

Abstract

The views of John Dewey and Kurt Vonnegut are often criticized for opposite reasons: Dewey's philosophy is said to be naively optimistic while Vonnegut's work is read as cynical. The standard debates over the views of the two thinkers cause readers to overlook the similarities in the way each approaches tragic experience. This paper examines Dewey's philosophic account of time and meaning and Vonnegut's use of time travel in his autobiographical novel *Slaughterhouse-Five* to illustrate these similarities. This essay demonstrates how both Dewey and Vonnegut embrace the ameliorative possibilities of art for preserving individuality and meaning in the face of tragic experience.

Keywords: John Dewey, Kurt Vonnegut, Slaughterhouse-Five, time

I. Introduction

Standard criticisms of the views of Kurt Vonnegut and John Dewey tend to obscure important insights common to both of them.¹ A typical reading of Vonnegut's novel *Slaughterhouse-Five* holds that the author advocates a passive acceptance of overwhelming circumstances that do unspeakable—unnarratable and unaccountable—harm to human beings. Vonnegut's protagonist appears to display this passivity as he repeats the pithy and plaintive phrase, "So it goes." Typically Vonnegut has been characterized as a cynic, fatalist, quietist, or nihilist; these views are surveyed and disputed in an essay by Robert Merrill and Peter A. Scholl, and in an essay by Lawrence Broer (Merrill and Scholl 2001; Broer 2001). John Tilton

The Meaningless- ness of Coming Unstuck in Time

MARTIN COLEMAN



considers the widespread view that Vonnegut is “a conscienceless escapist” to be “deplorable” (1977, 25).

A widespread criticism of Dewey’s philosophy holds that it cannot readily acknowledge the unintelligibility of tragedy as exemplified in irreconcilably ruptured friendships or, to offer a most extreme example, systematic genocide. Dewey’s faith in intelligence has been thought to blind him to the gritty reality of human suffering. For example, Cornel West and Raymond Boisvert maintain that Dewey lacks a sense of the tragic, and Boisvert invokes like-minded critics such as Randolph Bourne, Morris Raphael Cohen, and Reinhold Niebuhr (West 1999; Boisvert 1999). Donald Morse objects to Boisvert’s position and cites Sidney Hook’s defense of Dewey, “Pragmatism and the Tragic Sense of Life” (Morse 2001; Hook 1974). Naoko Saito attempts to move beyond this particular debate by suggesting “a new and promising possibility” in Dewey’s thought for “living with the tragic” (Saito 2003, 276). In this spirit I examine the views of both Dewey and Vonnegut in hope of finding new possibilities for living with tragic experience. To accomplish this, I approach the debate about Dewey’s tragic sensibilities somewhat obliquely. I use Vonnegut’s work to demonstrate Dewey’s theory, thereby countering the criticism directed at both writers.

I contend that Vonnegut is not a fatalist, cynic, quietist, or nihilist, and that with *Slaughterhouse-Five* he has produced a work of deep moral significance; neither is Dewey a naïve optimist lacking a grasp of the tragic. Vonnegut’s and Dewey’s views converge in important ways—ways that together demonstrate a way to live honestly and meaningfully in a radically contingent universe.

Vonnegut’s novel, motivated by his survival of the World War II bombing of Dresden, shows that “there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre” (1968, 19); he cannot give reasons why he survived the bombing to write about it. It is impossible that his survival could justify or redeem the enormous loss and destruction of the massacre, and that very impossibility underscores the accidental character of existence. But the accidental character of existence need not necessarily void all meaning. Jerome Klinkowitz, commenting on *Slaughterhouse-Five*, contends that Vonnegut’s work demonstrates how “the human bond” can survive such an assault on meaning as a massacre (Klinkowitz 2001, 123). Dewey’s attention to experience provides a philosophic account of what this might mean and further suggests that the fact of inescapable contingency need not lead to cynicism or despair.

Slaughterhouse-Five in fact illustrates a Deweyan way of living with tragic experience; Vonnegut’s autobiographical novel about surviving genocide provides an experiential context for Dewey’s philosophical writing on time, individuality, and meaning. This certainly is not to imply that Dewey himself had no experience of loss and despair. The death of his two-year-old son Morris in 1893 was, according to his

daughter Jane, “a blow from which neither of his parents ever fully recovered” (Schilpp 24). In 1904, Dewey’s eight-year-old son Gordon died, and, in a letter to William James, Dewey lamented that he would “never understand why [Gordon] was taken from the world” (1904.11.21 [00902]).² Dewey, in a letter to his wife, wrote of living with Gordon’s death and “how much harder & emptier . . . it gets all the time” and admitted, “I don’t know how much longer I’m going to be able to hold out.” (1905.03.06 [01458]).³ In looking to Vonnegut’s work, then, I am not neglecting Dewey’s experience. Rather, I suggest that exploring the relation between the two writers and the two different literary forms provides breadth and depth to the views on tragedy and art expressed in the work of both.

II. Experience

For Dewey, philosophical inquiry begins with concrete experience rather than *a priori* concepts, tradition, or authority. This means, “that things. . . are what they are experienced as” (MW 3:158).⁴ Though obviously there are existences prior to experience, there is no prior ontological realm of reality that can be accessed only through the distorting medium of experience. Dewey advocates the adoption by philosophy of the same kind of faith in experience that has been so fruitful for natural science. Experience, the starting point for natural science, can be the same for philosophy. In this way philosophy can enrich human experience rather than serve an agenda concealed in unacknowledged biases and unexamined traditional conceptions.

The adoption of a scientific approach need not entail reductionism. Experience presents actual values, hence they may be assumed “to reach down into nature, and to testify to something that belongs to nature as truly as does the mechanical structure attributed to it in physical science” (LW 1:13). When experience is taken, as it is in science, as the starting point of inquiry, experienced values will be taken as indicative of something real and significant.

Dewey’s empirical approach reconceives experience itself. He contrasts a traditional conception of experience that assumes preanalyzed atoms of experience with a conception that begins with experience as it is experienced. Experience as it is experienced is both relational and disconnected. Relations are real and are not, in themselves, problematic in the way many philosophers have imagined. That is, relations are not something external to be imposed on fundamental sense data nor are they something preexisting in a universal mind.

Instead, to understand experience empirically is to understand it as a biological phenomenon. Empirically, experiencing is living; it “goes on in and because of an enviroing medium” (MW 10:7). Dewey writes, “the career and destiny of a living being are bound up with its interchanges with its environment, not externally but in the most intimate way” (LW

10:19). Experience is an interaction of the live creature and its environment. The interaction of creature and environment is a double connection; the energies in the environment constitute the experiencing creature while the creature makes a difference in the environmental energies. Experience, then, entails being influenced by environing factors while also acting on those factors. Dewey writes, "Experience . . . is a matter of *simultaneous* doings and sufferings" (MW 10:9) or, in terms he employs in *Art as Experience*, doings and undergoings.

The task of philosophy then becomes making sense of experience rather than discovering ultimate reality. The question is not "what is reality?" or "what is really real?" but rather "what is the meaning of this particular experience?" or "what is going on here?" (MW 10:7). This is to ask: Why am I having *this* experience in *this* way? Where does this experience come from? Where does it lead, if anywhere? What possibilities are being presented? What possibilities am I ignoring?

This essay addresses experiences of time with attention to seemingly anomalous experiences of time and a related sense of meaninglessness. I think that Dewey's account explains such experiences and suggests possibilities for recovering meaningful experience. His experiential approach is one of honesty in the face of undeniably horrific overwhelming circumstances, but it also can find hope if there be any. This is seen in Dewey's treatment of time and meaning; and Vonnegut's novel, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, illustrates Dewey's ameliorative philosophy.

III. Unstuck in Time

Slaughterhouse-Five tells the story of Billy Pilgrim, an American prisoner of war captured after the Battle of the Bulge. He is in Dresden, Germany, as a prisoner of war, on 13 February 1945, when the Allies firebomb the city, destroying it and killing thousands of people, mostly civilians. Refugees from the East fleeing the invading Russians had doubled the population of the city. Estimates of casualties have ranged from 35,000 to 200,000, but a commonly accepted figure is 135,000, a figure attributed to the Dresden Police President. Billy Pilgrim survives the attack because he works in a converted slaughterhouse making vitamin-enriched syrup. When the bombing begins he takes shelter with others in a meat-locker dug out of solid rock beneath the slaughterhouse.

After the war, he returns home and lives another thirty years as a husband, father, and optometrist. He also has recurring experiences involving time travel and creatures from a planet called Tralfamadore. His story begins:

Listen:

Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time.

Billy has gone to sleep a senile widower and awakened on his wedding day. He has walked though a door in 1955 and come out

another one in 1941. He has gone back and through that door to find himself in 1963. He has seen his birth and death many times, he says, and pays random visits to all the events in between.

He says.

Billy is spastic in time, has no control over where he is going next, and the trips aren't necessarily fun. He is in a constant state of stage fright, he says, because he never knows what part of his life he is going to have to act in next. [Vonnegut 1968, 23]

Billy Pilgrim experiences irregular temporal relations. He can recognize a sequence of events, but he is unable to distinguish temporal relations among them so that he might understand why one follows another. His experience is haphazard, disconnected, and thin on significance for his development as an individual.

Billy Pilgrim's experiences are not wrong or untrue, because the things experienced really are what they are experienced as—that is, frightening, disorienting, unpredictable, discontinuous. But this does not entail that his experiences mean what he thinks they mean, that his immediate sense of his experiences is the final word on their relations. In fact, he neglects certain relations and seems, to himself, to come unstuck in time.

Vonnegut's narrative strongly suggests that when Billy Pilgrim travels in time, physically he remains in the environment that prompted the experience of coming unstuck. The opening narration includes the expression "he says" three times, suggesting skepticism about Billy's account. Accounts of Billy's time travel show that he goes nowhere. The first time Billy Pilgrim comes unstuck in time he is fleeing pursuers with three other American soldiers until he stops running. "He was leaning against a tree with his eyes closed. His head was tilted back and his nostrils were flaring" (1968, 43). After this journey in time, Vonnegut writes, "somebody was shaking Billy awake. . . . He was back in World War Two again . . ." (1968, 47). Vonnegut gives no account of Billy surprising the other character by appearing out of thin air. Similarly, Billy, lying in a hospital bed, is visited by his daughter:

"Daddy—" she said tentatively. "Daddy—?"

But Billy was ten years away, back in 1958. [1968, 188]

Billy Pilgrim's experiences need not be interpreted as experiences of time travel; rather one might suspect that he cannot make sense of temporal relations. He seems unable to answer these questions: Out of what do these experiences arise? Through what are they occurring? Toward what are they going? The questions do occur to him when he is in a prison camp and realizes he has "a new problem: Where had he come from and where should he go now?" (1968, 125). But he has no response other than to come unstuck in time a few moments later. Inability to

answer these questions suggests neglect of relations that make experiences temporally meaningful. These are questions about the qualitative aspects of experience denoted by “past,” “present,” and “future.”

IV. Experience and Knowledge of Time

These questions ask after relations of experience understood as an interaction among existences. Dewey claims that every existence is an event (LW 1:63). This follows from his understanding of experience as an interaction of live creature and environing conditions. If existences were completely static they could not enter the relations that are experienced. Timeless, eternal, and unchanging entities lie outside of experience. So if we experience something as an existence, we experience it in ongoing interaction and process of becoming.

Furthermore, Dewey writes of existences that

Any becoming is from, to, through. Its fromness, or out-of-ness, is *its* pastness; its towardness or intrinsic direction, is *its* futurity; that through which the becoming passes is *its* presentness. No becoming can be perceived or thought of except as out of something into something, and this involves a series of transitions which, taken distributively, belong both to the ‘out-of’ and the ‘into,’ or from a ‘through.’
[LW 2:66]

Any change or transition has these qualities. This means that, in Dewey’s words, “past-present-future are on the same level, because all are phases” of becoming (LW 2:66). These temporal qualities are on the same level, and not ontologically distinct categories.

Dewey’s account postulating time as part of the experience of change contrasts with accounts that make time a container for events with parts distinct from one another. The difference in the two sorts of accounts suggests a shortcoming of the image of time as a stream of sorts, in which isolated entities might enter, exit, or jump about randomly. The image of time as stream supposes time as a medium separate from things that exist temporally. Dewey’s account suggests that time does not consist of separate sections analogous to spatial divisions that a supposed traveler may pass to and from when he comes unstuck from the external bonds of time.

Following Dewey, time is better understood as an integral aspect of the interaction of things, as a quality of experience. Billy Pilgrim’s story reveals something about the way he has his experiences, not an alien theory about time. Dewey’s view does not make time any more subject to individual whims than are the ordinary and solid existences with which we regularly interact. The story of Billy Pilgrim shows this explicitly: Billy may disregard the temporal aspects of his experience, but he cannot do so without consequences.

Time, on Dewey's account, is not subjective, and stands in contrast to theories that claim that time is in the mind. Augustine gives such a theory—explaining time in terms of expectation, attention, and memory—and shows that the real problem lies in making knowledge the basis of time. The contrast is important because Billy Pilgrim appears to have knowledge of events and their sequence, and yet time still is problematic for him.

Augustine attempts to reconcile an eternal and timeless God with God's temporal creation by making knowledge the basis of time. He is trying to account for what it was that God created in making time and how God can be outside of it. The key role of knowledge in Augustine's account is made explicit when he characterizes God as a powerful mind that knows immediately that which a human can know only through expectation, attention, and memory (1961, 279). For God there is no change, no variation in feeling or sense as there is in the one who knows a temporal event. Because God is eternal, God's knowledge is unchanging; being outside of time means knowing everything immediately, without gaps or any process of comprehension. The tension between eternal God and temporal creation is resolved through knowledge.

Dewey does not have the theoretical constraints that come with the presupposition of an eternal being. This allows his account greater clarity than Augustine's: time for Dewey is objective. Augustine, in relegating time to knowledge of change removes it from the world. He writes, "I must not allow my mind to insist that time is something objective" (1961, 276). But for Dewey, since time is the experience of change, and experience is the interaction of creature and environment, time remains as objective as any natural existence. By rejecting tradition, doctrine, and superstition and assuming the naturalistic standpoint of science, Dewey provides an account of time that connects human creatures with the world; it is not burdened with the impossible task of connecting temporal creatures with something outside of time.

The problem that Augustine attempts to solve arises from assuming, in Dewey's words, "a knower in general, who is outside of the world to be known, and who is defined in terms antithetical to the traits of the world" (MW 10:23). This results in insoluble puzzles that seem only to keep intellectual wheels spinning far from any point of contact with the ground. The story of Billy Pilgrim shows the consequences of understanding time in terms of knowledge; it is precisely his insensibility to temporal experience, in spite of his knowledge of time measurements and of a comprehensive theory of time, that leaves his life chaotic and him "in a constant state of stage fright" (Vonnegut 1968, 23).

V. Fatal Dream

Briefly, time is change. But in pursuing wisdom, important ideas cannot be stated briefly; and briefly stated ideas can be only suggestions,

signs, or indications of experiences that contain the possibilities of wisdom. So the whole story of time cannot be contained in pithy identities, spatial metaphors, or schemes of measurement. The story of time lies in experiences. Experiences have temporal relating qualities that are vital to making sense of one's experience. Dewey writes, "any experience of anything in being an experience of a becoming or event contains within itself qualities which are named pastness, presentness, and futurity" (LW 2:66).

According to this view, Billy Pilgrim's experiences can be understood and critiqued rather than either accepted at face value or rejected out of hand as unreflective episodes or private subjective aberrations. Certainly he reflects on his experiences and *tries* to make sense of them. And his experiences are real and objective; that is, they enter into interactions with others who shake him awake or speak to him tentatively. But his reflection is limited by his insensibility to temporal relations. He is ignorant of the meanings of his experience, that is, of how his experiences are related. Billy Pilgrim does his best to determine the meaning of his experiences, but his sense of coming unstuck in time and his postulation of time travel indicates an insensibility to experience just as do eternal philosophies and static logical systems purporting to give complete accounts of reality.

Because of Billy Pilgrim's insensibility to temporal relations, the past is lost to him; he is blind to the present, and the future is wholly inscrutable, bringing good fortune or pain unaccountably and mysteriously. He cannot identify past events of terror and helplessness that established his isolation; and so he cannot discriminate among events and make sense of them. In the present he is frequently unable to respond intelligently to situations that overwhelm him; his indiscriminating response is to leave them all behind, he says, for another situation in a different time and place. This response makes it impossible for him to even recognize a problem such that he could begin to envision a different future; the future never presents possibilities, only shocks.

Time is meaningless to Billy Pilgrim because he is unable to reliably relate experiences temporally. He does not feel the connections among his experiences; rather he feels disconnections and disorder absolutely. He cannot employ the notion of time in trying to make sense of his experiences. He uses verb tenses, can tell time, and obviously lives in time, but his response to such observations is that time is unreal. This is understandable: it is precisely change, the loss inevitably related to time, that has shaken Billy to the depths of his being. In denying the reality of time, he is trying to find a way to carry on in the face of the incapacitating loss and pain produced by the war. His response is rational and sane; unfortunately his particular method puts reason and sanity at great risk. This is because his response to his problematic situation is to deny experience, to end his experiment after one attempted solution.

Billy Pilgrim's denial takes the form of a revelation about the nature of time from the inhabitants of Tralfamadore. Billy explains that, according to the Tralfadorians, "All moments, past, present, and future, always have existed, always will exist. The Tralfadorians can look at all the different moments just the way we can look at a stretch of the Rocky Mountains, for instance. . . . It is just an illusion we have here on Earth that one moment follows another one" (Vonnegut 1968, 27). In Dewey's account this is a denial of time, because it is a denial of change, of interaction, and of possibility. The Tralfadorian denial is made explicit in the words of one who says, "All time is all time. It does not change. It does not lend itself to warnings or explanations. It simply *is*" (Vonnegut 1968, 88).

The Tralfadorian account of time recalls Augustine's characterization of God, who "[i]n the Beginning . . . knew heaven and earth, and there was no change in [God's] knowledge" (1961, 280). Just as God, being eternal, knows temporal creation entirely and immediately, Tralfadorians have instantaneous comprehension of "all the different moments" (Vonnegut 1968, 27). They claim that experiences of out-of, through, and into are illusory. For a human being to assume the Tralfadorian view suggests a privileging of ideas over experience, and the denial of experience. The only way for a human being to make sense of the Tralfadorian view is to assume that time consists of what appears static, namely ideas or concepts abstracted from the flow of immediacy.

When something is discriminated from the flow of experience and named (when an event is set aside as an object), the named thing is assigned a more or less stable identity. This naming or characterization is an expedient for dealing with the onrush of experience, but it is a development out of experience, not the discovery of an entity existing prior to the inquiry that resulted in the characterization. This phase of experience is continuous with the activity of inquiring or knowing. Traditionally—and problematically—it has been detached and isolated from the more apparently transient phases of experience. In other words, the results of particular cases of inquiring have been hypostatized as eternal and unchanging knowledge independent of experience.

So when Billy Pilgrim adopts the Tralfadorian view of time, he aligns himself with a traditional privileging of knowledge, wrongly understood, over concrete human experience. This explains how he can use verb tenses, tell time, and observe the conventions of temporal beings while simultaneously denying the reality of time. He follows Augustine who denies conventional designations of past, present, and future and advocates instead a present of past things, a present of present things, and present of future things; but who writes, "[i]ncorrect though it is, let us comply with usage" (1961, 269). Both can acquiesce to convention, which patterns and is patterned after experience,

because both think they possess knowledge, which outshines transient, variable experience. This is denial of experience, and the story of Billy Pilgrim's chaotic and disjointed life suggests the disastrous consequences of attempting to live an account of time that separates knowledge and experience.

Sometimes the Tralfamadorian account seems, like Dewey's account, to reject the idea of time as a separate medium, though this poses difficulties for an explanation of Billy Pilgrim's supposed time travel. The Tralfamadorians explain to Billy that individuals in particular moments of time are like bugs trapped in amber (Vonnegut 1968, 77). This suggests that we are inseparably stuck in the time we are in. The seeming incoherence of being simultaneously stuck and unstuck in time is further indication of the insanity of Billy Pilgrim's predicament. Ultimately, though, the main criticism of the Tralfamadorian account is its denial of change and experience.

The problem with the account adopted by Billy Pilgrim is not merely the contradiction it entails, as if logic were the final authority. The problem is that Billy neglects the conflict in his concrete experience, that is, the conflict between his reasonable attempt to eliminate terrifying situations and his isolating method of doing so. It is a conflict denied, a tension ignored. He neglects to ask, "What is going on here?" after his first answer (namely, that he is unstuck in time). This conflict has solidified into a permanent block on his relations with his environment. His experience and development is frozen, and he is lost in a dream—OR FATAL DREAM—which, as Lawrence Broer points out, is an anagram of the name of the planet Tralfamadore, the origin of Billy's theory of time (Broer 1994, 887). A dream is what Billy Pilgrim opts for in response to his frightful experiences. He adopts an account of time that assumes a mistaken conception of human knowledge and thereby rejects vital aspects of experience for a dream-like state devoid of temporal roots, significant experience, and meaning. He is calm and untroubled, but isolated from his own experience.

Billy Pilgrim says the most important thing he learned from the Tralfamadorians is the unreality of death. He explains,

When a Tralfamadorian sees a corpse, all he thinks is that the dead person is in bad condition in that particular moment, but that the same person is just fine in plenty of other moments. Now, when I myself hear that somebody is dead, I simply shrug, and say what the Tralfamadorians say about dead people, which is 'So it goes.' [Vonnegut 1968, 27]

Billy's view, to me at least, is understandable if not actually appealing, because the 'so it goes' attitude almost feels forced upon me in the face of overwhelming forces such as death or war or the machinations of

gigantic organizations. What else can I say? But as Billy demonstrates, once adopted the attitude deadens discriminatory ability so that it becomes increasingly difficult to determine what is overwhelming and what is not. One gains a sense of peace in the world but loses his or her soul. Indeed, Billy Pilgrim succumbs and loses time, sanity, and individuality. He becomes a cosmic plaything.

Dewey illuminates the kind of loss Billy experiences, explaining that the denial of time entails the loss of individuality, because human individuality *is* the temporally related events that comprise biography; this history of changes makes the human individual unique. And this is a development in time, “not something given once for all at the beginning which then proceeds to unroll as a ball of yarn may be unwound” (LW 14:103). “Temporal seriality is the very essence . . . of the human individual” (LW 14:102). Dewey writes

Genuine time, if it exists as anything else except the measure of motions in space, is all one with the existence of individuals as individuals, with the creative, with the occurrence of unpredictable novelties. Everything that can be said contrary to this conclusion is but a reminder that an individual may lose his individuality, for individuals become imprisoned in routine and fall to the level of mechanisms. Genuine time then ceases to be an integral element in their being. Our behavior becomes predictable because it is but an external rearrangement of what went before. [LW 14:112]

Dewey is describing a life of mechanical monotony and meaninglessness. This is the life outside of time.

So, I understand Billy Pilgrim’s predicament as a broadly human predicament. Part of being human is encountering overwhelming forces that threaten to destroy individuality and eliminate meaning. But the only options are not despair in the face of the fact or denial of the fact. There are possibilities other than various degrees of suicide or engaging in one of the endless varieties of denial, which range from Billy’s fantasies about time to the misguided toughness of just getting over it, moving on, finding closure. Faithfulness to experience demands that we recognize the fact of overwhelming forces, but this alone is not the solution. The aim is to keep going, keep having meaningful experience, and keep growing as an individual.

This includes intelligently rejecting approaches that block experience and assume that the aim of human living is to find a secure, fixed order that eliminates all pain and loss. In fact, believing in such a fixed order of this sort solidifies pain and loss into an obstacle of experience, as Billy Pilgrim’s denial of time shows. A different approach would admit that hurt and loss are real, but that the meanings of such facts may change and grow in time.

I hardly think this different approach amounts to salvation. It is not always possible to keep going. That, in fact, is death. The point I am making is that it still may be worthwhile to distinguish between mortal life and the fact of death. I am not trying to deny the inevitability and finality of death; rather I am trying to figure out how to live well if possible.

IV. Keeping Going and Making Meaning

Keeping going means continuing to have meaningful experiences, but this is what appears to be obstructed by the fact of overwhelming forces. So the question becomes how one has meaningful experience when that experience is obstructed. And the answer is not by changing unchangeable facts, but rather by continuing to explore meanings of such facts and more importantly the possibilities in one's experience. Vonnegut's novel is an example of such exploration, and therefore illustrates Dewey's suggestion to take experience seriously. Vonnegut does not tell any secrets of salvation, which is not possible. Rather he tells a story. And, following Dewey, I think this is what empirical method consists in. This is how we make meaning, how we make sense of experience, and how we inquire into what is going on here.

Dewey writes that "a meaning is a method of action, a way of using things as means to a shared consummation" (LW 1:147). Meaning is a way of acting that is a means to a shared experience, to a common point of view, to an agreed-upon conception of things. It is primarily active and social; that is, it assumes interaction with other human beings. Experience is made meaningful when one can express the connections experienced and enrich human understanding of what is going on here.

Dewey's empirical method in philosophy aims at this sharing of meaning. He suggests how it does so by employing the image of a road map. He writes that empirical method

places before others a map of the road that has been traveled; they may accordingly, if they will, re-travel the road to inspect the landscape for themselves. Thus the findings of one may be rectified and extended by the findings of others, with as much assurance as is humanly possible of confirmation, extension and rectification. [LW 1:34]

Meaning is made as we communicate our experiences. This is as true in science as in art, and the image of the road map is meant to suggest laboratory reports and logic proofs as well as poems and paintings. Each one, different in scope and context from the others, is a way of presenting the results of some experience as a means to further experience.

The idea is that one convinces others not by cogency of argument but by presenting a course of doings and undergoings that lead to

further experiences. The offered road map is really an invitation to follow the same course and learn for oneself. Of course, the map is made according to the eccentricities of the author, but this is no fatal flaw if they are acknowledged. On the other hand, if a map is claimed to be the only way things can be, any invitation to follow that map sets a trap. The document becomes propaganda, and the meanings are shallow because imposed rather than made freely.

Vonnegut's novel is a road map. He is explicit that the book grows out of his own experiences in World War II. His novel is about the pain of those experiences and the novel itself is an attempt to find a way meaningfully to go on while acknowledging that pain. The strange conceit of time-travel is not a gimmick; it is a way to express deep conflicts in experience. Reading itself may constitute an experience, and the author intends by that means to share with the reader aspects of the author's experience: the conflict, the absurdity, the isolation, the violence done to reason and understanding. He declares no doctrine; he invites the reader to glean what insights he or she can from the immediate experience of the work.

One example of how Vonnegut's novel makes meaning out of stubborn fact comes from the use of the phrase, "So it goes." As noted, critics have read the phrase as an expression of Vonnegut's own fatalism or nihilism. For example, David Goldsmith invokes the phrase when characterizing *Slaughterhouse-Five* as resigned and lacking the ironic indignation of earlier works by Vonnegut (Goldsmith 1972, 29). Even if the phrase is not read as an expression of Vonnegut's own sentiments, its function is not always fully grasped. Patrick Shaw mentions the phrase as an indicator of the loss of responsibility for violence (Shaw 2000, 111–12). Jerome Klinkowitz, though he does not assign passive acceptance to the author, seems to read the phrase as an expression of our verbal helplessness in the face of violence and massacre (2001, 123). The phrase may function in these latter two ways, but it also does more.

As noted above, Billy Pilgrim, following the Tralfamadorians, uses the phrase whenever he encounters a dead person. And throughout the narration the phrase appears after any mention of death, including the crucifixion of Christ, the bombing of Dresden, the practice of lynching, the explanation of torture devices, and the death of the novel. When used by the Tralfamadorians or Billy Pilgrim the phrase does indeed have the fatalistic aspect that Vonnegut's critics want to attribute to the author. But the novelist is not his characters, and it is incorrect to read "So it goes" as fatalistic when employed by Vonnegut himself in the narration of the novel.

Peter Reed, in his essay "The End of the Road: *Slaughterhouse-Five*, or *The Children's Crusade*," suggests that Vonnegut takes up the expression "So it goes," with which Billy Pilgrim's encounters with the world stop, and begins again, making new meanings unimaginable to Billy.

On Reed's view Vonnegut's repetition throughout the novel of "So it goes" has the opposite effect of Billy Pilgrim's usage. Reed observes that "So it goes" becomes an "incremental refrain, building meaning with each restatement." It may seem funny or ironic the first time but it becomes increasingly irritating and irreverent. Reed thinks this irritation is the right response because the phrase has become a pointer to another death or atrocity and emphasizes what otherwise runs the risk of being overlooked. Reed writes, "'So it goes,' initially almost a shrugging acceptance of the inevitable, becomes a grim reminder meaning almost the opposite of what it says, and finally another more poignant kind of expression of the inevitable. . . . the device which had first brought smiles leaves us close to tears" (Reed 2001, 25).

Vonnegut the novelist keeps going where Billy Pilgrim the character is frozen like a bug in amber. Vonnegut appropriates the seemingly fatalistic phrase, "So it goes," and reloads it with new meaning, namely the meaning of an increasingly conspicuous indicator of the loss of human connection. The repetition of the phrase and the accumulated meaning demonstrate the inescapably temporal aspect of experience—its meaning does not remain static and in fact grows as it recurs in the novel. Vonnegut exploits the temporal aspect of experience to defend against inhumanity.

Hence, Vonnegut's effort to tell a story exemplifies how to keep going while acknowledging the fact of overwhelming forces. It may tell the story of what happens when one gives up time, but the novel itself does not follow the Tralfamadorian view. Compare Vonnegut's novel to the characterization of a Tralfamadorian novel: in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut writes about the Tralfamadorians transporting Billy Pilgrim to their planet. During the trip Billy examines some Tralfamadorian novels. He cannot decipher the language, but he can inspect the layout: "brief clumps of symbols separated by stars." The clumps of symbols remind Billy of telegrams, and his Tralfamadorian companion explains, "each clump of symbols is a brief, urgent message—describing a situation, a scene." The Tralfamadorians read the messages simultaneously. The different messages bear no relation to each other, but the Tralfamadorian author selects them so that when looked at all at once "they produce an image of life that is beautiful and surprising and deep. There is no beginning, no middle, no end, no suspense, no moral, no causes, no effects. What we love in our books are the depths of many marvelous moments seen all at one time" (1968, 88).

In his insightful essay, "The 'New Reality' of *Slaughterhouse-Five*," James Lundquist claims that "*Slaughterhouse-Five* is an approximation of [a Tralfamadorian] novel" (2001, 45). However, Vonnegut's novel is Tralfamadorian in the same way that Vonnegut's use of "So it goes" is fatalistic; which is to say that ultimately it is not. In both cases Vonnegut takes up materials provided by Billy Pilgrim, but he transforms

them in an attempt to show the possibility of a life different from Billy's.

According to Lundquist, *Slaughterhouse-Five* approximates a Tralfamadorian novel in dividing chapters into short sections resembling clumps, in seeming to present many moments simultaneously through the conceit of time travel, and in eliminating suspense (for example, time travel reveals the fate of Billy Pilgrim (Vonnegut 1968, 141) and even the entire universe—the Tralfamadorians blow up the universe while experimenting with new fuels for their space craft (Vonnegut 1968, 117)). In this way, thinks Lundquist, Vonnegut's novel responds to the loss of certainty resulting from modern physical theory, specifically the idea that matter is an event such that things are histories and not entities to which things happen (entities like billiard balls knocked around a table). Lundquist sees Vonnegut overcoming the loss of metaphysical stability by creating a new novel form appropriate to the "new reality." Lundquist writes, "through the constant movement back and forth in time that constitutes Vonnegut's narrative, we see Billy becoming his history, existing all at once, as if he is an electron. And this gives the novel a structure that is, to directly state the analogy, atomic" (1968, 46). Vonnegut's new form provides stability where there is none.

Lundquist's point is that Vonnegut simulates the impossible Tralfamadorian structure and creates a new novel structure that "enables him to overcome the problems of change, ambiguity, and subjectivity involved in objectifying the events surrounding the fire-bombing of Dresden and the involvement of Billy Pilgrim and the author in them" (Lundquist 2001, 46). But to follow the Tralfamadorians in confronting the problems of change, ambiguity, and subjectivity is to *deny* change, ambiguity, and subjectivity. This is the strategy of Billy Pilgrim, not Vonnegut.

Lundquist argues that the similarities of *Slaughterhouse-Five* to a Tralfamadorian novel mark a move in the direction of the Tralfamadorian approach to contingency. I claim that the similarities are the result of Vonnegut beginning at the isolated and meaningless place that Billy Pilgrim winds up in after the war, but the novel marks Vonnegut's attempt to escape the paralysis of being unstuck in time. Where Lundquist sees Vonnegut moving the human novel in the direction of the Tralfamadorian novel, I see the opposite. I see Vonnegut moving away from frozen relations, isolation, and fatalism toward human connection and the possibility of richer experience. I see Vonnegut moving away from the meaninglessness of massacre in a more humane direction.

In Lundquist's words, Vonnegut "shows us . . . how it is possible to gain a sense of purpose in life by doing what Billy Pilgrim does" (Lundquist 2001, 52). I agree that Vonnegut presents Billy Pilgrim's life fairly and sympathetically, but his novel presents it in a context broader

than Billy enjoys in his reflections. Vonnegut is not advocating Billy's way of life; he is presenting it as an option among others. Billy sees no other options. Indeed, Billy claims he brings the *truth* about the unreality of time to humans (Vonnegut 1968, 28, 199); for Billy there are no other options. Vonnegut's novel is not so dogmatic. Unlike the message Billy brings, everything Vonnegut says "is horseshit" (1976, 239).

Slaughterhouse-Five is not a Tralfamadorian novel; rather, Vonnegut offers the reader a temporal or serial experience. The actual novel rejects the method of Billy Pilgrim, while always remaining sympathetic to him, as it must. Billy Pilgrim may deny experience, but our experience cannot deny him. His experiences are real and cannot be rejected as unimportant simply because the methods leading to them might be rejected. Vonnegut understands this and offers Billy Pilgrim as a way, among others, to deal with loss and pain. Vonnegut draws the map, and you can follow if you will. The story suggests it to be a self-limiting journey. But despite Vonnegut's insights or mine or yours, others may find it the only option open to them. It seems extremely unlikely that the novel could have been written by rejecting the experience of Billy Pilgrim out of hand the first time it presented itself as a possibility.

The upshot of this is that it is vitally important to tell the stories of our own experiences, to others certainly, but above all to ourselves. This is how philosophy performs its functions: Philosophy is not a problem solver; it is vision, imagination, reflection (MW 10:46). It is the habitual practice of asking what is going on here. The failure to do so results in a loss of individuality and meaning. Vonnegut shows how art is especially helpful in this regard. Dewey concurs: he writes that art discloses the individuality of the artist but also manifests "individuality as creative of the future, in an unprecedented response to conditions as they were in the past" (LW 14:113). Art shows how things could be different, and a great virtue of Dewey's philosophical outlook is that it allows for difference and the possibility of making a difference. Hence, Dewey explicitly rejects the notion that "the self is a stranger and pilgrim in this world" (MW 10:25); he rejects the notion that the individual is "an unnaturalized and unnaturalizable alien in the world" (LW 1:30). We are part of the world, we are in the mix, and we have genuine creative possibilities.

Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis
martcole@iupui.edu

NOTES

1. Earlier versions of this essay were presented at St. Andrews Presbyterian College in 2005 and at the meeting of the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy in 2006 in San Antonio, Texas. I am grateful to Robin L. Condon for helpful comments on this essay.

2. References to John Dewey's correspondence are to *The Correspondence of John Dewey, 1871–1952*, vols. 1–3, rev. ed., ed. Larry A. Hickman (Charlottesville, Va.: Intalex, 2005). A particular letter is cited by the date of the letter followed by the document number set off in parentheses or brackets. For example, 1904.11.21 (00902).

3. See also Ryan 122, 155; Martin 180–83, 228–31. Ryan characterizes the deaths as “two catastrophes that did so much to destroy Dewey's domestic happiness” (Ryan 122). See Dalton 115–16 for discussion of Dewey's literary expression of powerful emotions in his poetry.

4. Standard references to John Dewey's works are to the critical edition, *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882–1953*, edited by Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969–1991), and published as *The Early Works: 1882–1898* (EW), *The Middle Works: 1899–1924* (MW), and *The Later Works: 1925–1953* (LW). These designations are followed by volume and page number. For example, page 32 of volume 14 of the *Middle Works* is cited as “MW 14:32.”

REFERENCES

- Augustine, Saint. 1961. *Confessions*. Translated by R. S. Pine-Coffin. Middlesex, England, and New York: Penguin Books.
- Bennett, Jonathan. 2004. “Time in Human Experience,” *Philosophy* 79 (2): 165–83.
- Bloom, Harold, ed. 2001. *Kurt Vonnegut's “Slaughterhouse-Five.”* Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers.
- Boisvert, Raymond. D. 1999. “The Nemesis of Necessity: Tragedy's Challenge to Deweyan Pragmatism,” in *Dewey Reconfigured: Essays on Deweyan Pragmatism*, ed. Casey Haskins and David I. Sciple, 151–68. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- . 2001. “Updating Dewey: A Reply to Morse,” *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 37 (4): 573–83.
- Broer, Lawrence. 1994. *Sanity Plea: Schizophrenia in the Novels of Kurt Vonnegut*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press.
- . 2001. “*Slaughterhouse-Five*: Pilgrim's Progress,” in Bloom 2001, 67–79.
- Dewey, John. 1984. “Events and the Future,” in vol. 2 of *The Later Works: 1925–1953*, ed. Jo Anne Boydston, 62–68. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press.
- . 1980. “The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy,” in vol. 10 of *The Middle Works: 1899–1924*, ed. Jo Anne Boydston, 3–48. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press.
- . 1977. “The Postulate of Immediate Empiricism,” in vol. 3 of *The Middle Works: 1899–1924*, ed. Jo Anne Boydston, 158–67. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press.
- . 1991. “Time and Individuality,” in vol. 14 of *The Later Works: 1925–1953*, ed. Jo Anne Boydston, 98–114. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press.
- . 1989. *Art as Experience*. Vol. 10 of *The Later Works: 1925–1953*, ed. Jo Anne Boydston. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press.

- . 1988. *Experience and Nature*. Vol. 1 of *The Later Works: 1925–1953*, ed. Jo Anne Boydston. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press.
- . 2005. *The Correspondence of John Dewey, 1871–1952*, vols. 1–3, rev. ed., ed. Larry A. Hickman. (Charlottesville, Va.: InteleX, 2005).
- Goldsmith, David H. 1972. *Kurt Vonnegut: Fantasist of Fire and Ice*. Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press.
- Hook, Sidney. 1974. "Pragmatism and the Tragic Sense of Life," in *Pragmatism and the Tragic Sense of Life*, 3–25. New York: Basic Books.
- Lundquist, James. 2001. "The 'New Reality' of *Slaughterhouse-Five*," in Bloom 2001, 43–54.
- Klinkowitz, Jerome. 2001. "Emerging from Anonymity," in Bloom 2001, 107–25.
- Merrill, Robert and Peter A. Scholl. 2001. "Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*: The Requirement of Chaos," in Bloom 2001, 55–65.
- Morse, Donald. 2001. "Pragmatism and the Tragic Sense of Life," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 37 (4): 555–72.
- Reed, Peter J. 2001. "The End of the Road: *Slaughterhouse-Five*, or *The Children's Crusade*," in Bloom 2001, 3–26.
- Saito, Naoko. 2002. "Pragmatism and the Tragic Sense: Deweyan Growth in an Age of Nihilism," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 36 (2): 247–63.
- . 2003. "Transcending the Tragic with Dewey and Emerson: Beyond the Morse-Boisvert Debate," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 39 (2): 275–92.
- Shaw, Patrick W. 2000. *The Modern American Novel of Violence*. Troy, NY: The Whitston Publishing Company.
- Tilton, John. W. 1977. *Cosmic Satire in the Contemporary Novel*. Cranbury, N.J.: Associated University Presses, Inc.
- Vonnegut, Kurt. 1968. *Slaughterhouse-Five*. New York: Dell Publishing Co.
- . 1976. Playboy Interview. In *Wampeters, Foma, and Granfalloon: Opinions*, 237–85. New York: Dell Publishing Co.
- West, Cornel. 1999. "Pragmatism and the Sense of the Tragic," in *The Cornel West Reader*, 174–83. New York: Basic Civitas Books.