

Prof. Rex Li's Writings

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Title: John Dewey's *Experience and Nature*: Background, Summary and Commentary

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Summary/ Abstract: Experience and Nature is Dewey's magnum opus and a most difficult work. This paper helps readers to get into Dewey's ideas.

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**John Dewey's *Experience and Nature*:
Background, Summary and Commentary**

(A) Dewey Wants to Change the Title

In December 1922, Dewey gave the first Paul Carus Lecture in three talks: "Existence as Stable and Precarious", "Existence, Ends, and Appreciation", and "Existence, Means and Knowledge". (Dykhuizen, 1973: 208) Afterwards, Dewey built on it and published *Experience and Nature* in 1925. It was well-received by the philosophic community and hailed as his *magnum opus*. His colleague, John Randal, a renowned historian of philosophy, considered that "*Experience and Nature* is the greatest new addition to metaphysical knowledge since Spinoza" (Dykhuizen, 1973: 215)

But more than 20 years later, when Dewey wrote a new introduction to *Experience and Nature* in around 1950, he wanted to replace "experience" with "culture" and change the title to *Culture and Nature*:

Were I to write (or rewrite) *Experience and Nature* today I would entitle the book *Culture and Nature* and the treatment of specific subject-matters would be correspondingly modified. I would abandon the term "experience" because of my growing realization that the historical obstacles which prevented understanding of my use of "experience" are, for all practical purposes, insurmountable. I would substitute the term "culture" because with its meanings as now firmly established it can fully and freely carry my philosophy of experience. (LW 1: 361)

So, what's wrong with the title and what has changed in Dewey's thinking over time? What are the main ideas of *Experience and Nature*? With this puzzle I began my search.

(B) Background

Experience and Nature did not come out of the blue. Take a look of Dewey's work in philosophy; See my chronology on Dewey's metaphysics (Idea 860 or JD 01-008).

Briefly, Dewey outgrew his Hegelianism and moved to pragmatism in 1900s. He published many papers to detail his position on pragmatism and theory of knowledge (Idea 861 or JD 01-009). Of particular importance is his talk on *The Influence of Darwin in Philosophy* (1909), in which he attacked the traditional philosophical view for the search of eternity. To replace it he proposed evolution and change. Also noted is his *Introduction to the Essays in Experimental Logic* (1916) in which he outlined his ideas on experience, nature and existence.

In 1919 he went on a trip to Japan and China. In February he delivered 8 lectures on the Development of Philosophy at Imperial University. The lecture summarized Dewey's critique of contemporary philosophy, his discontent and his proposal for reconstruction. His lectures become a book entitled *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (1920). To quote Dykhuizen at length:

Dewey said that his purpose in the lectures was "to set forth the forces which make intellectual reconstruction inevitable and to prefigure some of the lines upon which it must proceed."⁹ In keeping with this aim, he first pointed out that traditional philosophy has always been concerned with justifying certain fixed moral, social, and religious values, relying primarily on reason and proof to do this; it has argued in favor of some absolute or transcendent reality to guarantee perpetuation of these values. The emergence of modern science, technology, and industrialization, and the political and social trends toward democracy have led men to think along new lines. They are now concerned with what is specific, concrete, and undergoing change rather than with the universal, changeless, and eternal; they rely less on the pronouncements of traditional authorities for truth and more on the power of individual minds trained and disciplined in the methods of science; they entertain the idea of progress and stress the future rather than some allegedly golden age of the past; they believe that knowledge of nature brings control over her and that this is the path by which progress is to be achieved.

Dewey went on to say that philosophy needs to be reconstructed and oriented to these new trends in contemporary life. As a first step, he examined the traditional philosophical antithesis of experience and reason, concluding that the antithesis is false because reason and experience come together and cooperate in intelligent inquiry. He examined next the traditional opposition between the real and the ideal, declaring that instead of their being opposed or inhabiting different realms, the ideal is simply the real developed and elevated to its higher or ideal dimensions under the guidance of creative intelligence. In spelling out the needed reconstruction in logic, Dewey gave an account of the logic of experimental inquiry. In detailing the reconstruction needed in moral and social thinking, he emphasized that concern with specific, concrete moral and social problems and their practical solution through collective thinking must replace interest in abstract moral and social concepts and their rational systematization. (Dykhuizen, 1973: 189-90)

After that, Dewey visited China and was busy with lectures in China——politics, democracy, education, and philosophy. He returned to USA in 1921. The following year, his book entitled *Human Nature and Conduct: An Introduction to Social Psychology* was published, based on his earlier lecture delivered in 1918 in Leland Stanford Junior University. The book signified Dewey's shift from general psychology to social psychology and anthropology for explanation of human behavior, in which he already stated his theory of perception and action. According to Dewey, all seeing and acting are bound by culture, environment, existence and understanding.

With this background, it is clear that Dewey's *The Influence of Darwin in Philosophy* (1909), *Introduction to the Essays in Experimental Logic* (1916), *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (1920) and *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922) are the precursors of his *Experience and Nature*.

(C) Main Ideas of *Experience and Nature*

Experience and Nature is highly complex. Fortunately I found a good summary in 10 pages in Dykhuizen (1973: 208-220). I try to summarize in 21 points:

(1) Experimental Naturalism

The basic canons are:

- (a) Experience and nature are continuous
- (b) Reality can be known only through experience
- (c) Denotation
- (d) Ideas serve instrumental function (pragmatism)

(2) Added New Ideas

- (a) A biological-psychological-anthropological approach to understanding experience
- (b) Frequent reference to Aristotle
- (c) Philosophy of art (related to Barnes):
- (d) "Consummatory" object

(3) *Experience and Nature*: Scope and Objective——Metaphysics

in the book was "to set forth the implications of experience for philosophy," and more particularly for "a theory of nature, of the world, of the universe."¹²

(4) John Dewey's Definition of Metaphysics——Being Qua Being

Dewey defined metaphysics as "cognizance of the generic traits of existence"; he believed this definition was akin to that of Aristotle when he defined metaphysics as the study of Being *qua* Being.¹³ Though Dewey's definition seems to imply that his metaphysics will take into account the generic traits of *all* of existence, actually in *Experience and Nature* the discussion centers on those generic traits that relate to man and are of help in formulating a theory of human life and happiness.

(5) Experience is both Precarious and Stable

Viewed from the perspective of human experience, existence is immediately seen to be a mixture of the precarious and stable.

(6) Men Guard against Uncertainty and Create Laws

trolling the unpredictable, precarious elements in nature. "Our magical safeguard against the uncertain character of the world," wrote Dewey, "is to deny the existence of chance, to mumble universal and necessary law, the ubiquity of cause and effect, the uniformity of nature, universal progress, and the inherent rationality of the universe." If civilized modern man's science and technology

R:

- (i) Man has a curiosity to know and to explore.
- (ii) Laws are "discovered" to explain, to fit human logical/ rational cognitive structure.
- (iii) Science succeeds not only in predicting and controlling, but in understanding. We now understand (know) our thinking and the beginning of universe.
- (iv) We have tried to tame nature. Now we learn to live with it.

(7) Change, Process, Movement in Relative Term

The changes continually taking place everywhere in nature suggest that movement or process is another general and pervasive trait of existence. Dewey spoke of the "stable" in nature, but, as he pointed out, this is a relative term. For even the most stable and enduring things are subject to outside conditions that force them to change. But, because the rate of change in some things is

(8) Structure vs. Process

- (a) Structure and process are the same thing; when things change slowly, we see it as structure.
- (b) Everything is process. Every existence is event.

so slow and rhythmic compared to the rapid, irregular changes of other things, the former are called structure and the latter process. Actually, everything is process, or, as Dewey put it, "every existence is an event."¹⁵ Dewey rejected the metaphysics of enduring and changeless substances that somehow underlie and cause the changes that are observed, substituting for it a metaphysics of events.

R: Here again Dewey objects to changeless laws.

(9) Matter, Life and Mind as Quality of Events

- (a) Dewey is against metaphysical substances/ entities
- (b) He uses the term “quality of events”
- (c) Eventual functions

This consideration applies to such things as matter, life, and mind, which are not special kinds of metaphysical substances or entities but rather qualities of events, qualities that appear when events take on certain intricate and complex forms of organization. These terms are adjectival, not substantive, in character and function; they refer to qualities of events, not to something underlying events. “The idea that matter, life, and mind represent separate kinds of Being,” wrote Dewey, “is a doctrine that springs, as so many philosophic errors have sprung, from a substantiation of eventual functions. The fallacy converts consequences of interaction of events into causes of the occurrence of these consequences.”¹⁶ Dewey called this “*the philosophic fallacy.*”¹⁷

R:

- (i) Dewey seems to replace the term “experience”, “phenomenon”. His quality is something more than basic (e.g. atom, light). See below.
- (ii) Causes, interaction, consequences are sometimes hard to delineate.

(10) Unpredictable Emergent Evolution and Three Plateaus

Dewey’s theory of nature, thus, includes a version of the doctrine of emergent evolution, according to which each new organization of events results in the emergence of new qualities and capacities that could not have been predicted on the basis of what had occurred previously. And, like most adherents to the theory, Dewey distinguished three main levels or “plateaus” of existence—matter, life, and mind.¹⁸

(11) Existence is Process/ Events with Beginnings, Development and Ends

(a) Aristotle’s Error

ments, and endings. Aristotle recognized this when he declared that nature contains ends, terminals, finishings. But Aristotle went beyond empirical evidence, falling into error when he maintained that the ends in nature reflect purposes on the part of nature. He confused simple endings or terminals in nature with ends-in-view, “things viewed after deliberation as worthy of attainment and as evocative of effort.”¹⁹ Simple endings in nature

(b) Endings in Nature vs. Ends-in-views in Sentient Organisms

tainment and as evocative of effort.”¹⁹ Simple endings in nature can and constantly do become ends-in-view but only when a sentient organism wants and deliberately strives to get them. “Classic metaphysics,” Dewey declared, “is a confused union of these two senses of ends, the primarily natural and the secondarily natural, or practical, moral. Each meaning is intelligible, grounded, legitimate in itself. But their mixture is one of the Great Bads of philosophy.”²⁰

R: Dewey frequently talks about mean-end relations. Here he distinguishes natural ends vs. moral/ practical ends.

(12) Qualitative Individuality

John Dewey talked about immediate experience which shows “qualities” and “traits”. He called them “qualitative individuality”, which is “another of the pervasive generic traits of existence” (Dykhuizen, 1973: 212). here he puts human feelings together with five senses:

qualities given in immediate experience. “Empirically,” he wrote, “things are poignant, tragic, beautiful, humorous, settled, disturbed, comfortable, annoying, barren, harsh, consoling, splendid, fearful; are such immediately and in their own right and behalf. . . . These traits stand in themselves on precisely the same level as colors, sounds, qualities of contact, taste and smell. . . . *Any* quality as such is final; it is at once initial and terminal; just what it is as it exists. It may be referred to other things, it may be treated as an effect or as a sign. But this involves an extraneous extension and use.”²¹ These considerations led Dewey to

R: John Dewey proposes these traits-in-themselves, or qualities, are final. But this is hard to defend; these traits cannot stand in themselves; they exist only by human interpretation. The Trump impeachment can be tragic, or humorous, or consoling, depending on where you stand. They are not traits in themselves.

Or, alternatively, we may argue that sound, light, color are not traits in themselves, only traits to be experienced by humans. This comes back to the old question: there is something out there, we experience and understand it by our cognitive structure, capacity and apparatus, which only catches a small portion of the outside world. But we can go further by inventing more tools, such as telescope, microscope, spectrometer, MRI, etc. These machines are extension of human sense and experience. But they are all based on human reason and understanding, not necessarily human immediate experience.

(13) Qualities belong to Nature and are Located by Immediate Experience

Dewey emphasized that qualities belong to nature; they are not mere subjective states of mind or consciousness as modern philosophy has often taught. Qualities, he said, have a "natural existential status"²³ and are "qualities of cosmic events."²⁴ They are "qualities of inclusive situations"²⁵ created when sentient organism and environment interact; they are located where immediate experience finds them to be located.

(14) "Consummatory Objects"

These are objects men seek to attain or avoid, for they are of value to life.

Because the qualities that characterize events are the aspects of things that are enjoyed or suffered, they therefore determine the worth or value of life itself. As Dewey remarked, "The realm of immediate qualities contains everything of worth and significance."²⁶ The things in this realm are what Dewey called "consummatory" objects; they are the things men seek to attain or avoid.²⁷ Consequently, men are interested in the control of the processes that produce qualities in order to control the qualities themselves.

(15) Sciences as Manmade Instruments to Control Outcome, Endings

Science is the instrument by which modern man attempts to control events, histories, endings. It concerns itself with "those connections of things with one another that determine outcomes and hence can be used as means."²⁸ The ideas and concepts of science, Dewey argued, are not revelations of the inner nature of things, nor are they descriptions of a world separate from or underlying the world of qualitative experience. Rather they are tools or instruments that enable men to get and perpetuate the qualities they want and to avoid those they do not desire. "Physical science," Dewey wrote, "does not set up another and rival realm of antithetical existence; it reveals the state or order upon which the occurrence of immediate and final qualities depends. It adds to casual having of ends an ability to regulate the date, place and manner of their emergence."²⁹

R:

- (i) Whether Dewey's interpretation of science is an advance or a derogatory remark depends on one's position. Science is not the search for truth, but for the purpose of control for a better life man desires, according to Dewey.
- (ii) John Dewey is too pre-occupied with his pragmatic view of life. A considerable number of mainstream scientists and philosophers aim at truth, to search and to understand for its own sake. I dare not say Hawkins discovered "Black hole" so as to control or avoid them.

(16) Man and Meaning

According to John Dewey, man is part of nature, growing into consciousness of meaning. Meanings arise from experience in community life, with customs and formation of habits.

consciousness of meanings. Meanings arise in experience; they acquire public and general status through the give and take of community life. As individual mind is a function of social life, the first meanings it acquires have their origin in tradition and custom. "From his birth," wrote Dewey, "an individual sees persons

R: This idea is based on *Human Nature and Conduct*.

(17) Language and Mind

Language and communication substantially enlarge the world of meanings. Mind is simply the whole system of meanings embodied in human life.

are not physically present. "Ability to respond to meanings and to employ them, instead of reacting merely to physical contacts," said Dewey, "makes the difference between man and other animals; it is the agency for elevating man into the realm of what is usually called the ideal and spiritual."³¹ "Mind" is defined by Dewey as "the whole system of meanings as they are embodied in the workings of organic life."³²

R: In this sense, language is pivotal and meaning is essential to the creation of ideas and mind. Mind is more social than individual. The individual person simply utters the shared meaning of the public, common mind. But the public mind (opinion) itself can be conflicting.

(18) Art as "Consummatory Fulfillment"

successful culmination of this encounter. Art is "a continuation, by means of intelligent selection and arrangement, of natural tendencies of natural events";³³ it aims at "consummatory fulfillment."³⁴ In successful artistic production means and ends, the instrumental and the consummatory, process and product, the contingent and the necessary, the irregular and the settled, the precarious and the stable, the subjective and the objective no longer work at cross purposes but mingle in harmony till consummation is achieved.³⁵ Artistic production, Dewey believed, "sums

(19) Value as "Intrinsic Qualities of Events in Their Consummatory Reference"

Here John Dewey uses abstract concepts and brings to "real value" vs. "immediate value" of an object, to be judged by laws of conditions and consequences.

to."³⁹ The question therefore arises as to the "real" as contrasted with the immediate value of an object. When this question is raised, the appeal is to criticism and to value judgments; "the court of appeal decides by the law of conditions and consequences."⁴⁰

(20) Value Judgment, Wisdom and Philosophy

Value judgment is related to human quest of security and happiness. Wisdom in judgment is philosophy——criticism of criticism.

Since judgments of value are of crucial importance in man's quest for security and happiness in a perilous world, his great need is for wisdom, wisdom of the sort traditionally associated with philosophy. Philosophy as wisdom is in essence criticism, concerned with the evaluation of existing goods and values so as to render them "more coherent, more secure and more significant in appreciation."⁴¹

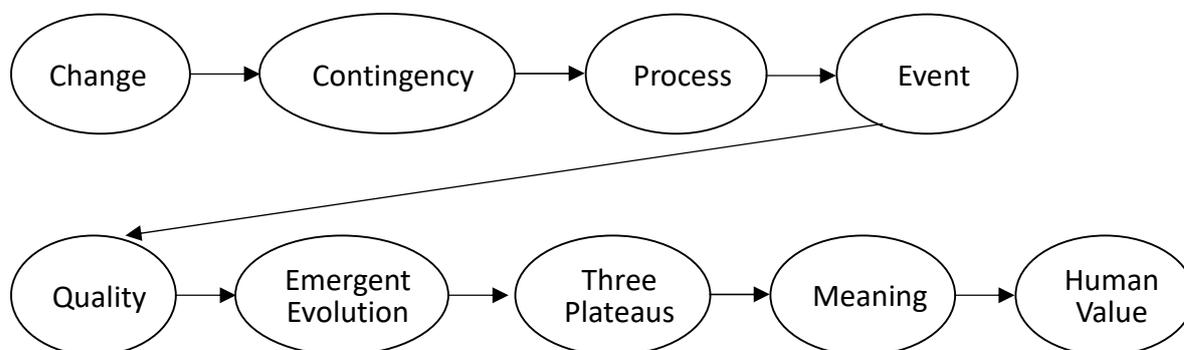
(21) Metaphysics is a Ground-map for Philosophy and Criticism

Metaphysics is an outline of generic traits of existence. It offers a picture for criticism in philosophy.

Metaphysics as cognizance of the generic traits of existence is a prerequisite to philosophy as wisdom. By discovering, analyzing, and defining the general and pervasive traits of existence, metaphysics provides "a ground-map of the province of criticism, establishing base lines to be employed in more intricate triangulations."⁴² "Barely to note and register that contingency is a trait

(D) First Commentary

(1) *Experience and Nature* is Dewey's metaphysics, representing the pragmatist view of reality and existence (being). The few core ideas are linked in the order of:



(2) Bound in the polemic of experience in the subject and object, Dewey put forth "immediate experience", "mediated experience", "qualitative individuality", "consummatory objects". When Dewey proposed qualities as traits-in-themselves in events, it is an assertion against commonsense and common usage of terms (see commentary in the above point 12).

(3) I think it is necessary to delineate existence into physical existence and human existence. The former should be studied by science/ physics and the latter by psychology/ neuroscience. The province of philosophy is to focus on semantics, logic and value.

- (4) When John Dewey wants to avoid the word “experience” and replace it with “culture”, he has good reasons for it (see Idea 864 or JD 01-013, Muhit, 2013). He even wants to modify related pages and chapters, probably on the problem associated with immediate experience, qualities, consummatory objects, which are hardly intelligible.
- (5) Dykhuizen pointed out that Dewey frequently referred to Aristotle. It is because western philosophy started from Aristotle: men are rational; reason to be governed by logic; men to pursue happiness; morality and golden mean; causes and teleological explanation. In fact Aristotle is a biologist vaguely aware of evolution. Aristotle set the scope and guide Dewey’s metaphysics tried to answer all these questions. Dewey’s answers: thought (reflective), emergent evolution, process, change, uncertainty, quality, language and mind, mean-end, human action (pragmatism).
- (6) Dewey is also much influenced by Bergson (creative evolution) and whitehead (process philosophy). Dewey is contributing to early 20th century philosophy, but he did not live long enough to see the impact of logical positivism.
- (7) With his personal relationship with A. Barnes, a famed art collector, Dewey developed his aesthetics and the idea of “consummatory objects”. Probably it is his way of articulating his feelings, later to be termed “affective thoughts”.