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7 Pragmatist Aesthetics and the Experience of Technology

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Technology enchants; it makes us forget what we know about life.

Sherry Turkle (2015, 13)

It is not enough to insist upon the necessity of experience, nor even of activity in experience. Everything depends upon the quality of the experience which is had.

John Dewey (1938, 12–13)

Technological Practices and the Need for Theory

To live in society means to live with technology. It is a complex, multifarious relationship, fraught with a variety of benefits and burdens. Often, when we think of technology, we focus mainly on the devices and the functions they provide. But, of course, these devices are embedded in larger technical systems as well as in the systems comprising existing institutions (banking, trade, education, etc.) and our personal social arrangements. The fact we live with and because of these systems means that when a new device, such as the mobile phone, is introduced, there are disruptions, both micro and macro. New practices arise, older ones vie for survival, and a cascade of changes causes both enthusiasm and consternation. What are we to make of these devices and their attendant practices? What new opportunities do they offer? Which cherished values do they threaten? How are they changing what or who we are?

These questions raise the further question: how should we study such phenomena? What will shed light on their practical, phenomenological, and normative dimensions? How can we grasp what they mean, in the largest possible sense? It is here that both social theory and philosophy can make their contributions. For while the introduction of new technologies is studied in detail by those with a financial stake (manufacturers, marketers, investors, etc.)—and those with an indirect financial stake, such as industry-supported academic researchers—philosophers and social theorists often raise broader, more normative concerns. Beyond sizing up individuals as "users" or "consumers," with certain behavioral inclinations and choice-preferences, they want to know how new practices effect well-being or capacity to contribute as a citizen. Do new technologies empower people to lead richer and more reflective interior lives? Such theorists, then, situate phenomena within a wider plurality of cultural and ethical imperatives. For this reason, one might argue, theorists are necessary for truly "objective" assessments because they are better positioned to challenge technologies' impact despite (or perhaps even because of) popularity and potential commercial success.

While I approach these issues as a philosopher, I'm no technophobe. Throughout my life, I've harbored a deep interest and affection for technology (especially phones, computers, and other consumer electronics); an early and enthusiastic adopter of technology, I am typically a key source of advice for family or friends. But my heart is changing, and I am increasingly skeptical. New technologies arrive too early and too often; they promise hyperbolically, break quickly, and inveigle more trust and resources than deserved. Moreover, technologists (and the press which cover them) *never* advise *scaling back* or eliminating technology; life, it seems, cannot be improved with techniques that are slower, simpler, or free.

My more important concern regarding these devices' uses—the way they are transforming practice and experience in the spheres of family, work, education, and personal life. My contention is that new technologies—particularly personal information technology (PIT)—are affecting *experience* in profound ways that can best be understood using vocabularies rich in phenomenology and philosophically pragmatic analysis. While I do not find much in social science and communication theory that explores such deep changes in experience, my hope is that philosophical analysis can unearth some important discoveries which can then be reincorporated into both common sense and expert assessments of technology.[1]

My paper proceeds as follows. After briefly explaining the pragmatic approach (I), I review the technological issues by consulting several communication specialists (II); the key question is: how is PIT amending or changing our practices? Most important among these theorists is Sherry Turkle who, more than the others, pushes beyond usual analyses of behavior and usage to the psychological, even existential, stakes. But because Turkle only *raises* philosophical questions and does not inquire into them, she opens the door to a philosophical investigation of technological experience (III). Here, I deploy the work of John Dewey, William James, and John J. McDermott; these pragmatists articulate different categories of experience and provide nuanced techniques as to how such experience can be analyzed. Finally, applying their work, I make connections between technology, experience, and (pulling it all together) pragmatist aesthetics (IV). I conclude with the suggestion that pragmatist aesthetics provides useful ideals for evaluating, normatively, new technologies being deployed into everyday life.

The Pragmatic Framework

While further details about pragmatism will be discussed later, here is the basic pragmatist framework within which *experience* is to be understood. Pragmatists understand human agency in terms of ongoing practices. But practices are not behaviors somehow separable from feelings and experiences; there is a dynamic and iterative relation between undergoing, cogitating, and acting. In brief, no *encounter* is ever completely naïve or raw; rather, *thinking* is proleptic—always occurring in a matrix of ongoing feelings and purposes. *Action*, too, cannot be radically isolated, for we act in response to feelings and purposes. Any practice, then, is constituted by collocations of encounters, thoughts, and actions all taking place in environments with both physical and cultural dimensions. Such environments contextualize practices in crucial ways. An environment may be fecund and conductive of practices' growth; they may be barren or even destructive of growth. Environments can change, too; fecundity can be replaced by toxicity, transforming or destroying practices. This, in general, is the pragmatist picture. It is a *transactional ecology* of organisms-constituted-by-practices encountering, cogitating, and acting in and with their environment.

The Pragmatic Concern: What Is Technology Doing to Experience?

Given this framework, it is possible to telegraph a couple of pragmatist concerns about the experience of technology. (Evidence for these concerns follows, shortly.) First, if *experience* is being fundamentally altered by new practices—engendered by, for example, personal information technologies (PIT)—then we are obligated to understand these alterations' qualitative character. It is plausible, now, to think that the way we encounter the world is changing; the question is: how? Second, the pragmatist will also be concerned about how reflective *knowing* is changing. As described by the ecological framework described earlier, knowing emerges from encounters ("had" experience). Therefore, if encounters are changing (if we are increasingly distracted or fragmented by technology), then we must try to understand what happens to thinking built upon such experience. Are the resources for intellection being degraded? Finally, if both encountering and thinking is being altered by PIT, what might this portend for our efficacy as actors?

To my mind, these questions about the impact of technology upon experience and human practices relate directly to this volume's missions. One mission is to conceptualize action and practice; my contribution argues that the technological practices we are adopting are still unclear, even disturbing, to us. Conceptualizing them helps locate them as they penetrate our life activities. In addition, the volume also seeks to identify the ways in which practices can be normative. Again, technological practices call out for normative assessment. After all, much is at stake. The level of specific assessments may

be local (e.g., are cell phones ruining dinners?) or global (e.g., are we seeking control at the expense of authentic feeling?) but the key lesson is that normativity is inescapable. While practices can be described narrowly, no neutral description is ever possible; every description involves selection and emphasis and thus raises questions about prescription—normativity. Practice theory, and pragmatism, both acknowledge and engage the normative dimension from the get-go.

Recent Themes in Communication Analyses of PIT

PIT and Absent Presence

A large literature documents and analyzes the use of technologies of various kinds, including smart phones (PIT). While Turkle is part of this literature, she pushes beyond it into philosophical territory. Before discussing her work, and the philosophers relevant to it, a quick review of several prominent issues around PIT will be helpful.

The first deals with the phenomenon Kenneth Gergen (2002) names "absent presence," when people make themselves "absent" from face-to-face situations ("co-presence") by engaging with PIT. Analysts are not univocal on the implications of this phenomenon. Gergen worries that such absences can weaken trust and even moral standards. (Gergen 2002, 232) At the same time, Gergen acknowledges that the technology can empower "new integrations" of people across distances (Gergen 2002, 239). Richard Ling, an academic also employed by the Norwegian mobile powerhouse Telenor, harbors no similar worries; while absences can be disruptive of social life, he argues that because PIT uses are becoming "embedded" in the social fabric (as clock time was), people are adjusting their expectations and etiquette. (Ling 2012, 3–4)[2]

PIT and Interpersonal Relationships

A second prominent research area concerns PIT's effects upon interpersonal relationships, especially those created and sustained in co-present situations. Researchers generally recognize that the near-constant availability afforded by PIT can be both comforting and stressful. Gergen's view is decidedly mixed: PIT *can* undermine co-present relationships in ways that might weaken moral obligations and even lead to a "wholesale devaluation of depth in relationship" (Gergen 2002, 233); alternately, though, he sees that cyber-relationships can provide empathy and support otherwise lacking, and that such contacts may facilitate closer and more intimate bonds that can reinforce co-present relationships. Ling, again, is much less worried. Because PIT functions as social mediators, people are prone to forgive a variety of drawbacks (Ling 2012, 7–8). PIT makes micro-coordinations possible, permitting people to exchange information

and feelings; the net effect is often, he argues, improved social cohesion (Ling 2012, 111–112). Ling draws upon Erving Goffman's work on ritual to argue that our new technologies are giving rise to new rituals, the fundamental basis for all relationships.[3] Theorist Nancy Baym, now with the Microsoft corporation, sees the issue as frequently double-sided; on one hand, PIT offers people greater control over relationships via enhanced contact. On the other hand, that increased potential for control may result in the disclosure of private information and opens up the possibility of manipulation by others.[4] Still, Baym, like the others, sees ways in which new messaging abilities can extend relationships into new domains and communities of interest (Baym 2015).

PIT and Self-Identity

A third pertinent area of inquiry concerns PIT's effects on self-identity. While this is another extraordinarily complex topic that cannot be summarized here, several interesting points are germane to this essay's remainder. Gergen, again, strikes chords of both worry and hope. Individuals' increased investment in a "floating world" of online information and communication may result in a dangerous divorce between people and "the pragmatics of everyday life" (Gergen 2002, 235). The divorce is dangerous because the more attention such floating worlds get, the less involved we are in co-present communities. But these communities are crucial for the recognition selves need; deterioration of that sphere, Gergen argues, removes the "scaffolding for a recognizable self" (234); the skills and repertoires necessary for daily relations weaken, and a "coherent and centered sense of self, moral bearings" is threatened (Gergen 2002, 236). Yet Gergen strikes a hopeful note, too. PIT increases one's ability to be more selective about who can contact us, and so we can focus attention upon people that matter; that increased focus, he says, "more effectively sustains one's identity as a singular and coherent being" (Gergen 2002, 238).

Baym, for her part, reviews both "utopian" and "dystopian" literature about effects on identity, but sees both as overwrought. Seeking to defuse their concerns, she writes: "These rhetorics are predictable, and tell us as much—if not more—about society than they tell us about technologies" (Baym 2015, 44). Unlike Gergen, she doesn't fret about the wide range of options for identity play, noting that the literature on embodied vs. online representation of identity shows that "most people, most of the time, use new media to act in ways mostly consistent with their embodied selves" (Baym 2015, 118). She notes that online activity can *aid* identity formation; for example, online self-disclosure, expression, and assertiveness practice can all "help people to work through issues involving control and mastery, gain competence, and find a comfort which they can then transfer to their embodied encounters" (Baym 2015, 139). Finally, she argues that the supposed gap between online and offline relationships is overemphasized. "The

identity foundations on which new relationships are built," she writes, "can be just as sturdy online as off" (Baym 2015, 141).

Sherry Turkle

While Sherry Turkle's work fits squarely with that of Gergen, Ling, Baym, and the wider body of communications research, it ventures further in ways which bear directly upon philosophical issues. Turkle is a psychoanalytically trained sociologist at MIT who has spent 30 years describing and analyzing technology's impact on our practices and identities. Her work encompasses what she calls "the 'subjective side' of people's relationships with technology, especially computers" and focuses upon culture, therapy, mobile technology, social networking, and sociable robotics.[5] Her recent books, *Alone Together* (2011) and *Reclaiming Conversation* (2015), examine how the capacities and applications of recent technologies are already having deep impacts upon experience and identity formation. Her extensive and careful ethnographic and analytic work limn a host of ethical, political, and metaphysical dilemmas raised by new technologies, incorporating case studies worthy of further philosophical analysis.

Reclaiming Conversation paints a picture of PIT use that has become pervasive, intensive, and disruptive. Consider the following facts she relays about connectivity: Every 6.5 minutes, Americans check their phones; within five minutes of awakening, 25% of teenagers connect to a device; American teens send an average of 100 texts per day; 80% of teens sleep with their phones; 44% of teens never unplug, even during sports or religious services; most American students use four forms of media at any given moment. (Turkle 2015, 42) This is just a small sample of the data she presents, but it conveys the gist. In addition to teens, of course, parents and younger children are also using PIT. (I shall omit a picture of the Fisher-Price *iPad Apptivity Seat*, a baby bouncer for "Newborns-to-Toddlers" that includes a 7-inch mirror with the "option to insert iPad (not included) into the mirror's case."[6]) As this degree of connectivity implies, PIT infiltration has spread to venues and practices fundamental to personal, educational, and professional life. Older practices are either being disrupted or displaced, including, for example, the family meal, breastfeeding, bathing and sitting with children, classrooms, offices, and public spaces such as cafés and streets.

Thoreau's "Three Chairs" and Disruption

Across venues, old norms are being modified or broken, spurred on by new technologies. Turkle is concerned, as are other researchers, not to judge these phenomena too rashly, nor lump them together. Culture is always complex and changing; there is a multiplicity of situations and applications of technology, so caution is warranted.[7] The situations Turkle describes, however, are endemic enough—and their implications for the meanings of

our practices is profound enough—that attempts at psychological and philosophical analysis are warranted.

To organize her concerns as a psychologist and sociologist of technology, Turkle draws from Henry David Thoreau's notion of "three chairs." In *Walden*, he writes, "I had three chairs in my house; one for solitude, two for friendship, three for society" (Thoreau 2004, 140). Thoreau is especially relevant today, Turkle argues, insofar as he sought to live deeply and deliberately in a milieu with accelerating degrees of clamor and distraction. Moreover, Thoreau was not against conversation—unlike monks or sages, his proposal of more deliberate living didn't require vows of silence. Indeed, the three chairs metaphor provides Turkle with what she calls a "virtuous circle," and by understanding that circle we glimpse not only the value of conversation, but the basic dangers of PIT.

> These three chairs plot the points on a virtuous circle that links conversation to the capacity for empathy and for self-reflection. In solitude we find ourselves; we prepare ourselves to come to conversation with something to say that is authentic, ours. When we are secure in ourselves we are able to listen to other people and really hear what they have to say. And then in conversation with other people we become better at inner dialogue.
>
> (Turkle 2015, 10)

Turkle then explains how "technology disrupts this virtuous cycle" (Turkle 2015, 10). The prompts and affordances of PIT have a far-reaching impact on all three basic elements—solitude, friendship, and society—by disrupting the stillness and patience required for empathy:

> We are so accustomed to being always connected that being alone seems like a problem that technology should solve. And this is where the virtuous cycle breaks down: Afraid of being alone, we struggle to pay attention to ourselves. And what suffers is our ability to pay attention to each other. If we can't find our own center, we lose confidence in what we have to offer others.
>
> (Turkle 2015, 10)

Changes in Habits and Problematic Effects

Turkle analyzes disruptions to conversation and empathy as a social scientist and therapist—documenting how changes in technological practice can alter both emotional and physical habits; these new habits are connected with increasingly problematic situations in psychological and social life. Important changes in habits engendered recently by PIT include: (1) "hyper attention" (as opposed to "deep attention") where attention shifts constantly; (2) "multi-tasking" (as opposed to "uni-tasking"), the rapid switching between

actions; (3) "fear of missing out," a constant anticipation of updates, even emergencies; (4) avoidance of co-present interactions (by substituting PIT) because they pose what seems, now, as too great a risk of emotional intimacy; (5) "cognitive offloading," where device or online information resources are substituted for natural memory; and, (6) increased impatience with interpersonal situations containing lulls and silences; such lulls increasingly seem like evils to escape rather than fallow moments generative of new discovery.

These changes have generated, Turkle argues, significant psychological and social problems. Here are five of the more important ones.

(1) *Solitude and loneliness.* Constant connection and hyper-attention increase impatience with silence, lulls; this impedes the ability to be alone, self-reflective, and exploratory of one's own feelings and imagination. For many, creative "solitude" has become "loneliness" or "boredom." There is a feedback effect, as anxiety to escape loneliness increases the frequency and intensity of digital connections. As Turkle puts it: "In our new culture of connection, we are lonely but afraid of intimacy" (Turkle 2015, 357).

(2) *Alone-with-others.* This impatience with silence/lulls also diminishes the ability to be alone *with* others; quiet moments of companionship with friends or children become increasingly intolerable. Again, the affordance of external stimulation is invited to punctuate those spaces. One casualty of this change is eye contact, which we know is deeply important to infant and childhood development (Turkle 2015, 28, 36).

(3) *Conversational impoverishment.* The anxieties mentioned earlier produce a profound effect upon conversational length and depth. Besides overt disruptions to conversation via divided attention (users multitasking, interrupted by notifications, etc.), studies indicate that phones need merely to be *present*—even just face down—to impoverish conversation (Turkle 2015, 21). Anticipating interruption, conversations are becoming shorter and less intellectually and emotionally adventurous; pale "connection" is replacing earnest "conversation" (Turkle 2015, 27, 35). Having lowered expectations about what conversation can deliver, we also anticipate less earnestness or empathy from partners. Echoing some of Gergen's concerns, Turkle worries about the amplification of coarseness and emotional distance in the way we relate.

(4) *Existential displacement (absent presence).* As with other theorists, Turkle pays considerable attention to absent presence. But she is more concerned than many about how this degrades being together, co-presence. The capacity and temptation to be "elsewhere" is now embedded in how we inhabit place and time; moreover, powerful PIT techniques keep emerging to keep users online ("clickbait"). "When we have our phones in our hands," Turkle writes, "we are invited to stay in the world of our phones" (Turkle 2015, 124). Such invitations to remain "elsewhere" change the nature of domestic, professional, religious, and

public spaces; not only are we seduced away, but we now present a new public-facing mien: "do not disturb me."[8]

(5) *Friction-free engagement.* At least in developed countries, there is an increasing assumption that most tasks can be done effortlessly, by remote control—as evinced by the expression, "There's an app for that." PIT extends this assumption, Turkle notes, to politics (texting, donating, etc.), social intercourse (via texting, Facebook), and family disagreements (over chat). In other words, the meta-message of PIT is that everything can be made convenient—including difficult, messy, human interactions. Turkle's concern is that these presumptions will play into more frequent miscommunication, and even the fraying of social bonds.[9]

Extending Turkle's Concerns: PIT and Experience

This review of Turkle is sufficient to show that fundamental changes are at work beyond the level of actions, practices, and norms. Changes are being effected at fundamental levels of both reflective and non-reflective *experience*. I turn now to a brief review of the pragmatic notion of "experience," especially focusing on the account given by Dewey and James of experience in its basal form. "Experience" is a concept that, once understood, offers a handle that philosophers, theorists, and everyday users might use to appreciate the subtler ways new technologies affect us. In addition, pragmatic experience links us to an alternative aesthetic vision regarding how new habits might be reconfigured in ways more meaningful than those foisted upon us, willy-nilly, by for-profit companies, futurists, and other techno-mandarins.

Philosophers Dewey, James, and McDermott on Experience

Escaping Epistemology: Experience vs. Knowledge

How might Dewey diagnose problems arising in daily life under the impingements of information technology? First, one should recall that Dewey began by rejecting one of philosophy's earliest prejudices: that experience was inferior to knowledge. While the history of "experience" is long and complicated, Dewey (and other classical pragmatists) argued that the term's exoneration was crucial to shifting away from metaphysical and epistemological dualisms.[10] In the new Darwinian *Weltanschauung*, change—not permanence—was the ineliminable basis for stories about human beings and their natural environment. In a dynamic and changing arena, successful adaptive creatures develop capacities and utilize resources necessary to survive and grow. While experience certainly includes sensory and emotional components (as the tradition insisted), pragmatists rejected reductive "input/output" schemas that made sensation and emotion primordial suppliers of materiel for

intellectual work. Indeed, there were various ways, pragmatists said, that sensations (as received) were indebted to a range of prior influences (cognitive, physical, etc.); by framing sensation as another activity, they emphasized sensation's selectivity. That selectivity was never reducible to reason in any pure or isolated sense, but depended on a variety of factors, many not reflective. Moreover, "reflection" was also framed as something creatures constantly *do*; thus, the philosophical traditions' predilection to intellectually prescind "powers" of the mind (*sensation, cognition, imagination,* etc.) and then nominalize them was rejected. In place, pragmatists argued for a more dynamic view of human habits which admitted that many of the traditional powers could commingle in complex ways—ways which were saturated, even guided, by emotions.

This potted history (about pragmatists' escape from epistemology) anticipates the rescue of "experience" from its lowly status. By rejecting the dualism between "experience" and "knowledge," it was now possible to investigate the *many* forms and functions experience could take—as *consciousness,* as *attention,* as *inquiry,* as *judgment,* as *imagination,* and so on. They could offer a reconstructed account of what it meant to know or do something—an account not embroidered with a rigid and narrow temporality (stimulus-*to*-response, sensation-*to*-conception). One lesson of Dewey's famous 1896 "Reflex Arc" paper was that human responses should be seen as constituting *circuits* or situations; such situations are, themselves, part of more comprehensive situations. The intended lesson, for epistemology, was that our more complex responses to the world—"knowledge," —emerged from experiential circuits; these experiences are "had" and become available for future uses. Tests of knowledge claims should be understood in light of this framing—as experiments which take place in experience.

Salient here is that James and Dewey were arguing for a conception of active experience no longer awaiting *validation* by static, reflective knowledge. Rather, the masterstroke was declaring experience's *autonomy*; if the question was raised whether a present experience was "right," the answer lay in the issuances of future experience. As John McDermott puts it:

> Rather than honoring a simple dualism between thought and action, the American bent toward the practical should be viewed from a wider perspective. Both the method of reflection and the method of action are to be seen as conjoined and rotating functionaries of an experimental approach.
>
> (McDermott 1976, 10)

What this "rotating priority of thought and action" exemplifies, McDermott adds, is that:

> experience, as such, has informing, directive, and self-regulating qualities which are ordered and managed as subject to intelligence and as

responsible to the burdens of the various contexts in which inquiry finds itself. Experience, as such, is educational.

(McDermott 1976, 10)

The Continuum of Experience: From Had to Known

Though Dewey rejected epistemologies' elevation of knowing over feeling and acting, he nevertheless recognized there were genuine, functional distinctions indicated by those terms. In works such as *Experience and Nature*, Dewey delineated two basic kinds or levels of experience to help explain those distinctions. Most basic is what he sometimes calls "primary," "direct," or "had" experience. It is minimally reflected upon or regulated; it is felt, qualitative. The other kind of experience he names "secondary," "mediated," or "reflective" experience. This form of engagement operates more abstractly, apart from the immediacy of feeling or the shock of events. Secondary experience takes an interest in arranging and rearranging symbolic elements, sizing up relations and connections, in service of some further purpose.[11]

The two kinds of experience may be seen on a *continuum* because both co-constitute the flow of our lives—ways of being, so to speak. (They can be categorized *as* "primary" or "secondary," *as* "feeling" or "cognition" insofar as there is a use for those labels—e.g., in psychological or philosophical inquiries.) What is important, though, is that "primary" ("had") experience is fundamental, the qualitative *how* imbuing every situation. There is a *how* to the way one is feeling, acting, or even calculating; I awake *perturbedly*; I solve a crossword puzzle *relaxedly*; I suss out my flight's gate *hurriedly*, etc. Note that the "had" aspect of these experiences is not reflective. A reflective experience is always *had* in some way, but a had experience is *not* always reflective. (This explains why reflective experience is designated as *secondary* by Dewey.)

Aspects of Primary Experience Relevant to Technology

The foregoing effectively conveys how what James called "radical empiricism" was integral to classical pragmatism. To get at what was practically at stake in our meanings and actions—the commonly understood purpose of "pragmatism"—one needed to not only debunk bad dualisms, but also take a more earnest approach to what was being experienced. To try to take experience *as it is had*, to observe and describe without the heavy-handed intrusion of theoretical preconceptions—that was the insight.[12]

The relevance of radical empiricistic pragmatism for our purposes, then, is to utilize it to reconceptualize and reexamine anew the effects of the technologies under scrutiny here. Doing this requires some familiarity with pragmatism's close analyses of experience at the "had" or "primary" level. Here, in brief, are several aspects of primary experience useful for a fulsome critique of contemporary technological experience.

Relations and Qualities—Experience as Relational and Emotional

In works like *The Principles of Psychology*, James called out philosophers for placing undue attention upon things rather than *relations*. Famously, he urged new respect for relations, noting that without relations, things become meaningless. As McDermott points out, for James, "Meaning is located in the ongoing fabric of relations, by which we mean it is found neither in an isolated self nor an isolated thing but, rather, in the environment constituted by shared participation" (McDermott 2007, 358). Dewey richly details how relational transactions between organism and environment cross various cultural fields (education, politics, aesthetics, and more).

Besides weaning thinkers from a disproportionate attention to *things*, James and Dewey used this new emphasis upon relations to downgrade the priority placed upon *concepts*. Concepts, too often, provide pat formulas that are taken as *permanent* realities. Such "vicious abstractionism" (James) was a "philosophic fallacy" (Dewey) that induces formulaic thinking and desensitizes our attention from the moving, emotional, and qualitative experiences imbued the flow of events.

Fringe vs. Focus—Experience as Pervasively Qualitative

The shift toward *relations* and away from *things* and *concepts* can be understood in light of a sibling adjustment involving "focus" and "fringe." Historically, philosophy's development has centered upon the intellectual quest clarity and definition. Pragmatists drew back from their discipline's myopic fealty to clarity, pointing out that conscious foci are possible only because of fringe elements *not* in focus. As James puts it, "Our fields of experience have no more definite boundaries than have our fields of view. Both are fringed forever by a MORE that continuously develops, and that continuously supersedes them as life proceeds." (James 1978, 158) James' "more" defies definition yet is indispensable for meaningful experience. "The experiencing of this fringe," McDermott writes, "yields awareness while defying any conceptual formulation. For James, the crucial area of human activity is found precisely where the conceptual order breaks down." (McDermott 2007, 353)

In "Qualitative Thought," Dewey takes up James's point. However, Dewey refuses to call such qualitative experience a "fringe" because that term understates the way a unity of pervasive and underlying qualities "regulates pertinence or relevancy and force of every distinction and relation" and "guides selection and rejection and the manner of utilization of all explicit terms." The presence of such a quality, Dewey continues:

enables us to keep thinking about one problem without our having constantly to stop to ask ourselves what it is after all that we are thinking about. We are aware of it not by itself but as the background, the

thread, and the directive clue in what we do expressly think of. For the latter things are its distinctions and relations.

(Dewey LW5, 247-48[13]

How are these ideas ("fringe" or "pervasive quality") relevant to technology? For one thing, we can better see how PIT's new rhythms intervene in our typical fringe/background experience. They tend to reinforce prejudice *against* the ambient fringes and toward the overt and bright. "Modern man is . . . a victim of clarity. Much of our difficulty proceeds from the demand for certitude and an inability to recognize and live with the irreducibility of shadows" (McDermott 2007, 350). We should be aware that PIT desensitizes us to fringe experience; we become less able to acknowledge experience outside of conscious focus, and less inclined to remember it as *necessary* to meaning.[14]

The Connotative: Experience as Learning-Capable

In addition to the ontological points James and Dewey made (about relations and transactions) and those regarding the phenomenology of experience (fringe, focus, pervasive quality), they also highlighted experience's epistemological capacities—the ways in which experience generates knowledge. Primary experience is "connotative"—not specious, but thick. It is a fabric of relations, of "perchings and flights," in James' phrase. Experience, ongoing, draws upon itself and projects anticipated futures. "Dewey accepts the claim of James that experiences are indeed cognitive of one another, so that the transaction is not without a guide, a source, leaning, a hint, a hunch" (McDermott 2007, 415). Thus, experience is not a Humean moment-after-moment affair, but one capable of *continuity*.

> To learn from experience is to make a backward and forward connection between what we do to things and what we enjoy or suffer from things in consequence. Under such conditions, doing becomes a trying, an experiment with the world to find out what it is like, the undergoing becomes instruction—discovery of the connection of things.
>
> (Dewey LW11, 215)

Again, this relates directly to technological life, raising the question: "is the primary experience on devices capable of subtle connotation, or is it dominated by intense titillation?"

Temporal Experience—Urban Time vs. Nature Time

The last dimension of primary experience to discuss is temporality—how time *feels*. In *Principles*, James argues that time is experienced not as clock

time—a specious, knife-edge present—but rather as *durations* of varying thicknesses and feels. He describes the cognized present as:

> a saddle-back, with a certain breadth of its own on which we sit perched, and from which we look in two directions into time. The unit of composition of our perception of time is a duration, with a bow and a stern, as it were—a rearward- and a forward-looking end.
>
> (James 1983, 609)

McDermott builds upon James, and considering the technology of the 1970s, distinguishes "urban time" and "nature time." Urban time tends to be faster, thin, tense, jagged, and aligned with machines; nature time connects, more variously, to natural events; it tends to be thick, liberating, and continuous (McDermott 2007, 200–201)

The difference between these kinds of time becomes a useful critical tool for understanding contemporary technology.

> The network of communication media . . . constantly tunes us in to sensorially multiple experiences. . . . Our imagination, and fed at all times by the messaging of electronic intrusions, races far ahead of our body which we often claim to drag around.
>
> (McDermott 2007, 201, 202)

Technology problematizes life, in part, because while "the speed of urban time revs up our capacity for multiple experiences," it is also "intensifying the need for inner personal space to play out the experiences subsequently in our own 'good' time" (McDermott 2007, 202). The challenge *we* face, to a greater degree than did McDermott in 1974, is the never-ceasing "urban time" of devices. In the 21st century, information flow is relentless; there is never "enough time" to unfold, unravel, or unpack what is foisted upon us by "urban time." Between the portability of PIT and the near-omnipresence (via satellite) of connectivity, *all* spaces can become urban spaces, experientially. What theorist Richard Ling celebrates as the *opportunity* of "micro-coordination" would be seen, from McDermott's perspective, as the fulfillment of urban time's *hegemony* over primary experience. "We isolate here the dilution of embodiment and the worship of speed" (McDermott 2007, 453).

Technology, Experience, and Pragmatist Aesthetics

Technology, at the end of the day, expresses how human beings suppose they want to live; whether we are talking about affordances such as "video on-demand," "constant availability," "micro-coordination," or "online dating," they are *all* arranged by us (engineers, managers, marketers, and consumers). What philosophers (and philosophical theorists such as Turkle) can do is back

up and raise the normative question: "are these choices producing the kinds of lives we ideally want to live?" This ethical question is also an aesthetic one about what is ideal; pragmatist aesthetics may have some suggestions.

As we have seen, descriptions of experience with technology can be more or less explicitly normative. In this piece, Gergen, Turkle, and McDermott raised profound normative questions about the patterns of experience PIT can create. What grounds the normativity of such judgments? As a *psychologist*, Turkle is concerned about the constituents of psychological well-being: sympathy, empathy, and authentic communication; she warns against isolation, loneliness, disconnection, and alienation. The *philosophical* case can reach toward further grounds about the nature of experience. Here, pragmatist aesthetics (utilizing the criteria of experience offered earlier) can provide standards with which to judge the upshot a way of life shot through with PIT experiences. Here, I select Dewey's aesthetics as my model.

An (Consummatory) Experience in Dewey

At the heart of Dewey's aesthetics was his notion of experience at its best: "an experience" or "consummatory experience." The opposite he termed the "anesthetic." Understanding this spectrum can provide metrics with which to judge technological experience. Dewey introduces "*an* experience" (his emphasis) by contrasting it with ordinary experience—the humdrum, dispersed, and inchoate character which is part of everyday life.

> Oftentimes . . . the experience had is inchoate. Things are experienced but not in such a way that they are composed into *an* experience. There is distraction and dispersion; what we observe and what we think, what we desire and what we get, are at odds with each other . . . because of extraneous interruptions or of inner lethargy.
>
> In contrast with such experience, we have *an* experience when the material experienced runs its course to fulfillment. Then and then only is it integrated within and demarcated in the general stream of experience from other experiences. A piece of work is finished in a way that is satisfactory; a problem receives its solution; a game is played through; a situation . . . is so rounded out that its close is a consummation and not a cessation. Such an experience is a whole and carries with it its own individualizing quality and self-sufficiency. It is *an* experience . . . [and in it] . . . every successive part flows freely, without seam and without unfilled blanks, into what ensues.
>
> (LW10:42)

This extended passage may reveal why critics often found it hard to connect the term "aesthetics" with Dewey. Dewey's general project is wider than art criticism; rather, he sees art as a form of human expression capable of illuminating ways that experience, more generally, can manifest as whole,

harmonious, and exemplary in meaning. Understanding art *as* experiencing provides an object lesson as to how daily life experience could be more meaningful, even beautiful. And understanding what can go wrong in art helps reveal the "anesthetic," features which are present all too often in daily life. Here, again, such analyses of experience can help highlight *which* of our habits are anesthetic habits—both the older or newer ones (especially those imported through new technologies). Having discussed consummatory, let us briefly consider the anesthetic.

Anesthetic Experience

Opposed to *an* experience is the *anesthetic*. The anesthetic is actually a lethal cocktail, comprised of *two* different poisons—one is slackness, dissolution, while the other constriction, coercion. As Dewey puts it:

> The enemies of the esthetic are neither the practical nor the intellectual. They are the humdrum; slackness of loose ends; submission to convention in practice and intellectual procedure. Rigid abstinence, coerced submission, tightness on one side and dissipation, incoherence and aimless indulgence on the other, are deviations in opposite directions from the unity of an experience.
>
> (Dewey LW10, 47)

Again, the anesthetic pertains both to the experiences of art *and* daily life. Much in contemporary life, Dewey argues, prevents it from being fulfilling. He notices, as does McDermott, the "urban time" phenomenon which prevents ordinary experience from being more fulfilling. We suffer from what he calls an "excess of receptivity"—what we might call "information overload." In our lives, Dewey writes,

> Zeal for doing, lust for action, leaves many a person, especially in this hurried and impatient human environment in which we live, with experience of an almost incredible paucity, all on the surface. No one experience has a chance to complete itself because something else is entered upon so speedily.
>
> (Dewey LW10, 51)

Dewey noticed that the increased pace of life, the adoptions of various forms of technology (not limited to information technology) had changed the habits and expectations people held for themselves—and others. What happens, in such cases, is the impoverishment of experience over the long term. He writes:

> What is prized is then the mere undergoing of this and that, irrespective of perception of any meaning. The crowding together of as many

impressions as possible is thought to be "life," even though no one of them is more than a flitting and a sipping. What is called *experience* becomes so dispersed and miscellaneous as hardly to deserve the name. Resistance is treated as an obstruction to be beaten down, not as an invitation to reflection. An individual comes to seek, unconsciously even more than by deliberate choice, situations in which he can do the most things in the shortest time.

<div align="right">(Dewey LW10, 51)</div>

Technology and Pragmatist Aesthetic Ideals

Pragmatist aesthetics offers more than just criticisms, though; it offers an ideal to assess how technology can lead us away from experiences we acknowledge are better, more enduring, more meaningful. Not all experience is the same; experiences which have reached a zenith of completion and wholeness yield what Dewey called "consummatory experience," whereas other experiences can fall short in various specific ways. Pragmatist aesthetics such as Dewey's are informed by our nature as biological beings, and remain open to scientific findings about attention, emotion, neural activity, and so forth; still, pragmatist aesthetics recognizes that aesthetics should be meliorative—a way to improve experience throughout our lives.

Much of what I have laid out is, admittedly, cursory. But what seems clear is that problems illustrated by Turkle and others—interrupted conversations, disrupted public spaces, fragmented attention, overstimulation, ennui, etc.—call out not only for new rules of etiquette but deeper normative assessments, particularly the ways in which deeper levels of experience are affected. My sketch of Dewey's pragmatist aesthetics means to exhibit the *viability* of applying pragmatist aesthetic criteria to PIT and other technologies; regarding details, it must remain a promissory note. Eventually, it demands a point-by-point mapping between specific technological practices and their aesthetic attributes.[15]

My brief need not be taken as neither pessimism nor determinism about technology. PIT can and does produce consummatory experiences; there is no reason it cannot be designed to produce more—and/or reduce the ways it contributes to the various forms of anesthesia around us. It can become a more "appropriate technology," as Alan Drengson (1982) might put it, affording space to the viewer-experiencer rather than suffocating with constant prompts. An appropriate technology can invite gently, so that one becomes *freely* absorbed in a new experience. But let us be realists, too. Let us not suppose we are there—or heading there, yet.[16] While tools can be shelved or redesigned to seek better ends, I am reluctant to think they will be without criticism. Pragmatist aesthetics offers an experiential basis for such criticism.

Summary and Conclusion

To briefly summarize my argument, this inquiry began with a feeling that something is amiss about the ways PIT affects individual and social life; the inquiry moved next to an initial characterization of the problem. Then the problem was described in richer empirical detail, asking: what kinds of technology? How are they colonizing attention? With what initial consequences? The work of communication theorists and especially Turkle helped lay out these aspects, and Turkle's foci on conversation and empathy were especially helpful in displaying the complex psychological and social stakes.

These initial phases showed that there was a further philosophical dimension worth exploring; I suggested that technology impinges upon something even more fundamental that the conduct singled out by Turkle et al. This fundamental thing is experience.

To explore technology's implications for experience, we looked at Dewey, James, and McDermott. After reviewing pragmatism's critical reconstruction of the term, we saw that Dewey (and James) developed a distinction between *had/primary* experience and *known/secondary* experience. The had-primary/known-secondary distinction legitimates their detailed work on the phenomenology of had-primary experience (e.g., relations, qualities, fringe, focus, connotativeness, temporality) which, I argue, can now help frame and make sense of the welter of changes introduced by new PIT.

Finally, I argued that these philosophical instruments—analyses of experience—lead toward a constructive last stage: the application of a pragmatist aesthetics (constituted by experiential analyses) to the phenomena of PIT.

In the end, technology really doesn't matter. What matters are empathy, care, justice, and consummatory experience. The reason to care about pragmatism, as a conceptual tool for the analysis of practices, is its commitment *as a theory* to meliorism—to remaining in honest touch with practical life to make it better. Because pragmatism is equipped to understand the habits of both organisms and their cultural environments, it can evaluate the variety of experiences which emerge. Such evaluations are, themselves, tools for the direction of better, future experience. Because technology is so pervasively informing our habits, it is now falling under pragmatism's critical purview. This paper has provided one critical approach.

The inspiration for doing this work now is prompted by watching my students and my own children. Forces beyond my control are driving distraction, ennui, and perhaps depression. What is technology's role in this? I need to find out. Like Dewey, I am ethically staked in promoting growth. As McDermott points out:

> Growth is not a casual word for Dewey, for its absence denotes dying, as when children, by virtue of the pedagogical ennui which so often

envelops them, become dead unto themselves. In our time they escape into varieties of electronic media.

(McDermott 2007, 423)

Dewey worried that the schools of his day were trading away the richness of the present for some supposedly more important future. They denigrated the potentialities and direct enjoyments of present experience and fomented on children the anesthetic poisons of slackness, dissipation. Many schools and workplaces today are still doing this. Too often, attempts to cure this are proposed by new technologies; yet they may present the *other* anesthetic poison of overstimulation. Curing boredom with the ever-appealing *new* seems like progress; but understood through the lens of pragmatist aesthetics, we see how it can lack fullness. The technological fix is *our* version of the specious present James warned about, the isolated moments which entertain but don't teach, connect but do not pause for regenerative solitude or genuine conversation. We are taking big gambles; we should take a closer look.

Notes

1. This is a traditional ambition of classical pragmatists such as John Dewey, William James, G.H. Mead, Jane Addams, and others. Dewey encapsulated this vision by calling philosophers "liaison officers": "philosophy as a critical organ becomes in effect a messenger, a liaison officer, making reciprocally intelligible voices speaking provincial tongues, and thereby enlarging as well as rectifying the meaning with which they are charged." (Dewey LW1, 306).
2. Ling's industry association is with Telenor, a firm that describes itself as "one of the world's major mobile operators" with 176 million customers connected in 12 markets across Scandinavia, Central and Eastern Europe, and Asia. [URL: www.telenor.com Accessed 14 January 2018].
3. Consider the ritual of a birthday party. PIT can extend such co-present interactions to later online periods (e.g., by sharing photos via the web). Photo-sharing may itself become part of the ritual. In this way, the co-present relationships may be strengthened via new rituals.
4. As it is alleged Microsoft did in cooperation with the National Security Agency's Prism program. As The Guardian reported in 2013, "Microsoft has collaborated closely with US intelligence services to allow users' communications to be intercepted, including helping the National Security Agency to circumvent the company's own encryption, according to top-secret documents obtained by the Guardian" (Greenwald et al. 2013).
5. Sherry Turkle, MIT website; www.mit.edu/~sturkle/ Accessed 20 August 2017.
6. URL: www.amazon.com/Fisher-Price-Ipad-Apptivity-Seat-Newborn-to-Toddler/dp/B00EL4NI5U Accessed 16 January 2018.
7. As Baym cautions, "we need to stop talking about media in overly simplistic terms" and seek out "concepts to help us recognize the diversity amongst what may seem to be just one technology" (Baym 2015, 6–7).
8. As Baym points out, PIT often "doubly privatize" public spaces—first, users opt out of public space availability, and second, they fill that space with their private matters (Baym 2015, 5).

9. See e.g., Turkle (2015, 52–53). Thus, one might say, PIT takes the concept of a "device" to the next level. Over 30 years ago, philosopher Albert Borgmann (1984) described the evolution of a "device paradigm" disconnecting people from the sources of their heat, food, and consumer goods. Such "disburdenments," Borgmann pointed out, hide the natural and social connections implicit in our practices. Though such changes increase conveniences, there is also an increase in fragility, as we become less informed and less self-reliant.
10. On the history of "experience" see Jay (2005).
11. See *The Quest for Certainty*. There, Dewey writes,

> Experienced situations come about in two ways and are of two distinct types. Some take place with only a minimum of regulation, with little foresight, preparation, and intent. Others occur because, in part, of the prior occurrence of intelligent action. Both kinds are had; they are undergone, enjoyed or suffered. The first are not known; they are not understood; they are dispensations of fortune or providence. The second have, as they are experienced, meanings that present the funded outcome of operations that substitute definite continuity for experienced discontinuity and for the fragmentary quality due to isolation.
>
> (Dewey LW4, 194)

12. This is not phenomenological bracketing à la Husserl; pragmatists did not advocate that a neutral (free of all cultural, historical, and personal valences) account of experience could or should be strived for. But they recognized that theoretical preconceptions can pervert genuine openness to experience; some amount of "intellectual disrobing" (as Dewey put it) was possible and worth attempting. See Dewey LW1, 40.
13. Richard Shusterman traces this movement from James' *Principles* to Dewey's *Art as Experience*. In *Principles*, James writes that "Every definite image in the mind is steeped and dyed in the free water that flows round it . . . . The significance, the value, of the image is all in this halo or penumbra that surrounds and escorts it." (James 1983, 246) As Shusterman points out, "This 'halo of felt relations,' James continues, forms a '*psychic overtone*' or '*fringe*' whose felt quality essentially guides our consciousness, selecting and organizing the elements and focus of our thought so as to render them coherently unified in terms of their felt 'sense of affinity' to that quality. 'Any thought the quality of whose fringe lets us feel ourselves "all right" [may be considered] . . . a relevant and appropriate portion of our train of ideas.' (James 1983, 247, 249, 250)" (Shusterman 2011, 359).
14. We need to accept that "ambiguity bathes our experience" and that this means "the one-to-one correspondence between the perceptual act and the objective order is challenged" (McDermott 2007, 354).
15. I don't, however, think this would be very hard to fulfill. Even Dewey's simple comparison between our pace of life and the obstacle it creates for engaging in art *or conversation* makes that plain—Turkle would happily concur. In modern life, Dewey writes:

> Continued acceleration is breathless and prevents parts from gaining distinction. In a work of art, different acts, episodes, occurrences melt and fuse into unity, and yet do not disappear and lose their own character as they do so—just as in a genial conversation there is a continuous interchange and blending, and yet each speaker not only retains his own character but manifests it more clearly than is his wont.
>
> (Dewey LW10, 43–44)

16. Much contemporary technology involves us by *instigation* rather than by invitation; the terms of our engagement are highly controlled—the lines along which we "choose" are carefully scripted, delimited, and timed. Or, technology shoves us this way and that—disrupting whatever investment we have started to make (e.g., the "clickbait" of news websites, the pop-up advertisements, the use of sexual imagery). In either case, there is a failure to achieve the aesthetic or consummatory (the highest level of aesthetic experience) because of the anesthetic poisons of distraction, coercion, and overstimulation. No "pervasive and underlying quality" has a chance to inform the experiences undergone, nor is there a chance for experience to reach forward and back—the "connotation" which leads to growth and learning.

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