

**AESTHETICS, METAPHYSICS, AND POLITICS:
JOHN DEWEY AND THE SYMBOLIC RECONSTRUCTION
OF THE WORLD**

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Many philosophers have dismissed metaphysics without realizing that it is inseparable from human existence. When properly understood, that is as a view that endows meaning and value to the world we live in, metaphysics is a most basic need for every human being no matter how unaware they might be of their metaphysical commitments. Thomas Alexander labels this pervasive need “the human Eros” and finds it exemplified in the “meaning-giving mythic structures” that we all absorb in the process of acquiring both language and the set of symbols, rituals and habits that shape our culture. He adds:

“Philosophy in general and metaphysics in particular is simply a conscious pursuit of this desire [...]. Because the world is a place of change, conflict, and tragedy, our mythic worlds are not immune and may be confronted, modified, or destroyed entirely. Our traditions may collide with each other, each imperiously convinced of its absolute mandate.”¹

In its conscious effort to produce a better (mythic) world metaphysics differs from the mere absorption of ready-made traditions in that it takes into account the possibility for tragedy; it knows that, in a world of chance and conflict, our meaning-giving structures are unstable and may even collapse. This fact turns the metaphysical pursuit of meaning and value into an *intelligent* task having to do with conditions, predictions, operations and corrections in order to reconstruct our symbolic history in accordance to present and foreseeable future demands. Now, this means that metaphysics cannot proceed from an abstract, purely formal questioning of

“the meaning of things” as an intellectual problem, but is prompted by specific situations with an experiential import. In particular, it starts with a sense of disruption in our worldview, a presentiment —or a felt presence— of disaster. It is only when the set of meanings and values that hitherto oriented our understanding of events and actions appear to us as worthless or meaningless, that we are in need of a metaphysical shift.

Alexander hits the nail on the head when he interprets that John Dewey linked the very possibility of metaphysics to this destabilization of the symbolic. Dewey’s idea is revolutionary because it presents the whole Western metaphysical tradition as fundamentally ill-conceived. The belief in a timeless Being that confronts us in a perfect, immutable form is but an unreflective translation of those pre-philosophic mythic worlds wherein we feel safe and “the possibility of tragedy and of freedom”² is denied. This also accounts for the preeminence of the epistemological in Western tradition, for such frame of thought reduces our relation to that “Being” to its sheer apprehension in knowledge, provided that no action, no human ideal or aspiration could transform it in the least.

If, on the contrary, one adopts the Deweyan view that metaphysics responds to specific experiential situations, then one must assume a realm of “primary experience,” antecedent to any discursive apprehension, that provides the ground on which metaphysics can pose its questions about being, value, and knowledge. The eventual answers to these questions, when obtained, will not be true *sub specie aeternitatis* but only to the extent that they lead to new forms of (“secondary”) experience that fulfil the desires and expectations prompted in primary experience. In this connection, metaphysics can no longer be described as a picture of the world as it really *is* in its ultimate, most impersonal form but as “an art of imaginative understanding and creative envisagement of contexts, histories, and

¹ Thomas Alexander, “Dewey and the Metaphysical Imagination,” *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 28, 2 [1992]: 203.

² Alexander, “Dewey and the Metaphysical Imagination,” 204.

possibilities of aesthetic meaning realizable through shared activity.”³

This is particularly congruent with Dewey’s lifelong effort to restore the concept of “experience” to its full meaning, after centuries of philosophical distortions and mutilations. The restoration is of metaphysical import because it is meant to overcome the artificial gap between a subject *experiencing* the world and a world that is *experienced*. It was on this gap that a timeless “Being” could become to be thought in the first place as the unfathomable counterpart of the ever-changing world of human experience. In a memorable passage of *Experience and Nature* Dewey refused, as James did before him, to support such a disjointed picture:

“We begin by noting that ‘experience’ is what James called a double-barrelled word. Like its congeners, life and history, it includes what men do and suffer, what they strive for, love, believe and endure, and also how men act and are acted upon, the ways in which they do and suffer, desire and enjoy, see, believe, imagine —in short, processes of experiencing. ‘Experience’ denotes the planted field, the sowed seeds, the reaped harvests, the changes of night and day, spring and autumn, wet and dry, heat and cold, that are observed, feared, longed for; it also denotes the one who plants and reaps, who works and rejoices, hopes, fears, plans, invokes magic or chemistry to aid him, who is downcast or triumphant. It is ‘double-barrelled’ in that it recognizes in its primary integrity no division between act and material, subject and object, but contains them both in an unanalyzed totality. ‘Thing’ and ‘thought,’ as James says in the same connection, are single-barrelled; they refer to products discriminated by reflection out of primary experience.”⁴

This clarifies the sense in which symbolic operations *do*

create new “possibilities of aesthetic meaning.” Primary experience conveys beliefs, enjoyments, fears, etc. along with the objects believed, enjoyed, feared, etc.; “act and material, subject and object” are given in one and the same felt unity. Then, the transformation of this material through activity is simultaneously a transformation in the objects *experienced* and a transformation in our *experiencing* those objects. By imposing new meanings upon the succession of events we go through, we in fact alter the qualitative character of the world as it affects us. It is not the case that we learn to react in different ways to objects that we *know* antecedently to be independent of how we experience them; the case is rather that the objects are singled out and *known* only as meaningful parts of what we experience in dealing with the world through action. This is why a difference in aesthetic, qualitative meaning always makes a difference in the world of “things” and not only in the world of “thoughts.”

There is a tension between the “human Eros” that strives for living with a sense of meaning and value, on one hand, and the potential in human action to undermine that sense by changing the conditions that sustain it, on the other. The dualism of theory and practice, the depreciation of the practical as ignoble and inferior, are attempts to dissolve this tension by conjuring up the *unconditioned* (and, therefore, “real”) as opposed to the conditioned and variable (and, therefore, only “apparent”). Dewey denounced this form of escapism,⁵ of course, but was sensitive to its aesthetic appeal.⁶ This

⁵ “Escape from Peril” is the title of the first chapter of *The Quest for Certainty*. There Dewey states that the alleged superiority of theoretical knowledge over the practical arts lies in that the former is associated to permanence and security: “exaltation of pure intellect and its activity above practical affairs is fundamentally connected with the quest for a certainty which shall be absolute and unshakeable.” John Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty*, in *The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925-1953*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984): vol. 4, 5.

⁶ “*Sub specie aeternitatis? or sub specie generationis?* I

³ Alexander, “Dewey and the Metaphysical Imagination,” 209.

⁴ John Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, in *The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925-1953*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1981): vol. 1, 18-9.

was not condescension, but a clear perception of the “human Eros”. We are not recommended to renounce the aesthetic aspiration for the sake of a more “realistic”, tough-minded attitude, but to make the aspiration really effectual by orienting the changing world in the direction of increased aesthetic consummations. The mistake of idealistic philosophies is not to claim for a world endowed with spiritual value, but to fail to relate that value to its generating conditions, thus taking as absolute and unshakeable what in fact is relative and revisable. As Dewey said:

“There is danger that the philosophy which tries to escape the form of generation by taking refuge under the form of eternity will only come under the form of a by-gone generation.”⁷

But Dewey was no less critical to the “philosophies of change” such as Bergson’s, for they also contradict experience by making change something absolute. Far from this, the real character of experience is that it encompasses precariousness and stability in a way that cannot be resolved either into combinations of the permanent or into combinations of changes. This inextricable mixture is what makes it possible and necessary at the same time to impose meaning-giving structures onto the succession of events. It makes it possible because similarities and repetitions are needed in order to establish recognizable meanings; it makes it necessary because those meanings are, and will always be challenged by the unknown and the unexpected. A world of pure change would be a totally unpredictable one, whereas in a world of pure permanence nothing at all could be done about it. None of them correspond to the world we have experience of; none make room for action, ends, and accomplishments.

am susceptible to the aesthetic charm of the former ideal—who is not?” John Dewey, “Does Reality Possess Practical Character?”, in *The Middle Works of John Dewey, 1899-1924*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale and Edwardsville, Southern Illinois University Press, 1977): vol. 4, 141.

⁷ Dewey, “Does Reality Possess Practical Character?”, 142.

It is not the possibility of change by itself, then, but the *contingent* distribution of stable and mutable traits within nature what grants to action a potential to enrich human experience—that is, according to the “double-barreled” character of the term, to transform both what is experienced and the very process of experiencing it. Reflection discriminates here a “subject” that endeavors to secure some desired “objects”, or a “mind” that represents some “things” as valuable and worth existing, but in this perspective these terms are given a relational meaning. The aim of activity is to change the constituents of a given situation so that some parts of it are made permanent or intensified, and some others are suppressed or attenuated. Therefore, the “objects” or “things” pointed at as the ends of action cannot occur to the subject except as a possibility already contained in the given situation, that is to say, as a part of its *meaning*. Secondary experience, which comes after reflection and discrimination—or which, to put it differently, incorporates the meaning-giving structures supplied by language and symbols—interprets the world of primary experience as one that can be controlled and improved and where the means-ends relation is given pride of place.

It is in this connection that Dewey’s metaphysics reveals its full import. The reference to the “destabilization of the symbolic” and the consequent possibility of a “symbolic reconstruction of the world” contrast in the sharpest way with the static set afforded by traditional metaphysics, where goods are absolute and evils are irremediable. “Being” is as it should be, therefore it only invites contemplation or, at best, it invites an action that only seeks its own ceasing. In this quest for certainty and fixity, philosophy has neglected that it is the *imperfection* of reality what calls for inspection and understanding, and what mobilize our creative energies. For one thing, it mobilizes knowledge, which is essentially a reconstructive (not a reproductive) faculty:

“Not all existence asks to be known, and it certainly does not ask leave from thought to exist. But some existences as they are experienced do ask thought to direct them in their course so that they may be ordered and fair and be such as to commend themselves to admiration, approval and appreciation. Knowledge affords the sole means by which this redirection can be effected. As the latter is brought about, parts of the experienced world have more luminous and organized meaning and their significance is rendered more secure against the gnawing tooth of time. The problem of knowledge is the problem of discovery of methods for carrying on this enterprise of redirection. It is a problem never ended, always in process; one problematic situation is resolved and another takes its place. The constant gain is not in approximation to universal solution but in betterment of methods and enrichment of objects experienced.”⁸

It was Sydney Hook who first associated pragmatism with “a tragic sense of life”. Indeed there is a touch of tragedy in the recognition that there is no reconciling unity beneath diversity, no necessary order behind contingency, no universal solutions. The uncertain character of the world and the recalcitrant particularity of experience entail that no improvement is guaranteed once for all. The most we can expect is that whatever proves to be serviceable in one particular dimension of our experience will find application within new contexts and for different purposes, or that the goods envisaged by one individual will blaze a path to common goods. But it is not up to philosophy to dictate which goods are the dearest or what ends should be pursued. What existences in particular “commend themselves to admiration, approval and appreciation” depends on the changes in the aesthetic quality of the experienced objects as they are enriched and reorganized by new meanings. Philosophy is apt to preserve the openness of this process by revealing its contingency. Philosophical criticism of obsolete meanings and entrenched habits is needed because there is an all too natural tendency to disregard the precarious condition of our goods and to rely on comfortable myths. Instead of yielding to the

demand “to be let alone and relieved from the continual claim of the world in which we live in that we be up and doing something about it,”⁹ the task of thinking is to look into the origin of those goods, the conditions that sustain them, and the consequences they lead to.

This is where the metaphysical imagination plays a fundamental role, for it weaves together present and future, the actual and the potential, and assorts the multiplicity of meanings that the arts, science, religion, and social relations of all sorts, are constantly creating in a moving universe. Philosophy here invades the territory of art:

“Philosophic discourse partakes both of scientific and literary discourse. Like literature, it is a comment on nature and life in the interest of a more intense and just appreciation of the meanings present in experience. Its business is reportorial and transcriptive only in the sense in which the drama and poetry have that office. Its primary concern is to clarify, liberate and extend the goods which inhere in the naturally generated functions of experience.”¹⁰

The metaphysical narrative sets up as a symbolic order that seeks to assemble the variegated experience of a culture into a common history in progress. Such narrative, although, is not animated by a sense of beauty, but by a sense of responsibility. What is at stake is not the possibility of producing ideas and values not thought of before, as is the case in literary imagination, but the possibility of using them to cope with the imperfection of our shared world:

“If insight into specific conditions of value and into specific consequences of ideas is possible, philosophy must in time become a method of locating and interpreting the more serious of the conflicts that occur in life, and a method of projecting ways for dealing with them: a method of moral and political diagnosis and prognosis.”¹¹

⁹ Dewey, “Does Reality Possess Practical Character?”, 141.

¹⁰ Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, 304-5.

¹¹ John Dewey, “The Influence of Darwinism on Philosophy”, in *The Middle Works of John Dewey, 1899-1924*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale and

⁸ Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty*, 236.

Tragedy and freedom go together, and we cannot face them without the ability to reconstruct our mythic world. This requires a constant cultivation of our aesthetic sensitivity, a resolute use of imagination, and a robust sense of moral and social responsibility. Dewey should be credited for having shown that these dispositions can converge on one and the same aesthetic, political, and philosophical ideal.

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