Environment, Spaus Place vol. 1, no. 1 (April): 189-701

THE EBB AND FLOW OF PRIMARY AND SECONDARY EXPERIENCE

KAYAK TOURING AND JOHN DEWEY'S METAPHYSICS OF EXPERIENCE¹

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ABSTRACT: John Dewey's metaphysics of experience has been criticized by a number of philosophers—most notably, George Santayana and Richard Rorty. While mainstream Dewey scholars agree that these critical treatments fail to treat the American Pragmatist's theory of what exists on its own terms, there has still been some difficulty reaching consensus on what the casual reader should take away from the pages of Experience and Nature, Dewey's seminal work on naturalistic metaphysics. So, how do we unearth the significance of Dewey's misunderstood metaphysics? One way is for philosophers to look to spatial and socialcultural geographers for help. To fully grasp the movement of experience, these geographers recommend that we start with an experiential activity, such as touring. The activity of sea kayak touring, I contend, discloses the general movement of experience in Dewey's metaphysics between its primary and secondary phases. With this illustration and a closely connected metaphor, I demonstrate that Dewey's naturalized metaphysics can not only withstand the objections of the likes of Santayana and Rorty, it can also assist us in gaining a deeper appreciation of the qualitative richness of our own day-to-day practices.

Introduction

John Dewey's metaphysics of experience has been criticized by a number of philosophers—most notably, George Santayana and Richard Rorty. While mainstream Dewey scholars agree that these critical treatments fail

to treat the American Pragmatist's theory on its own terms, there has still been some difficulty reaching consensus on what the casual reader should take away from the pages of *Experience and Nature*, Dewey's seminal work on naturalistic metaphysics. So, how do we unearth the significance of Dewey's misunderstood metaphysics? One way is for philosophers to look to spatial and social-cultural geographers for help. To fully grasp the movement of experience, these geographers recommend that we start with an experiential activity, such as touring. The activity of sea kayak touring, I contend, discloses the general movement of experience in Dewey's metaphysics between its primary and secondary phases. With this illustration and a closely connected metaphor, I demonstrate that Dewey's naturalized metaphysics can not only withstand the objections of the likes of Santayana and Rorty, it can also assist us in gaining a deeper appreciation of the qualitative richness of our own day-to-day practices.

The paper is divided into six parts. The first section provides a brief explanation of Dewey's metaphysics of experience. The second reviews George Santayana and Richard Rorty's criticisms of Dewey's theory of what exists. In the third section, I draw some parallels between Dewey's metaphysics of experience and the works of spatial and social geographers. The fourth section demonstrates how Dewey's two-phased movement of experience emerges in the story of a sea kayak touring trip, as well as in a closely connected metaphor. In the fifth section, we evaluate Santayana and Rorty's criticisms. The sixth and concluding section explores the implications of the previous analysis for appreciating the deeper meaning of Dewey's metaphysics and for grasping the geographical moment of experience.

Dewey's Metaphysics of Experience

Dewey's metaphysics divulges the generic qualities and patterns that underlie our experience of the felt and known world. Philosophers, from Plato to Kant to Russell, were mistaken in claiming that knowing or reasoning is either the predominant or the exhaustive feature of so-called 'real' or 'really-real' human experience. Rather, it is a small part of our experience of the natural world and a single mode among many for appreciating what Dewey terms the "generic traits of existence." According

to Dewey, "[a] naturalistic metaphysics is bound to consider reflection as itself a natural event occurring within nature because of the traits of the latter" (LW 1, 62).² Since bound up with the generic traits, our experience of natural events is objective and cognitively-rich. However, 'objectivity' here does not mean purely factual, impartial, a 'god's-eye view' or transcendent of any specific perspective. The tendency to bifurcate our experience into categories of 'pure' objectivity and plural perspectives is one that Dewey resists in crafting his metaphysics of experience.³

The degree of objectivity and cognitive-richness is reflected in a distinction Dewey makes between two phases of experience: (i) primary and (ii) secondary. Only when humans are confronted with an entirely novel and problematic situation do they shift from "primary experience," which is habitually "had" and mediated by previously formed habit, to "secondary experience," which demands genuine reflection, "knowing" and inquiry. "The distinction [between primary and secondary experience]," Dewey writes, "is one between what is experienced as a result of a minimum of incidental reflection and what is experienced in consequence of continued and regulated reflective inquiry" (LW 1, 3-4). While the dominant mode of experience for Dewey is what Langsdorf (2002, 151) calls "a complex affair of doing and undergoing. . . that is 'felt' rather than 'known,'" experience is nevertheless a cyclical, ebb-and-flow movement between precognitive (or felt) havings and cognitive knowings.

The outcome of each successful inquiry is that experience grows in ordered richness. Dewey defines inquiry as the "controlled or directed transformation of an indeterminate situation into a [determinate and unified] situation" (LW 12, 55). "The existence of inquiries," Dewey claims in the *Logic*, "is not a matter of doubt. They enter into every area of life and into every aspect of every area" (LW 12, 106). In "secondary experience", inquirers achieve the objectives of inquiry and thereby deliver settled objects to "primary," or practical and everyday, experience. The overall result is that experience is enriched with an ensemble of intelligent habits (LW 1, 379; Ryan 1994; Fott 1998, 40-41). Enriched primary experience—or what Chandler (1977, 51) terms the "alpha and omega of all theorizing"—also renders ideational tools available or "ready-to-hand" (Heidegger 1962; Ryan 2004, 20). So, once learned through focused inquiry, these experiential lessons are stored or funded as meaningful data and

tools (i.e., as settled objects or knowns in primary experience) for use in future inquiries. Henceforth, they can be accessed and acted upon easily, framing our ongoing experiences in intelligent and habit-governed ways.

Santayana and Rorty on Dewey's Metaphysics

Among the many critics of Dewey's metaphysics, George Santayana and Richard Rorty have made increasingly difficult for Dewey scholars to communicate the theory's meaning to casual readers of *Experience and Nature*. Scholarly attempts to defend Dewey's metaphysics have gravitated toward an increasingly select and philosophically sophisticated audience. Their strategy has involved technical descriptions of its terms and explanations of its virtues compared to competing metaphysical theories. In articulating Dewey's metaphysics in non-technical or layperson's language, these scholars worry that they would open the theory up to one of two charges: (i) Dewey's metaphysics relativizes lived experience to its historical and cultural conditions (i.e., Santayana's critique) or (ii) it erects a grand metaphysical scheme for what experience is in-itself that resembles the projects of traditional metaphysicians—projects that Dewey himself rejected as part and parcel of an ill-founded "quest for certainty" (i.e., Rorty's critique).

Santayana: Dewey's Relativistic Metaphysics

Though Thomas Alexander (1992, 1) characterizes the debate between Dewey and Santayana as "[o]ne of the most fascinating and totally unproductive exchanges between two American philosophers," recounting Santayana's position is still instructive for the purpose of appreciating how Dewey's metaphysics was, and still is, misunderstood. In Santayana's 1925 review of *Experience and Nature*, he accuses Dewey of advancing a "half-hearted" naturalism that reflects nothing more than the culture and history of the United States in the early twentieth-century. Rather than communicating the generic or pervasive quality of experience, Dewey's metaphysics merely emphasizes features of the American way of life, including its narrow practicalism, ambitious capitalism, and a philosophically shallow or paltry account of experience's relation to nature (Dilworth 2002).

According to Santayana (1977, 351), "The dominant foreground which he [i.e., Dewey] calls Experience is accordingly filled and bounded not so much by experience as by convention. It is the social world." In other words, Dewey reduces nature to human experience and social norms. In trivializing the mysteries that lie beyond human experience, Dewey simultaneously overstates the place of human values, perspectives and culture in constructing the meaning of the natural world. Thus, Dewey's metaphysics of experience, on Santayana's view, amounts to an impoverished form of cultural relativism, if not a wild-eyed perspectivalism—but in no way does it disclose what we might call a full-blooded naturalism.

Rorty: Dewey's Bad Faith Metaphysics

The late Richard Rorty (1982, 1991) distinguishes between the "good Dewey" and the "bad Dewey." The Dewey he favors eschewed the long tradition in the history of philosophy, whereby philosophers erect dualisms (e.g., the Cartesian dualism between mind-body), understand knowing on the representational model of a spectator viewing an object (e.g., David Hume's copy principle), try to get at the "really-real" or foundational truths about what exists (e.g. Leibniz's monadology) and otherwise construct the edifices of grand philosophical systems on first principles (e.g., Hegel's "the real is rational, and the rational is real"). The Dewey he rejected decided to offer an alternative to traditional metaphysical systems, a naturalistic metaphysics, revealing the pervasive quality, generic traits, or 'feel' of ordinary lived experience. This is where, Rorty (1982, 74) contends, Dewey went entirely wrong, for either Dewey's metaphysics differs from "traditional metaphysics" in not having a directing bias concerning social values because Dewey has found an "empirical" way of doing metaphysics which abstracts from any such biases and values, or else when Dewey falls into his vein of talking of the "generic traits manifested by existences of all kinds" he is in slightly bad faith. In what David Hildebrand (203, 103) calls "Rorty's Fork," Dewey has either found a non-foundational way of doing metaphysics or his naturalistic metaphysics falls into the same trap that past metaphysical system-builders have repeatedly encountered, that is, trying to describe the indescribable. Since the first possibility is so unlikely as to seem absurd, Rorty concludes that Dewey must be engaging in bad faith metaphysics.

The Geographical Moment of Experience

Similar to Dewey's metaphysics of experience, the works of spatial and social-cultural geographers reveal a wealth of insight into the character of lived experience. According to David Lowenthal (1961, 241), "[m]ore than physics or physiology, psychology or politics, geography observes and analyzes aspects of the milieu on the scale and in the categories that they are usually apprehended in everyday life." For instance, spatial geographer Yi-Fu Tuan (1977, 18) does not limit the scope of experience to what is known, but insists that "[a]n object or place achieves concrete reality when our experience of it is total, that is, through all the senses as well as with the active and reflective mind." Similarly, Derek McCormack (2003, 488) explores non-representational "spaces of practice" or "spaces of affect" in which "the world is emergent from a range of spatial processes whose power is not dependent upon their crossing a threshold of contemplative cognition." In a similar spirit, social geographer Mike Crang (1997) points out that places are not merely representative landscapes, but also resemble everyday practices that constitute our embodied experience. Discussing how his view of social geography relates to tourism, Crang (1997, 365) interprets the classical tourist "as a voyager, setting out to understand the world—to mould experience into a sequence, into a route and inscribe a geography on to knowledge." From this small sampling of spatial and social geographers, it can be seen that they share with Dewey a concern for the underlying qualities and patterns of lived experience, and more specifically what is commonly referred to as the "geographical moment of experience." In this moment, experience of a place is dense with meaning, mediated by the products of past experiences and inquiries, including spatial and embodied relations between the organism and it natural environment. This experiential moment emerges with especial force in the activity of touring.

Kayak Touring and the Sea Tides Metaphor

Imagine a sea kayak touring trip along the coast of British Columbia, Canada. After packing one's kayak with all the necessary material for camping on a distant island or coastal nook, one maps out a route, checks the

weather and inspects the tidal charts before embarking on an exciting adventure (Burch 1993). Unlike the tourist who visits Disneyland or Niagara Falls, the sea kayak tourist, even when accompanied by a guide, resembles Crang's (1997, 365) classic tourist, the active "voyager" or explorer, but seldom the passive spectator or photographer. In this respect, the land traveler or backpacker is no different than the sea kayaker. She is fairly self-sufficient, equipped with the supplies to undertake a long journey, the outcome of which remains uncertain, and yet confident that her past experience and relevant abilities will aid her in completing a safe voyage.

When danger strikes or an emergency occurs (e.g., the hull of a kayak has been breached, a shark is nearby, or the kayaker has lost her navigational bearings), the activity of kayak touring enters a secondary phase: namely, the cognitively-rich experience of inquiry or problem-solving.8 The enjoyable experience of gliding across the water in a fiberglass or wooden vessel suddenly turns into a felt difficulty—at once, the pilot of the kayak must assess the situation, define the problem, and imagine possible measures for remedying the disrupted or disunified situation. Since the stakes are high (e.g., death or serious injury at sea), the kayak tourist cannot ignore the onset of conditions that would threaten her return to safe ground. Her experience involves a transition from its primary to its secondary phase, and inquiry commences. Confronted with a problematic situation, she attempts to predict the consequences of various plans of action by deploying what scientists call 'hypotheses' and Dewey terms 'suggestions.' In this stage, the inquirer disengages the engine of action, and engages the 'cognitive clutch', imaginatively rehearsing the many possible routes of future action (Ryan 1994, 34). She might ask, "if I did x, then what state of affairs y would I expect to result?" (e.g., if I turned the bow of the boat toward the oncoming wave, would I be able to safely pass over it?). Finally, the kayak tourist faced with an emergency must experimentally test the best action plans or suggestions for the sake of transforming the problematic situation into an unproblematic one.

The kayak tourist also experiences the ebb and flow of the sea tides in a way that only sea creatures do. This lived experience suggests a helpful analogy with the movement of the sea tides. Given that mature adults have already learned those habits that guide them in their everyday life, they no longer actively think about the most common and basic activities,

such as walking, reading, maintaining the thread of a conversation and even paddling a kayak through calm waters. So, the majority of human activity, including kayak touring, involves having an experience of the qualitative whole, not knowing the analyzed parts. Most human experience is, as Dewey's metaphysics of experience suggests, habitual, noncognitive and immediate, yet mediated by the products (habits, ideas, concepts, and meanings) of prior inquiries (or secondary experiences). In other words, similar to the sea tides, experience ebbs and flows from the sandy beaches of primary experience to the tumultuous waves of secondary experience, but spends more cumulative time on the beach than on the crest of a wave. It

Santayana and Rorty Revisited

Revisiting the criticisms of Dewey's metaphysics, it can be confidently stated that both Santayana and Rorty neglect to treat the theory on its own terms. Santayana sifts Dewey's metaphysics through a very tightly woven filter of cultural perspectivalism and Rorty through a post-modernist agenda set on rejecting all philosophical programs labeled 'metaphysics.' In Dewey's own response to Santayana, appropriately titled "Halfhearted Naturalism," he makes three interconnected points to refute the argument that his metaphysics is reducible to an American cultural perspective. First, Dewey declares that while his metaphysics acknowledges the relevance of a plurality of perspectives, this position does not commit him to the reductionist claim that all nature is within the scope of human experience. Second, his metaphysics does not invite solipsism because experience for Dewey is still objective and cognitively rich with shared meanings. Third, he does not make either the "foreground" or the "background" of experience ultimately meaningful, so neither serves as a mechanism for essentializing crass American values (LW 3, 73-81). Instead, the background provides a wealth of habits, resources and tools, while the foreground offers immediate enjoyment to be had and current problems to overcome. The fringe between foreground and background hints at still-to-be experienced possibilities—or as Hickman puts it, "a vague indication of what may be to come." 12 By showing us that experience ebbs and flows between two phases, the sea tides metaphor also invites the casual reader of *Experience and Nature* to consider what activities bring her into closer contact with the natural wonders beyond the reach of her current experience. Is it, for instance, meditation and art (i.e., emphasizing primary/consummatory experience), math and science (i.e., focusing on secondary/inquirential experience), or some more commonplace activity (i.e., revealing a combination of primary and secondary experience)?

Since Dewey died long before Rorty and thus never had the opportunity to respond to his criticisms, we must reconstruct a response based on his own writings as well as the works of contemporary Dewey scholars. Both David Hildebrand (2003, 103-10) and Larry Hickman (2007, 13-29) have mounted impressive defenses of Dewey's naturalistic metaphysics against Rorty's attack. However, as mentioned, I think that in many ways their technical arguments about the realism/anti-realism debate (in the case of Hildebrand) and the postmodernist agenda (in the case of Hickman) make them more suitable for a select audience, and less accessible to casual readers of Experience and Nature. In short (and with a comparably lower level of sophistication than either Hildebrand or Hickman), they insist that Dewey's naturalistic metaphysics differs dramatically from the grand theorizing about what ultimately exists that traditional metaphysicians typically undertake. Therefore, it is disingenuous to claim, as Rorty does, that Dewey's metaphysics was in "bad faith" with his far-reaching critique of the tradition. Dewey's two-phased account of experience is not comparable to, for instance, Immanuel Kant's (1787) realm of noumenal things-in-themselves (Ding an sich) lying behind the experiential realm of phenomenal appearances. Rorty might have been correct in claiming that better words than 'experience' and 'metaphysics' were in order, especially given the totalizing connotations that philosophical system-builders have imparted to them. 13 However, Dewey's intention was to salvage this terminology from philosophical obscurity and return it to ordinary discourse about our day-to-day activities. 14 Instead of positing noumenal objects or claiming a realm of existence that transcends our sensible experience, Dewey's naturalized metaphysics gives us a deep description of our ordinary experience and its relation to the lived environment, including the spaces and places that we inhabit.

Conclusion

We have seen that with the assistance of geographers, philosophers will be able to convey the deeper meaning of Dewey's misunderstood metaphysics to the causal reader of Experience and Nature. Still, it could be objected that kayak touring and sea tides are mere window dressings on a sophisticated metaphysical theory that deserves an equally technical treatment. Although there is some merit to this objection, I think that it misrepresents Dewey's intention in philosophizing about ordinary lived experience. Dewey insisted that one of the most important functions of philosophy is as a "liaison officer," translating the languages of distinct discourses into a shared lexicon for academics and non-academics alike (LW 1, 306). 15 Geographers, philosophers and even interdisciplinary scholars have much to share with each other, as well as much to teach and learn from ordinary people, when it comes to appreciating the geographical moment of experience. Part of this inquiry should involve describing the generic qualities and patterns underlying our experience of place and space. 16 As Dewey tells us, most of human experience is not a knowing event. Rather, it is a having event, a matter of facing the totality of one's situation, feeling its pervasive quality, and undertaking activities, such as landscape painting, improvisational dancing, and even kayak touring, that enrich the fund of habits that make experience meaningful. Even more mundane, everyday experiences, such as taking a walk through the park and checking one's e-mail, become more meaningful when one reflects on them. One then returns what one learns through reflection to primary experience (e.g., I spend far too much time checking my email and not enough time walking through the park). Nevertheless, the geographical moment is more thoroughly had or enjoyed, rather than known or cognized, by the experiencing agent. In the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson (1914), "To finish the moment, to find the journey's end in every step of the road, to live the greatest number of good hours, is wisdom."

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Notes

- 1 This paper was presented at the 2008 International Association for the Study of Environment, Space, and Place, April 27, 2008, at Towson University, Towson, Maryland, U.S.A. The conference theme was tourism.
- 2 All citations of the works of Dewey will be made to the text and *The Collected Works of John Dewey*, 1882-1953: The Electronic Edition (1996). According the citation convention, LW refers to Later Works; MW to Middle Works; and EW to Early Works; with the volume: page number following.
- 3 The bifurcation of objective and plural perspectives is, in most cases, a byproduct of strictly adhering to the fact/value dichotomy. Defenders of 'pure' objectivity are concerned that plural perspectives or value orientations will undermine any claims of fact and deliver us into a relativistic quagmire. Defenders of plural perspectives counter that a partial perspective benefiting entrenched interests and preserving the status quo can be surreptitiously introduced under the guise of a universal, value-less and incontestable objectivity. In collaboration with Arthur F. Bentley, Dewey criticize a strict fact-value dichotomy: "Whether this word [value] is used or not in the case of prizings, esteemings, cherishings,

etc., the observed facts emphasize a point previously made:—'Valuing' is not a special isolated type of act performed by a peculiar or unique agent, under conditions so unique that valuings and values can be understood in isolation from orders of fact not themselves of the 'value' kind" (LW 16, 348).

- 4 The distinction between knowing and having, secondary and primary experience, is found as early as 1905 in Dewey's "The Postulate of Immediate Empiricism" (MW 3, 163) and later (1929) in Experience and Nature (LW 1, 3-5). In the second appendix of the latter work, Dewey writes: "There are two dimensions of experienced things: one that of having them, and the other that of knowing about them so that we can again have them in more meaningful and secure ways" (LW 1, 379). Fott (1998, 104) comments that "[t]he difference between immediate [or primary] experience and reflective [or secondary] experience implies that not all things in a person's experience are objects of knowledge." The distinction is also insightfully developed by Kenneth Chandler (1977:51) and Ryan (1994; 2004) as the concept of "mediate immediacy." According to Dewey, cognitive experience, or knowing, is secondary to its non-cognitive counterpart, or having "an experience," because consciousness seamlessly shifts from an active foreground of thinking and problem-solving to a settled background "of meanings as they are embodied in organic life" (LW 1, 229). Having an experience is primary, the repository of these tentatively settled meanings and habits that are both the outcome of successful past inquiries and potentially employable resources in subsequent inquiries. According to Schutz (2001, 289), "human beings simply do not have the ability to attend consciously to more than a very small proportion of their daily activities." So, habits and meanings accumulated from cognitively-rich secondary experience mediate and enrich the immediacy of primary experience, thereby permitting humans to negotiate day-to-day challenges in cognitively undemanding ways. Dewey's example of a machine's constant and rhythmic operations versus the spatio-temporal changes that make up its processes is intended to distinguish between primary and secondary phases of experience (LW 4, 130).
- 5 For commentary on Dewey's use of the word 'habit', especially in his main works on human psychology, see Murray Murphy's introduction to the same work (MW 14, 25). In *Human Nature and Conduct*, Dewey explains how the creation of ideas implies the existence of prior habits: "[F]ormation of ideas as well as their execution depends upon habit. If we could form a correct idea without a correct habit, then possibly we could carry it out irrespective of habit. But a wish gets definite form only in connection with an idea, and an idea gets

shape and consistency only when it has a habit back of it. Only when a man can already perform an act of standing straight does he know what it is like to have a right posture and only then can he summon the idea required for proper execution. The act must come before the thought, and a habit before an ability to evoke the thought at will" (AW 14, 25).

- 6 The relevant difference between the land traveler and kayak tourist for the purposes of this essay is the feel of the experience, the movements of the waves which imitate the general ebb-and-flow pattern of primary and secondary phases of experience in Dewey's metaphysics.
- 7 The literature on kayak touring is for the most part limited to how-to books or instructional manuals. However, there are some stories of heroic kayak journeys, such as Linnea (1997), Hahn (2001), Duff (2003), and Heacox (2006).
- 8 For a popular account of the dangers faced by sea kayakers and various strategies for defusing tense and potentially life-threatening situations, see Broze and Gronseth (1997).
- 9 Of course, sailors and swimmers also experience the ebb and flow of the sea tides. The sailor is not as proximate to the wave movement as the sea kayaker and the swimmer would be even closer than the sea kayaker. This suggests that there are several levels at which the ebb-and-flow pattern of the ocean can be felt in lived experience.
- 10 This kind of environmental awareness and its connection with John Dewey's pragmatism, particularly the naturalistic component, has been debated at length elsewhere. See McDonald (2002, 2004), Bowers (2003), Chaloupka (1987), Taylor (1990), and Hickman (2007, 131-72).
- 11 In Art as Experience, Dewey compares the rhythmic change between stable and unstable periods of interaction to the "ebb and flow" movement of "the waves of the sea" (LW 10, 22). However, he does not make the same comparison with respect to the movement between primary and secondary experience. The sea tides metaphor for primary/secondary experience is also developed in Ralston (2007, 70). For an insightful treatment of the aesthetic dimension of Dewey's theory of experience, see Alexander (2002).
 - 12 See Dewey (LW 6, 13-14) and Hickman (2007, 148).
- 13 As Rorty (1982, 72) points out, Dewey regretted his use of the word 'experience' and wished that he had instead used the word 'culture'. However, this substitution would have made Dewey's metaphysics even more susceptible to Santayana's critique.

- 14 In a letter to Arthur F. Bentley, Dewey confesses that "I was hopeful that the philosophic word 'Experience' could be redeemed by being returned to its idiomatic usage . . ." Dewey and Bentley (1964, 643).
- 15 Dewey writes: "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 meanings with which they are charged" (LW 1, 306). Hickman (2007, 62) comments: "He [i.e., Dewey] indicated his view that one of the most important functions of philosophy was to act as a liaison officer, rendering the languages of these various disciplines intelligible to one another." Also, see Ralston (2008).
- 16 There is an extensive literature concerning the experience of place and space. For a sampling, see Relph (1976), Casey (1997), and Malpus (1999).