or absolute experience "manifests objects which are final" (EN 70). These *objects* are completely and totally determined; they are final and "consummatory" ends in themselves. Such static objects are fully actualized and for this reason are beyond the scope of human purposes and control. If anything, absolute experience influences and controls human agency and in general "sets limits to change" (EN 80).

Cognitively, absolute experience is either altogether prelogical or yields immediate knowledge which subsequently may become "de-

tached objects of contemplation" (EN 325). These are the objects that metaphysicians and epistemologists are wont to refer to as eternal essences, Being, ideal forms, or the truly real. Ultimately aesthetic objects are "the rational apprehended by reason" (EN 78).

In its immediacy absolute experience is gratuitous; it is passively had and unearned. "In its own integrity an immediate thing just exists as it exists; it stays or passes; it is enjoyed or suffered" (EN 115-116). Absolute experience is *not* subjective: "When we speak of esthetic experience we do not mean something private and psychical" (EN 381). And yet, "Immediacy of existence is ineffable;" but, Dewey continues, "there is nothing mystical about such ineffability; it expresses the fact that of direct existence it is futile to say anything to one's self and impossible to say anything to another" (EN 74).

Finite or artistic experience, by contrast, is comprised of *events* that are "problematic, undecided, still going on and as yet unfinished, and indeterminate in nature. . ." (EN 262). Finite experience "is always a matter for subsequent events to determine, or assign character to" (EN 262). Artistic experience is contingent pure potentiality, the emergent in history, as such it is within the grasp of human influence and control and amenable to human purposes, art and artifice. So much so that Dewey concludes that "the history of human experience is a history of the development of arts" (EN 290).

Cognitively, finite experience yields only mediate knowledge; it provides an occasion for the realization of "possibilities hitherto unrealized" (EN 270). These possibilities are actualized only through purposeful and directed effort – artistic production. This is the act of creation, and although "'Creation' may be asserted vaguely and mystically," it is nonetheless the case that "it denotes something genuine and indispensable in art" (EN 270). Creation and creativity here are to be taken as generally as possible.

If creativity is to be taken broadly, so too is its application. Dewey argues convincingly that not only is there no distinction between the fine and practical arts in regard to their degree of creativity, but more generally there is no distinction at all between practical and theoretical activity: "Thinking is pre-eminently an art; knowledge and propositions which are the products of thinking, are works of art, as much so

as statuary and symphonies" (EN 283). The aesthetic product of thinking is the *final* conclusion. Dewey further reminds us that "Science is an art also," and elsewhere declares that "the only distinction worth drawing is not between practice and theory, but between those modes of practice that are not intelligent . . . and those that are. . ." (EN 269).

What is produced as a consequence of artistic activity is an aesthetic object, "an enjoyed or suffered arrest of the flux of events" (EN 278). Artistic activity is the means to aesthetic ends. Even this congenial distinction is chimerical. Why? Because "a genuinely esthetic object is not exclusively consummatory but is causally productive as well" (EN 274).

The distinction between the aesthetic and artistic is arbitrary and can only be maintained *de dicto* never *de re*. In the reification of this distinction "Nothing is gained – except the delights of a dialectic problem" (EN 56). Experience presents us with an "ineradicable union in nature of the relatively stable and the relatively contingent" (EN 56). The most profound sense of this union is the coincidence in history of beginnings and ends, "Art in being, the active productive process, may thus be defined as an esthetic perception together with an *operative* perception of the efficiences of the esthetic object" (EN 281). Earned ends are actualities that may be used as "tools" to promote further contingencies to actualization. It is this characteristic that allows us to recognize genuinely profound art. "The 'eternal' quality of great art is its renewed instrumentality for further consummatory experience" (EN 274).

Dewey reconciles opposites by drawing them together in that unity in diversity characteristic of experience:

> For wherever there is art the contingent and ongoing no longer work at cross purposes with the formal and recurrent but commingle in harmony. And the distinguishing feature of conscious experience, of what for short is often called 'consciousness,' is that in it the instrumental and the final, meanings that are signs and clews and meanings that are immediately possessed, suffered and enjoyed, come together in one. (EN 269)

Having uncovered the empirical unity of opposites as a central theme in Dewey's thought, it still remains to be shown how it serves to ground his naturalistic metaphysics. I now turn to this task.

VI

We begin with one final, deeply penetrating unity: "necessity implies the precarious and contingent. A world that was all necessity would not be a world of necessity; it would just be. For in its being, nothing would be necessary for anything" (EN 59). It is difficult for finite, undetermined, and contingent beings such as ourselves to even imagine such a world, although many metaphysicians claim to have done so. It is unlikely that in a fully actualized world external relations would exist; certainly there would be no interrrelations or *interactions* between objects, since one consequent of interaction is change and becoming. In any case we may be sure of one thing, there is no room in such a world for the introduction of human agency, or any other kind of agency for that matter, since "A thing 'absolutely' stable and unchangeable would be out of the range of the principle of action. . ." (EN 64).

In existential experience "The stable and recurrent is needed for the fulfillment of the possible; the doubtful can be settled only through its adaptation to stable objects. The necessary is always necessary for, not necessary in and of itself; it is conditioned by the contingent, although itself a condition of the full determination of the latter" (EN 59). The necessary and contingent *condition* each other through mutually determining interactions, for "Whatever influences the changes of other things is itself changed" (EN 65). It is here that we are able to fix the difference between Dewey and Aristotle on the relation of the actual to the potential alluded to earlier. Both would agree that we cannot explain change without potentiality and both would further agree that we cannot explain it by potentiality alone, i.e., nothing is promoted from potentiality to actuality without the agency of something already actual. But for Dewey *both* the potential and the actual are modifed by the interaction.

In the interactions between human beings, objects, and events, the actualities and potentialities of all existentials involved are conditioned

and modified by reciprocal interdetermination. It is in such interactions that we may come to know and define ourselves. Social interaction is a very important limiting case of this reciprocity. Conceived in a consummatory human interaction we are nurtured in our childhood within a socially *structured* community in which we learn to communicate our needs, desires, and thoughts to others and they to us.

Dewey provides the following metaphor to describe the mutually conditioning interaction between necessary structure and equally necessary changes; "all structure is structure *of* something; anything defined as structure is a character of *events*. . . . A house has a structure; in comparison with the disintegration and collapse that would occur without its presence, this structure is fixed. Yet it is not something external to which the changes involved in building and using the house have to submit"[8] (EN 64). Replace the notion of physical structure in this passage with cognitive structure and the metaphor continues to hold. This simple move provides the intuition necessary to carry us to the heart of Dewey's naturalistic metaphysics.

VII

"Empirically," Dewey argues, "all reflection sets out from the problematic and confused. . . . When thinking is successful, its career closes in transforming the disordered into the orderly, the mixed-up into the distinguished or placed, the unclear and ambiguous into the defined and unequivocal, the disconnected into the systematized" (EN 60). Dewey adds later that "thinking is a continuous process of temporal re-organization within one and the same world of experienced things. . ." (EN 61).

In the modern era science has been the form of thinking, as Dewey sees it, which has shown the greatest promise for success in bringing about temporal re-organization: "Only as science is seen to be fulfilled and brought to itself in intelligent management of historical processes in their continuity can man be envisaged as within nature; and not as a supernatural extrapolation" (EN 130). When the thought is human, so too are the directing purposes. Human actuality, operating as intelligence, intervenes within the historical process of which

it is a part; and by selecting from among the possibilities it finds there, attempts to structure and actualize its choices through action. These choices in turn carry enduring responsibilities for their consequences. Reciprocally, necessity in nature intervenes in the course of human events partially determining our destinies and limiting the possibilities of effective action, thereby making genuine freedom possible. Un-*limited* (un*conditioned*) possibility yields capriciousness, not freedom. "Things," according to Dewey "have potentialities or are instrumental because they are not Being, but rather Being in process" (EN 102). Which potentialities of things are actualized will vary "according to the interacting field it enters" (EN 217). Historical processes go on and potentialities are actualized quite apart from human intervention.[9] This is why the choice not to intervene, when the means of effective intervention are available, constitutes a genuine choice for which we may be held responsible.

We are existential beings who find ourselves *within* the flow of existential experience partially determining and partially determined by the course of events. Man is such that "When he perceives clearly and adequately that he is within nature, a part of its interactions, he sees that the line to be drawn is not between action and thought, or action and appreciation, but between blind, slavish, meaningless action and action that is free, significant, directed and responsible" (EN 324). This carries us to our conclusion.

Man is "not a little god outside" nature, nor ought he "feign a powerful and cunning god as an ally. . ." (EN 324 and 313). We are not that *important*. Neither should we allow ourselves to be devalued into insignificance. We are not that *unimportant*. Our search for meaning must take place between these two poles. Dewey writes:

> Men move between extremes. They conceive of themselves as gods, or feign a powerful and cunning god as an ally who bends the world to do their bidding and meet their wishes. Disillusioned, they disown the world that disappoints them; and hugging ideals to themselves as their own possession, stand in haughty aloofness apart from the hard course of events that pays so little heed

> to our hopes and aspirations. But a mind that has opened itself to experience and that has ripened through its discipline knows its own littleness and impotencies; it knows that its wishes and acknowledgements are not final measures of the universe whether in knowledge or in conduct, and hence are, in the end, transient. But it also knows that its juvenile assumption of power and achievement is not a dream to be wholly forgotten. It implies a unity with the universe that is to be preserved. . . . A chastened sense of our importance, apprehension that it is not a yard-stick by which to measure the whole, is consistent with the belief that we and our endeavors are significant not only for themselves but in the whole. (EN 313-314)

It seems to me that the depth of Dewey's existential profundity rivals that of Heidegger or Sartre. Of late, Richard Rorty has done philosophy the valuable service of making this association more widely known. That Dewey arrives at his "existential" conclusions, if such they be, on the basis of his naturalistic metaphysics, grounded in turn upon the unity of opposites, suggests that Dewey might have some original twists to offer existentialism. I do not intend by any means to harness Dewey's naturalistic metaphysics to existentialist traces. Dewey's philosophy is not that easily tamed.

I have demonstrated here the crucial role of the unity of opposites in Dewey's naturalistic metaphysics. It is my opinion that Dewey's metaphysics, when properly understood, offers many intriguing solutions and perspectives to a plethora of philosophical questions. There is ample room here for a great deal of original research, but such inquiry must await another occasion.

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NOTES

1. This material is based upon work supported by the National Science Foundation under Grant No. IST-8310936 (Information Science and Technology).

2. John Dewey, *Experience and Nature, The Later Works,* vol. 1 (Southern Illinois University Press, 1981), p. 46. Hereafter referred in the text as EN.

3. Dewey probably has in mind here chapter XVII of William James's *The Principles of Psychology,* especially those setions titled "The Relativity of Knowledge" and "The Law of Contrast." See *The Principles,* Vol. II, pp. 658-78, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1981. See also chapter II of William James's *Psychology: Briefer Course.*

4. The passage continues ". . . which characterizes metaphysical systems as unlike as those of Plato and Democritus, St. Thomas and Spinoza, Aristotle and Kant, Descartes and Comte, Haeckel and Mrs. Eddy."

5. The term "bifurcation" is borrowed from A. N. Whitehead. See his *The Concept of Nature* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1920), especially chapter II "Theories of the Bifurcation of Nature."

6. When we *suspend belief* we suspend the cognitive predispositions requisite for effective practical action. This involves no small amount of risk to a contingent being in a perilous world. At best one in such a state would appear awkward; more likely the appearance would be that of madness (consider the plight of Hamlet); in time the inability to *suspend doubt* would, no doubt, prove fatal.

7. This phrase is borrowed from William James, *The Principles,* Chapter XXI. There James seeks to identify "*Under what circumstances do we think things real*?" (p. 917) James offers two criteria. The first is "Whatever excites and stimulates our interest is real" (p. 924). This, as James acknowledges, is merely Hume's criterion of vivacity. The second criterion is that "Whatever things have intimate and continuous connection with my life are things of whose reality I cannot doubt" (p. 926). This world of "practical realities" is the one in which we must act effectively in order to preserve our existence (See EN 21). Actually these two criteria are not distinct. We are all realists when running for our lives. To these two *psychological* criteria Dewey added a third, *logical,* criterion – semantical inexhaustibility.

8. Compare to Aristotle's *Metaphysics,* Book Θ, chapter 1.

9. Dewey remarks "The eventual has somehow been there from the start, 'implicitly,' 'potentially,' but efficaciously enough to attend to its own realization. . ." (EN 209).