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Is John Dewey a Communitarian?

Jason Kosnoski

Introduction

One of the most consistent criticisms of liberalism advanced by the communitarians contends that the liberal prioritization of the right over the good represents a morally incoherent claim. By incoherent, they mean that the claim cannot be sustained due to internal contradictions. The contradiction highlighted by the communitarians is that, in fact, every political position, even those aspiring to ultimate neutrality, in fact embodies a vision of society, and therefore embodies a vision of the good. This contention originates in a conception of human identity as necessarily “self-interpreting” and constituted by meanings, strong evaluations, and narratively organized efforts to attain these goods and meanings. I will use Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor, each representing a distinct aspect of what I will call the “interpretivist” position to ground my critique of liberalism. I use this label, as opposed to communitarian, to stress their mutual emphasis on the relation of meaning to identity and action and concerning the deficiencies of the liberal concept of the person and role of the state. Communitarianism connotes a more specific political position concerning the state’s role in supporting and encouraging specific comprehensive notions of the good.

Specifically I will use the next section to emphasize three aspects of the “interpretivist” position. First, I will demonstrate how these theorists highlight the role of meaning in the motivation of individual action as opposed to the utilitarian or liberal understanding. Secondly, I will discuss how their concern with the motivational power of value plays a vital role in the construction of “long term” actions; in other words, life plans and identities. And finally I will relate how these theorists conceive of goods as requiring standards of interpretations that take the form of intersubjective meanings. In other words I will show how “interpretivists” conceive of personal goals and values as products not only of individuals, but of meanings shared by members of collectivities.

MacIntyre’s begins his critique by declaring that at present the emotivist concept of morality has become the common view among philosophers. By emotivist he means that liberalism relies upon philosophy of the person that takes the status of specific moral claims to be that of the status of personal emotional ejaculations. They originate from and are confined to individuals and possess no greater status than that of being indications of the internal feelings of individuals. Hence the political framework of liberalism supports no overarching view of the good; to do so would be to arbitrarily privilege one individual’s capricious desires over another’s. Yet MacIntyre claims that despite the philosophic and political hegemony of the emotivist paradigm in the West, every day moral experience assumes exactly what the ascendant view denies. He states that it would be impossible to either live or act without the assumption of shared moral outlooks or the existence of goods that transcend individuals. Therefore, MacIntyre sees contemporary conceptualizations of morality as utterly confused and unable to inspire adherence or loyalty by citizens.

MacIntyre claims the only way possible to restore coherence to our moral lives is to revive the Aristotelian teleological tradition. Emotivism, to MacIntyre, impoverishes conceptions of ethics and leaves them incapable of acting as the framework for living a coherent or enjoyable life. Using the concept of *telos*, MacIntyre repaints several ethical themes and imbues them with the vitality he claims they have lost due to the corrupting influence of the Enlightenment. Initially I want to discuss MacIntyre’s insistence of the importance of the reintroduction of the concept of *telos* into action. *Telos* comprises the “end point” of a concept or action, its most highly developed state. For example, when a specific action is undertaken to fulfill a set of pre-determined guidelines, this action should be considered successful not when it produces a specific outcome, but when it is performed in a certain way. In the utilitarian understanding an action can be fulfilled through any number of specific methods, whatever helps us to achieve our goal is considered a success. But this

cannot be said of “practices”, to use MacIntyre’s phrase, such as succeeding at chess. To do well in a chess game, a person must follow the rules of chess, and only those rules. Also, based widely-held interpretations of these rules and the game itself, one can be judged to have won either badly or beautifully. Practices do not exhibit a specific form, but they produce specific goods. As opposed to instrumental actions, which result in attaining a desire which has nothing to do with the action meant to fulfill that desire, practices involve goods which are internal to the acts themselves. He states, “I call a means internal to a given end when the end cannot be adequately characterized independently of a characterization of the means.” (MacIntyre, 172) Therefore, practices should be understood not only as actions with *teloi*, but also as activities “through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to and partially definitive of that form of activity.” (MacIntyre, 175) These goods comprise the substance of the motivational lacuna within the liberal account and help to explain many actions that remain unaccounted for by this paradigm.

Obviously, innumerable practices exist in society, and the rules of different practices sometimes come into conflict with each other. Therefore, MacIntyre stresses the necessity of organizing actions around an overarching *telos*, or a narrative of attempting to fulfill a *telos*. He stresses that although this *telos* might change and point the agent in different directions at different times, the phenomenon of possessing an overarching value which directs the prioritization of different practices plays a fundamental role in the pursuit of the good life. Furthermore, just as MacIntyre claims humans need to discriminate individual practices according to the superordinating principle of the life narrative, he also claims that life stories gain coherence due to the existence of superordinating principles against which people judge the validity and the success of their individual *Teloi*. If these principles and patterns of meaning are not present, the over-arching life plans meant to prioritize the multitude of conflicting practices will be as arbitrary as the emotivist’s description of action. MacIntyre states that traditions play this role, acting as the initial script from which we take the roles and values that provide meaning for our lives. Yet, as with our individual *teloi*, traditions remain subject to modification by the same actors whose identities they constitute; they are best described as living matrices, not static models.

Taylor posits, with MacIntyre, that human action cannot be understood outside of the context of its larger significance within a semiotic background. Yet although he shares a common set of concerns he stresses them to different extents. For example, where MacIntyre stresses the importance of realizing the *telos* of actions, lives

and traditions, Taylor stresses the importance of the self-clarification of meanings and the establishment of personal “authenticity.” His essay *The Ethics of Authenticity* claims that the liberal focus on individuality and the interpretivist focus upon the intersubjective development of identities need not conflict. Just as MacIntyre sees that traditions form the environment with which we evaluate the individual *teloi* of our lives, Taylor claims that “background languages” constitute the semiotic material we use to construct our individual identities. How we assimilate and change these meanings he describes as the process of making our selves “authentic” to our own lives. Due to this constant searching for authenticity, he concludes that the values and meanings by which we order our lives are never final and that “we have to think of man as a self-interpreting animal. He is necessarily so, for there is no such thing as the structure of meanings for him independently of his relationship to them.” (Taylor 1985, 26) The constant “fitting” of our actions into larger contexts, and our rethinking of these concepts constitutes our interpretive natures.

In the essay “Interpretation and the Sciences of Man” Taylor outlines how the process of constructing the relationship of an individual action to a semiotic environment consists of three moments of interpretation. He describes the first of these as the moment of our “experienced meanings” or “proto-interpretations,” the immediately felt sensations of shame, attraction, like, dislike, we experience in our daily lives. These proto-interpretations then become interpreted and shaped on the second level in terms of the language possessed by the agent. A third level of interpretation is that which the agent or others give to this action, after the fact. Taylor stresses that this third level interpretation will be “really clearer than the lived interpretation” and that its product will be incorporated into the immediate first and second stages in a process that changes both desire and linguistic frameworks. In this sense he sees “the interpretation as giving clearer expression to what is only implicit in the explicandum” (or the lived experience) (Taylor 1985, 27). Taylor sees the conclusion of this constant process of self-interpretation as the articulation of what he calls metagoods.¹ These are values, in Taylor’s words, to which we “owe allegiance”, which seem “larger than our selves”, or, values that we “love.” To Taylor, any account that denies the existence of these larger goods remains not-only self contradictory, but also ultimately self destructive in that it would deny actors the opportunity to search for and express these goods.

Taylor feels the liberal positions that do not acknowledge the constant process of self interpretation against an environment of a background language deny individuals the tools they can use to construct a coherent self. In positing total autonomy of

¹ See Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 1989

choice, these views leave the individual without the intersubjective material necessary to build a self. Also, the liberal position cannot account for the desire to perpetuate certain background languages. He states that liberalism remains “inhospitable to difference because it can’t accommodate what the members of a distinct society really aspire to, which is survival. This is a collective goal, which almost inevitably will call for some variation in the kinds of law we deem permissible from one cultural context to another.” (Guttman, 61) In opposition to MacIntyre, Taylor concludes that this governmental support of collective cultural expression does not negate the liberal project of a state that protects the integrity of the individual. The focus on self-interpretation allows much more latitude for the individual to construct her own slate of values and life meanings than MacIntyre’s focus on virtues and *teloi*. Yet, both remain firmly committed to the common substance of the interpretivist account. First, both highlight the importance of meaning-latent concept of human motivation on both the micro-level of individual actions, and therefore the possibility of intrinsic goods in action, and on the macro -level of “life plans” or identities. They also remain united concerning the necessity of collective support of background systems of meaning to support the constant process of interpreting both actions and lives in terms of “traditions” to use MacIntyre’s phrase, or “background languages” to mirror Taylor’s discussion. Finally both express similar hierarchies through the idea that interpretation progresses along an upward continuum, one level determining the next. The action is interpreted in terms of the narrative life plan, which is interpreted in terms of the tradition, metagood, or cultural background language. Although both stress that traditions and cultures never remain static entities, they do not elaborate on the process of individuals changing cultures or action changing traditions, or actions possessing meanings sufficient unto themselves. It is on this first level, that of “proto-interpretations” as Taylor calls them, is where Dewey begins his discussion.

Experience and Interpretations

Dewey’s work confuses many political theorists because of its sympathy with many interpretivist assumptions, yet its insistence that it remains firmly within the liberal paradigm. He values collective expression, the importance of meaning in an account of human action and decries “neutral” descriptions of the state. But Dewey, while acknowledging the importance of many “communitarian” concepts, reinterprets them in fundamentally different ways. His most fundamental reinterpretation remains the status of “meaning” within human action. Dewey specifically wants to explore the phenomenon of experiencing a meaning and how this

differs from the act of interpreting a meaning stressed by Taylor and MacIntyre. As aforementioned, Taylor in his "Interpretation" essay stresses that the second and third stages of interpretation reveal truer meanings than the initial "experienced" meaning undergone by the actor. Outside observers, after further separating themselves from the act itself, can possibly provide a truer interpretation, by adding greater context, incorporating more cultural facts, and a greater "distance" from the experienced meanings. These interpretive acts help the scientist and the actor clarify and articulate the goods that truly animate the values of a society. Taylor, as Clifford Geertz, sees the web of meanings that comprise culture as a complicated text that needs repeated interpretation in light of its complexity and its fluidity. Taylor focuses on the "inarticulacy" of modern culture and asks the question, "if we do not know what we really want, how can we go about getting it?" To these theorists, the process of "rearticulation" remains an indispensable part of addressing the cultural failings of modernity.

Dewey also articulates concerns that modern, individualist conceptions of identity present an impoverished theory of the importance of meaning for human action, and he offers a reconstruction of what Taylor and other interpretivists dismiss namely, the initial experience of meaning as opposed to the cognitive, distanced process of interpretation. This distinction should not be taken as an assertion that the two concepts are mutually exclusive. Dewey insists that the central downfall of the interpretivist account is not that it includes the realm of interpretation but that it maintains a dichotomy between interpretation and action. He decries the fact that meanings for interpretivists play an important role because they act as standards by which to judge the actions we take. As aforementioned, an action expresses greater meaning for the interpretivist, because it helps us to achieve our life goal or succeed at a particular practice. Kicking a ball is a meaningful act because it fulfills criteria set within a pre-given set of social signs corresponding to the game of soccer or to the life plan of excelling at soccer, or to the tradition of athletic prowess of a particular family or nation. The act is meaningful because it signifies something larger, its place within the entire system of culture. To interpret how the individual signifier relates to other signifiers, is a process that occurs after the act itself. Although Taylor claims "expressive" theories of language to be the inspiration for his work, and therefore seems to address the importance of the individual in constructing her own meanings, his examination of the "autonomy" of culture mirrors Saussure's methodology. He states, "there is, of course, an important line of historical filiation between Herder and Humboldt and twentieth-century structuralist theories. For instance, Saussure's privileging of the code over the individual item within it is prefigured in Humboldt's image of language as a

web.” (Taylor 1985,10) Because human beings necessarily see their lives as narrative in form and these stories become constructed through traditions, acts necessarily possess these larger meanings. But although understanding these traditions remains one of the primary tasks of the philosopher and the actor, these acts do not occur simultaneously. The interpreter and the actor, while both important in the interpretivist account, remain separate.

Where Dewey differs from the interpretivists is in his focus on not only the importance of thoroughly understanding the meanings that constitute the background against which we constitute our action, but upon how experience and interpretation interact. MacIntyre, with Aristotle states that the goods internal to practices come from an “activity of the soul in accordance with excellence.” But what if these “excellences” remain ambiguous to the actor? Understanding Dewey’s answers to these questions must begin with an exploration of his most important and frustratingly ambiguous concept, experience. His fundamental claim revolves around the need to understand how concepts most philosophers discuss from a distance, such as meaning, interpretation, nature, and action are experienced by individuals undergoing these processes. The discussion will proceed under three headings. Experience as creative action, consummation and communication. Each section focuses on how an taking experience seriously as a fundamental category of human existence forces a different conceptualization of meaning for the two fundamental categories emphasized by the interpretivists: meaning in the construction of identity and meaning as the object of human motivation

Experience as Creative Action:

To begin, I want to introduce Hans Joas’s presentation of the pragmatist theory of experience as primarily as creative action. Joas’s stresses that the primary category of human experience is that of actions of “situated creativity,” or in other words that our experience of the world consists of both the constraints of the environment and the latitude afforded by human agency. Therefore, every moment of action involves a creative act, or an interpretation of our situation. Joas states that “it is the body’s capabilities, habits, and ways of relating to the environment which form the background to all conscious goal setting, in other words intentionality itself, consists in a self-reflective control which we exercise over our current behavior.” (Joas, 158) The actor constantly interprets and re-interprets The environment, and how she relates to it. Choosing from a set of possible actions remains the constant task of the actor, even when one attempts to follow a predetermined *telos* or steps back and engages in an apparently more authentic “third-tiered” interpretation.

Another implication of the action-theoretic interpretation of experience is that all actions occur in time and under the condition of uncertainty. Dewey, in his article “The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology” sees the act as, quoting Alexander “an intelligent search for the proper stimulus, that is it is the effort to determine the meaning of the situation to grasp the present in terms of its possibilities and histories.” (from Joas, 202) This statement demonstrates Dewey’s attempt to acknowledge the interpretivist observation that acts can gain larger significance through their attachment to larger systems of meaning and his own stress on the ubiquity of creativity in achieving goals in action, whether they be utilitarian or meaningful. To explain, because of the necessity for creative efforts to search for the meaning of an act that occurs in a stream of experience, actors must continually search for acts that will be successful in embodying larger webs of signification. For example, often times the manner in which one fulfills the Catholic value of charity remains perfectly clear: one gives to a charity. But, as is well known, fulfilling an ethical injunction and at the same time receiving satisfaction in the knowledge that our act embodies our larger goals remains cloudy and uncertain. When does charity transform into enabling destructive behavior? Dewey sees the actor as engaged in an experimental process, of some acts fulfilling meaning, some acts not. Determinations of successful embodiments of significance themselves should be interpreted as self-reflexive, with actions initiated and modified in the stream of time-bound experience, as opposed to conceiving action embodying meaning merely as performing according to an already-existent script. Struggle and partial endings constitute the substance of most of experience, and the effort to achieve meaning remains a process unto itself, not a simply a series of nested choices.

In the process of this constant interaction with their surroundings and their struggle to express meaning in action, actors experience qualities springing from these relationships. To Dewey, the term quality reserves this specific meaning, “something which externally demarcates [a situation] and which internally pervades colors tones and weights every detail and every relation” (LW 5: 245)² The actor perceives these qualities, sense before she completely knows or understands them. Dewey states “many modern thinkers, influenced by the notion that knowledge is the only mode of experience that grasps things, assuming the ubiquity of cognition and noting that immediacy or qualitative existence has no place in authentic science, have asserted that qualities are always and only states of consciousness.” (LW

² All references to Dewey are from the collected works edited by Jo Ann Boydson. I use the standard citation (volume number: page number). EW=*The Early Works: 1882-1898*, MW=*The Middle Works: 1889-1925*, LW=*The Late Works: 1925-1952*.

1: 75) Dewey wants to assert that although we experience qualities in a situation, we do not know them as we know discrete facts like numbers. Qualities express basic relations of the action in its semiotic environment, that of fitting, discontinuity, movement, and stasis. In his essay, "Qualitative Thought" he states that qualities, "cannot be states or made explicit. It is taken for granted, understood or implicit in all propositional symbolization," (LW 5:247) Alexander states that the quality of a situation of interaction between the actor and environment should be described as "a vast dynamic structure of pre-reflective involvement with the world which form the tacit order against which consciousness emerges and which it uses as its material (Alexander, 116) For example, when the actor engages in the search for an act to embody meaning, particular qualities corresponding to a search, that of tension, manifest themselves in the actor. Dewey emphasizes that a "problem is had or experienced before it can be states or set forth; but it is had as an immediate quality of the whole situation" (LW 5: 249) Sensitivity to these qualities and how they relate to the cognitive reception of meaning constitutes Dewey's greatest theoretical innovation.

Another implication of the body's interaction with environment is that the actor experiences qualities through the filter of emotions. Of course, not all meanings prompt emotion. We can know what a hammer means, in that we know its function, how others might react to its function, its history and other aspects of its meanings. But to be involved in a situation, to be involved in acting in a unfamiliar and important situation with impact, presents the possibility of prompting emotion. Dewey states that emotions are produced from our attunement to a situation. A situation which does not present any tensions between the actor and nature, one which involves an unreflective deployment of a meaning, (we see the hammer, we see the nail, we use it) will not produce emotion. But "emotion is a perturbation from clash or failure of habit and reflection ... it is the painful effort of disturbed habits to readjust themselves." (MW 14:54) Or, as Alexander states "the world calls forth a response and emotion reveals both the concern about the world and the concern about how we are in it." (Alexander, 220) Yet a "calling" of a situation need not be taken up as a relevant factor within the life of an actor. We encounter numerous tensions within our lives, which can be ignored or thought about. Emotion reveals, possibly before we cognitively come to know exactly how a situation affects us, that we are involved and that a tension exists. The discussion so far might be seen as a gross form of naturalism, with emotions springing directly from the environment irrespective of the actor. But Dewey emphasizes that emotions spring from the interaction of individual habits with the environment, and should not be conceptualized as a process where the environment determines affective reac-

tions. Dewey describes habits as “providing a stable repertoire of responses” (ALEX, 136) for the actor within her environment. They act as “general paths of integration and interpretation; as such they express continuity.” Habits involve both cognitive and emotional responses to a situation. It could be our habit to think about a problem in a thorough manner, it could be our habit to be excited by novel experiences. Although I will have more to say about the formation of habits later, at the present moment it is important to stress only that habits are culture as embodied within the individual. Emotional reactions to impulses depend on particular habits.

The fact that we react emotionally to meanings within a situation does not somehow overwhelm our ability to react to the meanings cognitively or interpretively. The cognitive and the qualitative must be understood to be constantly interacting. As aforementioned, the three implications of locating meanings within experience are: 1) that they are in time and therefore subject to change in the process of understanding, 2) that we feel them through our emotions’ interaction with the situational qualities, and 3) that the achievement of meaning in action always involves an act of creation, not simply application, by the actor. Using these three observations, I want to discuss aspects of meaning not uncovered by the interpretive paradigm. Let me return to the example of when an individual confronts a situation where the action to attain a larger meaning remains unclear, where she does not know what action would fulfill her values. Even though she might not understand the immediate significance concerning her life, Dewey claims that we directly experience a sense of the situation. Dewey states that the “sense of the thing is the immediate and immanent meanings; it is the meaning which is itself felt of directly had ... the meaning of the whole situation as apprehended is sense.” (LW 1:200) Alexander emphasizes that “the world may have many senses. ... Experience has a range of possible ways of encountering the world, extending from the highly indeterminate feelings we have to the highly articulate symbolic manipulation of cognitive experience.” (Alexander, 169) The sense is not simply the possibilities inherent in a situation, but how these possibilities relate to our own emotion and to our life’s history, and to our habits. In other words, this here Dewey links the known and the, for lack of a better term, felt by stressing that individual meanings relate in certain ways to larger symbolic structures, and therefore present the actors with qualities. For example, a meaning might be jarring, unpleasant, or alien. But knowing that this jarring feeling presents the possibility of producing a desired outcome in the future can modify our unpleasant feelings. Alexander provides an excellent account of how immediate qualities of meaning and their relations of significance interact within experience:

I believe that it would be better to regard Dewey's distinctions of feeling, sense and signification as matters of degree along a continuum rather than as three separate modes of experience. At one extreme, as we focus more on the immediate aspects we tend toward feeling, losing sight of the unrealized potentialities of the project at hand. We pay attention to the present on its own account and ignore the future. At the other extreme we can become absorbed in trying to mediate or locate the immediate in a future oriented-process, operation or context. ... It is at these extremes of feeling and signification that experience is likely to fall apart and the means-ends relationship become divided ... the ideal to which Dewey points is the continuous interplay of sense and signification so that the immediate is taken up into a broad and deep context which in turn is realized and brought to light in immediate experience. (Alexander, 172)

Taylor would refer to what Dewey calls the sense of a situation as a proto-interpretation. But instead of assigning it a subservient status, Dewey realizes that the sense of a situation remains an important factor in sustaining interpretation throughout the process of exploration and uncertainty. But the sense of a situation not only possesses the quality of tension or harmony, but that of direction. Certain experiences push toward certain courses of actions. Rarely does experience render a clear unitary direction, but a multitude of possible courses. But, one particular impulsion, or a relational "pushing outward" can be followed, explored and even cultivated, according to Dewey. Alexander describes the creative process "the result of sustaining the impulsion towards complete experience; it not only strives to meet the world, but to carry the situation forward." (Alexander, 219) It is the sense that drives our search for meaning and gives us clues to the direction we should take to embody greater meaning in our action.

Dewey's somatic, diachronic, and action-theoretic interpretation leads him to focus both on the constitutive function of systems of meanings and on their potentiality for transformation through a certain type of action. A sense of a situation can either deter us from attempting to act in a meaningful way, or it can push us toward the possibility of expression. In describing the consequence of sense in the execution of action Dewey acknowledges the importance of MacIntyre's emphasis upon the possibility of the intrinsic qualities of action. But due to his realization that an action can possess many different qualities, as opposed to simply "goods internal to practices" Dewey observes that all actions, present intrinsic and multiple qualities to actors. The qualitative sense of the situation "provides the fusion of part and whole in experience which, in terms of meaning is the integration of text and

context.” (ALEX, 179) It is not as though we somehow, step back from our bodies when we make a decision or attempt to interpret the meaning of a situation. Interpretation constitutes a phase of every action, and actions take part in time, before we step back and interpret we get a sense of a situation. We know and feel simultaneously, and each affects the other. By interpreting experience as necessarily involving creative action, Dewey highlights these two areas neglected in the interpretivist account.

Experience as Consummation

After observing the fact that actions take part in the constant time stream and that meaning possesses both cognitive substance and qualitative feeling that combine into an immediate sense, Dewey emphasizes that experience does not solely consist of constant tension and movement. Occasionally, plans reach completion and beings reach a temporary harmony with the environment. In his *Art as Experience*, he focuses on these moments of consummation and characterizes these moments as the generic form of a meaningful experience. This account, while mirroring the interpretivist impulse to give an account of the good in more expansive terms than utilitarians would allow, differs substantially with the interpretivist impulse to characterize the good in terms of a logic of congruence between action and semiotic structure.

As aforementioned, the actor’s emotional response, defined by Dewey as our attunement to the situation, depends on the location of our bodies within its physical and semiotic environment, or the sense of the situation. Alexander states, “it is this sense of the whole situation which allows it to be regulated. It is evident that what is right of fitting, that is what is rational is for Dewey ultimately determined by the situation as a whole and how this whole is felt or enters into conscious experience ... to be sensitive to the controlling quality of the context is to embark upon the path which intelligently explores nature.” (Alexander, 180) In the process of sustaining the impulsion, emotions change according to the level of involvement and attunement. “The theory that emotions are performed, definite, identifiable entities” Alexander states remains a holdover of an empiricist Humean epistemology. In fact, “the unique unduplicated character of experienced events and situations impregnates the emotion that is evoked ... because of the elements of struggle and control, the experience is highly emotional.” (ibid.) Dewey remarks that “there are few intense esthetic experience that are wholly gleeful. They are certainly not to be characterized as amusing, and as they bear down upon us they involve a suffering that is none the less consistent with indeed a part of the complete perception that is enjoyed.” (LW 10:48) The form of an aesthetic experience helps this process along,

joyed.” (LW 10:48) The form of an aesthetic experience helps this process along, provides a structure which assists the actor undertake this process, and provides the necessary framework for aesthetic experience.

What are the formal characteristics of the process of constructing an aesthetic experience? First, as opposed to resolving the struggle for expression through fits and starts, or in an immediate jump, Dewey observes that expression must come about through the interplay of continuity and tension. By this he means that although experience initially takes the form of forces working in tension, certain constant links of equivalence must be maintained through out the struggle. Expression grows, it does not simply become. One must undertake processes of reconstruction and not creation *ex-nihilo*. He states, “There can be no movement toward a consummating close unless there is a progressive massing of values, a cumulative effect. This result cannot exist without a conservation of the import of what has gone before. Moreover, to secure the needed continuity, the accumulated experience must be such as to create suspense [tension] and the anticipation of resolution” (LW 10: 142) Within this process of reconstructive growth, Dewey further emphasizes the importance of rhythmic movement. As Jackson states,

the rhythmic interplay of compression and release gives life to experience. The same pulsations move life forward for, as Dewey points out the more there is compressed the more intense the forward impulsion ... what makes repetitious encounters so interesting is the fact that earlier opinions and beliefs concerning the object may be modified or become unsettled by later ones. With repeated exposure a work of art may grow stale and tiresome or conversely it may become increasingly enriched through the acquisition of new meanings. (Jackson, 48)

Through the rhythmic conservation of tensions meanings come to be seen as both products of the past and possibilities of the future. When, in actuality, the meaning does come to “fit” and the initial impulsion comes to completion, the resulting consummation not only expresses its instrumental meaning, but the result can be realized for the temporal and emotional culmination that it is.

For Dewey, concept of the possibility of consummation of struggle differentiates experience in general from having AN experience in particular, with an identifiable expression of meaning. When the action resolves a problematic situation or achieves a gratifying quality, the tension associated with the problem is relieved, causing the experience as a whole to take on a different character. For example, the tension (remembering that tension involves both the environment and the agent, the agent acting as the problem or tension definer, either through conscious or unconscious

mental processes) becomes relieved, the history of the experience comes to be seen as a history leading up to a particular consummation. Therefore, Dewey stresses that the “pleasure” produced by a consummatory experience comes about not only due to the ‘matching up’ of an action with a larger semiotic framework, but from the place that the particular meaning within the rhythm of our lives. Thus Dewey modifies the metaphor of life as a narrative: As opposed to envisioning identities as continuing stories attempting to embody through actions independent *teloi* or metagoods, Dewey sees lives and identities as consisting of a multitude of smaller, yet interconnected stories. Therefore the temporary “ending” or relief of tension, throws the relations of the occurrences leading up to the consummation into sharp contrast against the seeming anarchy of the environment and constitutes a small story with meaning in itself. For a brief moment, agent is in harmony with the environment, both semiotically and temporally and therefore experiences, as opposed to knows, a sense of that harmony. It is important to note that nature only presents the possibilities of harmony for the actor, it never drives itself toward harmony as imagined by Hegel or the Romantics. But when this does occur, Dewey states that “happiness and delight come to be through a fulfillment that reaches to the depth of our being, one that is an adjustment our whole being with the conditions of existence” (Alexander, 194) This aspect of consummation is what unites all aesthetic experiences and is the unique, affective characteristic of meaning in its complete environment. The whole experience comes to possess a sense, as defined previously as harmony. Dewey states that “art is the living and concrete proof that man is capable of restoring consciously and thus on the plane of meanings the union of sense, need, impulse and action characteristic of the live creature” (LW 10: 25).

Not only does an experience produce the sense of harmony in an actor, but it becomes singularly identifiable, it comes to express itself as unique. Alexander states,

There is an assimilation of the present experience to the past; responses are generalized and socialized; the future becomes a guiding presence in controlling the immediate direction of action ... there is a crucial connection between the fixed past and the oncoming novelty of the future in the living present. “The junction of the new and the old is not a mere composition of forces,” Dewey insists, “but is a recreation in which the present impulsion gets form and solidity while the old, the stored material is literally revived, given new life and soul through having to meet a new situation. It is this double change which converts an activity into an act of expression” (LW, 10, 66)

Expression implies context, how a certain signifier came to be in addition to its future possibilities. When we follow an impulsion to its consummation, the expression chronicles the history of the reconstruction of experience, our encounter with the meaning, not just its place within a larger whole. Dewey states that an expression reconstructs past experiences in light of the present-ness of the consummation. Not just a word, but a situation, can come to express meanings having to do with the specific placement of meaning within experience, in other words an expression consists of our time-bound involvement with a meaning, not simply our reaction to it but the history of our reaction to it. The history of this reception comes to affect the understanding of the meaning and therefore the possibilities of action stemming from the meaning as much as its signification.

Another quality involved with consummation is the satisfaction we get from successful manipulation. With this possibility for control comes an energizing feeling for the moral agent. He states that “language is not a mere agency for economizing energy in the interaction of human beings. It is a release and amplification of energies that enter into it, conferring upon them the added quality of meaning.” (LW 1: 138) He also states, “even in the midst of direct enjoyment there is a sense of validity of authorization which intensifies enjoyment.” (LW 4: 213) Therefore a meaningful existence, in the sense of an existence where one is energized by a thick account of the potentialities of the world revealed through discourse, is an energetic one. Art re-dedicates old facts and fuses it with a sense of passion. With art “we are carried to a refreshed attitude toward the circumstances and exigencies of ordinary experience.” (LW 10: 144) He expresses the point in another way when he states, “we are hardly conscious of anything metaphorical when we say of a picture or a story it is dead and of another that it has life.” (LW 10: 176) The infusion of facts with emotion, work with the play attitude can occur in any activity organized according to the aesthetic form. Dewey stresses that the energy of art can be transfused into what has heretofore been taken as mundane activity and meaningless occupations. The main culprit in robbing activities of their aesthetic potential remains the stifling conformity of the mass production system. A full account of Dewey’s criticism of modern industry is not in order at this time, but suffice it to say that one of the many benefits Dewey sees in greater worker control of firms would be the propagation of the aesthetic to every day work experience.

Aesthetic experience is not only energetic in process, it is energetic in potentiality. For consummations, by throwing entire histories into new perspectives, always suggest new and fruitful avenues for reconstructing meaning. Dewey states that “in satisfying an aroused expectancy [the aesthetic experience] also institutes a new longing, enacts fresh curiosity, establishes a changed suspense.” (LW 10: 174) Ex-

pressions while always temporary, remain within the continuum of the process of aesthetic experience in that they point in new directions, towards the possibility of initiation of a new process of expression. Art necessarily possesses an expansive nature, one that reaches out, temporally, beyond the individual experience of reception and initiates a change in the agent's relationship to her symbolic environment. "Art would not amplify experience if it withdrew the self into the self, nor would the experience that results from such retirement be expressive." (LW 10: 109) He states that "Where ever their is art the contingent and ongoing no longer work at cross purposes with the formal and recurrent but co-mingle in harmony." (LW 1: 269) The experience of consummation forces us to re-evaluate the past in light of the future, and therefore encourages curiosity and new possibilities for creative action.

Because of the harmony-structure of the aesthetic experience, the meanings associated with its history, its structure as an autonomous "event", Dewey can discuss the aesthetic experience by stating that it is "charged with meanings capable of immediately enjoyed possession." (LW 10: 269) Enjoyment in this statement should not be thought of purely in the traditional context of enjoyment as something pleasurable. We can enjoy being scared, challenged, or even disgusted, and we can certainly enjoy expressing these states to others. The evocative power of art becomes possible where there is "something at stake, something momentous and uncertain—like the outcome of a battle or the prospects for a harvest" (LW 10: 72). Also, the harmony characteristic of an aesthetic experience is an active one, where meanings are not simply forced together but changed through their interaction. And this harmony should be thought of as distinctly secular and self-reflective, in need of no spiritual or philosophic or transcendent support. Ryan emphasizes that "On the face of it Dewey was right; anthropologists agree that there are innumerable societies whose elaborate systems of ritual, taboo, and moral symbolism that are wholly secular." (Ryan, 361) Feelings of self-transcendence, being at harmony with our environment provided by aesthetic experience provide a provocative equivalent to the "goods internal to practices" as described by MacIntyre. But opposed to the act being significant in terms of the tradition, the tradition is significant in terms of the act. And because in aesthetic experience the structure of the act in its relationship to meaning becomes the vehicle of expression, the substance of many traditions, values, and practices can come to be expressive for the individual. In fact, it is helpful to characterize Dewey's ultimate ambition in outlining the possibility for aesthetic experience as the pluralization of meaning for the actor, or providing an account of how an individual can experiment with meaning and not simply apply a pre-existing script to a life.

In conclusion, I want to re-emphasize that what remains most important in understanding Dewey's description of the aesthetic is that a great piece of art, or an aesthetic experience is not pretty, beautiful or even sensual, it is lively or lifelike. A rose does not take on aesthetic qualities because the light it reflects upon the eyeball somehow physically touches us in a pleasing way. Aesthetic appreciation, as opposed to the appreciation of the taste of an ice cream cone, can only be understood in the context of the unavoidable relationship of the human being to her semiotic environment. And because the aesthetic is a category of meaning, its application should be regarded as a potential within all meanings that take on this form. This observation leads Dewey to accept the constitutive importance of social meanings yet question their status and their function in traditional accounts of the good. The importance of the account so far has been to show how Dewey begins with criticisms of liberalism that would today be called communitarian or interpretivist yet ends up with a substantially different account of the importance of meaning and its incorporation into accounts of agency and ethical satisfaction. Dewey states that, "The world it self can be creatively appropriated as material for consummatory meaning and value but only by paying infinite care and attention to its qualities and by educating one's own powers of action and perception." (Alexander, 263)

Experience and Communication

The third implication for reinterpreting humans as "experiencing" as opposed to "self-interpreting" is to locate creative action and consummatory experience in the context of others engaged in the same process. As previously noted, communitarians all share the contention that human beings form their identities by interactive interpretation with a background language or tradition. Dewey stresses also that in addition to our existence and genesis within a semiotic background, we exist, at least potentially, within an environment with other actors creating meaningful experience. For Dewey communication "is a process of making common what is isolated singular and particular." (LW 10: 244) This statement can be interpreted with both a strong and a weak definition. In terms of the weak, the common should be understood as the mutual action expectations described by G.H. Mead describes in *Mind, Self and Society* as the various "mes" we gain through childhood development. By repeated interaction with others, we internalize the roles that others anticipate us to perform, and we actually come to see ourselves through the eyes of others. But Dewey goes on to describe the construction of the common in a more expansive sense. He states that "the common is that which is found in the experience of a number of persons; anything in which a number of

persons participate is by that very fact common ... for it is activity that is shared by language and by other mediums of intercourse that qualities and value become common to the experience of a group of mankind.” (LW 10: 286) With this Dewey implies that not only cognitive data such as mutual expectations and similar facts can be shared, but he suggests that qualities can become the common experience of mankind. This appears to be an instance of Dewey contradicting himself, because the definition of quality given earlier, the pre cognitive, received data resulting from the interaction of the agent with her environment seems to preclude any sharing of the qualities of experience. But, the uniqueness of aesthetic experience is that it can communicate, not only fact, emotion, and meaning, but also can communicate all three in their interrelatedness as an experience. “Art is the most effective mode of communication there is,” He states. “The transfer of qualities that add emotional excitement, what is called the magic of the artist, resides in his ability to transfer values from one field of experience to another, to attach them to the values of common life” (LW 10: 118) A good painting not only communicates the appearance of its subject, but the subject of the painting’s meaning to the artist as it is situated within his culture or ‘field of experience’.

Shusterman gives one of the best descriptions of a Deweyan account of shared aesthetic experience. He states, “the work-song sung in the harvest fields not only provides the harvesters with a satisfying aesthetic experience, but is zest carries over into their work, invigorating and enhancing it and instilling a spirit of solidarity that lingers long after the song and work are finished.” (Schusterman, 10) Not only do the singers of the song immediately share their experience in a new way through their “collective aesthetic action,” but also we who hear the song hundreds of years after it was written receive the best depiction possible of the monotony, drudgery and solidarity felt by field hands in the midst of their labor. Because individual experiences are expressions of the situations of their creations and their unique histories, not only do situations and expressions come to be communicated, but the three aesthetic “effects” of consummation,--harmony, curiosity and energy-- can also be effectively transmitted. The act of receiving an expression necessitates creative interpretation just as the construction of the original expression. Dewey states that “The perceiver as well as the artist has to perceive, meet, overcome ... for in order to perceive aesthetically he must remake his past experience so that they can re-enter integrally to a new pattern” (LW 10: 150) The bond created by truly perceiving a piece of art embodies the experience of both parties. Dewey states, “looking at a foreign piece of art can produce a solidarity with other people more readily than ethnography” and that “the moral function of art is to remove prejudice doing away with the scales that keep the eyes from seeing” (LW 10: 325) Finally, it is

through communication that we can become resources for each other's aesthetic. The receiving of art instills the curiosity, the redefinition the harmony, all the benefits of creation.

Dewey claims that Art always occurs best in a community, where interaction involves both urges for self and common creation. Yet, the common should not be seen as a specific group of shared beliefs, but as the possibility of shared experience and common inquiry. When people communicate, they use each others as resources for their own attempts at embodying meaning. The experiences of others can be the instigation for new attempts at actively constructing an expression. The "generalized ethic" of the common is the knowledge that experience can be shared, and that consequences of actions can be expansive and generalized. To experience how one's actions affected them constitutes a qualitatively different experience than simply to know that one's actions effected another. In some ways, the community of experience should be understood as an aesthetic "market place of ideas" in the sense Mill uses the term, where not all experiences become part of the common, but the possibility of the common becomes comprehended by the participants.

Dewey and a Thick Account of Post-Traditional Tradition.

Dewey's emphasis upon the possibility of intelligent meaning construction through individual action and the power of aesthetically experienced meaning to provide "goods internal" to actions in the community of experience suggests the adoption of something like Cohen and Arato's concept of "post-traditional tradition." In their work *Civil Society and Political Theory* Cohen and Arato realize that their Kantian moral position must take heed of the Hegelian critique by offering cultural supports to their deontological edifice. Yet, the introduction of *Sittlichkeit* seems to threaten the universalistic and rationalistic aspirations of their theory. What they hope to do with their concept to split the difference between the two concepts and outline the parameters of a "culture of rationalism" that will provide the motivational and effective supports to their otherwise formal procedures. To encourage these attitudes, they state that one of the sociological functions of their vision of civil society will be to encourage traditions and cultural practices that will further procedural norms such as self-reflexivity, tolerance, and other aspects of communicative rationality. They see the secondary associations in civil society as "a post-conventional post-traditional orientation to our own tradition, or at least to those aspects of our tradition and collective identity that have become problematic. Moreover, it implies that only those aspects of our collective identity and common tradition that are compatible with the principles of democratic legitimacy and basic

rights can provide the content of valid political norms.” (Cohen & Arato, 372) This is possible because “the procedures and presuppositions of rational agreement themselves obtain legitimating force and become the legitimating grounds (metanorms) replacing such material principles of justification as nature and God.” (Cohen & Arato, 369) This account, though, is confused concerning the actual status of traditions in relation to discourse ethic. On the one hand Cohen and Arato posit a dependent relationship between traditions and morals. They state, quoting Habermas “discourse cannot by itself ensure that the conditions necessary for the actual participation of all concerned are met. Discourse ethics is dependent on a form of life that meets it halfway.” (Cohen & Arato, 388) But their previous statements imply that actors, who have already adopted the discursive metanorm, will choose what traditions support this norm. Cohen and Arato make moves in the direction of solving this problem when they state “participation can have socializing effect on its own, and their relevant principles are such that we can all come to embrace. It is in such a process that discursive conflict resolution could itself acquire normative power.” (ibid) But the reasons for the participant to initiate such a discussion in the first place remains unclear. In actuality Cohen and Arato are aware of this flaw in their theory and state “The question of the generation of empirical motives for participation in discursive conflict resolution then belongs to the domains of social theory or social psychology.” (Cohen & Arato, 389)

Despite their confusion, Cohen and Arato begin down the correct path in their queries toward a more self-reflexive attitude towards social meanings. What they do not do is provide any account of the process of adopting a post-traditional attitude toward tradition, or seriously address the “meaning gap” that arises when tradition loses its transcendent and historical moorings. Dewey, in his attempts to wed reflective, creative action to the aesthetic form, hopes to bridge the gap between criticism and meaning and show how each can be mutually supportive, and how each presents its own possible goods. Due to his realization that traditional culture gains much of its motivating power through its aesthetic qualities, he demonstrates that criticism, disenchantment, and feelings of harmony, and the sublime needs not be in utter tension. Of course the loss of the transcendental does not occur without certain liabilities. Constructing and receiving aesthetic experience remains a difficult and precarious process, and Dewey wants to emphasize that new critical attitudes offer, if not equivalent goods in the sense of certainty, new and different opportunities to increase fulfilling experience.

To substantiate the claim that post-traditional aesthetic experiences can produce somewhat equivalent effects as that of traditional identities, let me “walk through” a comparison of the two models of relationship to meaning and how they both relate

to the aesthetic. To reiterate, in the Deweyan analysis, all actions begin when problematic situations interrupt the stream of experience and the actor attempts to creatively construct how an action can embody meaning. In a traditional relationship to meaning, the actor “solves” this “identity problem” through the use of the symbols and meanings of a tradition. New, confusing situations come to have meaning, and actions come to have a purpose, through their congruence with the traditional culture, and therefore transcendence by association with the larger, older and authorized semiotic system. Creativity can play important part of this process, in that tradition comes to be rearticulated and proven to provide meaning in new situations, which become reinvigorated in the process. Yet the logic of congruence need not involve the aesthetic construction of meaning. In fact, to receive the knowledge of the transcendent one need not engage in “action” at all. Instead a habitual, not creative application of rules, behaviors and meanings could reassure an individual that she was acting in accordance with the will of God, the history of her people, or the practices that have “served her well” over time. Surely, problems occur in traditional societies, but individuals and institutions forgo pursuing the possibilities for creatively reconstructing meaning through action. This “calcification” often plays a role in the downfall of traditions;³ they must expose themselves to challenge and problems to allow themselves the possibility of reinvigoration. The energy described by Dewey in the process of intelligently constructing a consummation, and consciously creating a new meaning, is not present. Cognitively, the experience, might have the same interpretation, but its status differs. The harmony can still be present, substantively, but not in the same way, concerning the overall quality. And also, the meaning will possess different qualities, and obtain a different status, if it is communicated, received and shared, as opposed to being created in isolation. In fact aesthetic experience that embodies the three moments distinct moments, consummatory, creative or communicated experience, constitutes something quite special and not easily obtained in Dewey’s description. Although, Dewey describes all cultures as possessing these traits in partial form, modernity presents the possibility of them interacting in a specific constellation.

In contrasting the logic of semiotic congruence to post-traditional orientations to culture, the discussion should again begin with a problematic situation concerning how action relates to meaning. A possible form of solution, for example, would be when a catholic approaches the Bible and church doctrine, talks about it, forms an action which takes into account others, makes an expression that is intelligible to others. The act of lighting a candle at an altar would be the culmination of this

³ See Edward Shills, *Tradition*, 1981

process, the act reiterating the individual's connection to the larger Church and Catholic cosmology. As with the traditional Catholic, a person possessing a post-traditional identity would most likely also begin with the Bible, the tradition from which she comes. But the difference between the traditional and the non-traditional is that, for the latter the orientation, as a method of approaching culture, or en-acting culture; it does not provide a good, but provides the ability to get new goods. The ability to extend a search for an answer to a question, to maintain productive tension, to open oneself to communication from others; these are the characteristics of a post-traditional attitude. Therefore, one could see how the lighting of a candle in a church would possess a qualitatively different status if it was the culmination of a process of grief, or the consummation of a long, difficult inquiry. Also, one can see how, if the actor's goal consists in constructing a consummation in a unique situation, how unique combinations of meanings, including aspects of novel traditions, can play a role in this process; this is due to variety and the not immediately apparent relevance of different solutions, with the consequence that individuals need to think, and communicate their experiences to one another. Demystification creates more possibilities, but actors must possess the attitudes that allow themselves to be open to them.

Therefore the best way to describe Dewey's culture is as a community of equals engaged in the joint effort to create fulfilling and meaningful experience. Individuals engage in projects of their own and with others in an effort to make their lives aesthetic projects. This culture of open exchange and mutual reciprocity mirrors descriptions of the values envisioned as necessary for the exchange, tolerance and mutuality present for a democratic culture. For now what is important to reiterate is that created meanings are not inauthentic. It is the manner in which people create them that gives them their power. "What a difference it would actually make in the arts of conduct, personal and social, if the experimental theory were adopted not as mere theory but as a part of the working equipment of habitual attitudes on the part of everyone, (LW 4: 214)" Dewey questions. If this attitude were adopted then the new democratic culture would be characterized by "continuous reconstruction and reordering of experience as to increase its recognized meaning or social content, and the capacity of individuals to act as directive guardians of this reorganization." (MW 9: 332)

In this paper I have attempted to show, initially, how meanings are not only recognized according to their content, but experienced according to their form. I have attempted to show that a difference exists between knowing and feeling, and both must be present to compromise a fulfilling experience. I have concluded my discussion by suggesting that "modernity" actually presents new avenues for the experi-

ence of meaning, and that one of the main benefits of “traditional” ways of life need not be sacrificed when adopting a critical and secular ways of life. Although certainty may be absent, harmony, fellowship and expression can characterize a post-traditional culture. But possessing this relationship to meaning is not a matter of merely adopting the “aesthetic attitude” toward culture, whatever that may be. Dewey stresses that certain attitudes have to be encouraged by the environment for meaning to be aesthetic, or, in other words that democratic virtues consist largely of gaining the skills of creatively constructing aesthetic experience.

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