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The Metaphysics of Dewey's Conception of The Self

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In "Self Realization as the Moral Ideal," (1893) John Dewey announced his intention to banish metaphysics from "ethical science." The reason was that metaphysics "seems to solve problems in general, but at the expense of the practical problems which alone really demand or admit action."[1] Ethical science deals with the moral growth of *individuals* rather than species, and so it must be rooted in an exploration of the specifics of each individual self. An ethics "rooted and grounded in the self," would incorporate the lessons of psychology and provide guidance for the practical problems involved in forming moral individuals and societies.

Dewey's intention to banish metaphysics from ethics seemed, for a time, to work,. During the next 20 years, Dewey's writings barely mentioned metaphysics. The few times the word was used, it was used in a derogatory fashion. For example, in 1910, Dewey claimed that it is "self-contradictory for an instrumental pragmatism to set up claims to supplying a metaphysics or ontology," because pragmatism "involves the doctrine that the origin, structure, and purpose of knowing are such as to render nugatory any wholesale inquiries into the nature of Being."[2] This view would not last. As Dewey explored his pragmatism further, he began to envision a reconstructed role for metaphysics. Specifically, he came to believe that ethics could benefit from the lessons of a reconstructed, naturalistic metaphysics.

Towards a Naturalistic Metaphysics

Studies in Logical Theory (1903) avoids explicit discussion of metaphysics, yet incorporates a coherent sense of nature which can be described as metaphysical. The preface hints at metaphysical implications in its use of the word "Reality" three times in one paragraph summarizing the "ultimate philosophical bearing of what is set forth" (MW 2:296). No longer would a static Reality determine the nature of inquiry; rather, inquiry itself is a key feature of existence. "Judgment appears," Dewey wrote, "as the medium through which the consciously effected evolution of Reality goes on.... Reality is thus dynamic or self-evolving" (ibid.). *Inference is existential* -- a real aspect of nature which has real consequences for what exists. *Thought* influences reality.

Another metaphysical implication of the *Studies* was the reconstruction of the notion of "object." This reconstruction is related to Dewey's emerging model of "the temporal development of experience" (MW 10:320). In its primary phase, experience is merely *had* and not processed or reflected upon; it is literally immediate and pre-cognitive. In its second stage, experience is reflective or cognitive. In this stage, "objects" emerge. Dewey in fact reserves the term "object" for "object of knowledge"; the word "object" is used here as in "objective." The "object" of inquiry is what inquiry is in the process of determining. The real world merely "suggests" objects; it does not "give" them (MW 10:340). On this view, *objects* are *created* in the process of inquiry, when a perception is consciously connected to some other perception or idea.

This reconstruction of the theory of inquiry provides the foundation for Dewey's desire to make ethics scientific. When a human agent comes to an ethical conclusion in a problematic situation -- for example, "the best thing to do in this situation is *x*" -- *reality* has been changed. The created object, *x*, has a new existential status. As such, it can be studied empirically. Science can say something about ideals. Like other objects, ideals enter into experience through the mediation of

reflective thought. But they are not created *de novo*; thought does not operate without existential constraints. The "brute existences" of nature have features which make the production of objects possible and must be taken into account in their formation. Dewey's desire to understand these features eventually brought him back to metaphysics.

In 1915, in "The Subject Matter of Metaphysical Inquiry," Dewey publicly announced his intention to reconstruct metaphysics as a naturalistic enterprise. Metaphysics should abandon the attempt to deal with first causes and devote itself to the empirical study of the irreducible traits of nature. A reconstructed metaphysics would supplement the various sciences, each of which deals with only a subset of existences, by inquiring into the "irreducible traits found in any and every subject of scientific inquiry (MW 8:4). The traits of diversity, interaction, and change, for example, are found in every subject-matter of inquiry. Through scientific inquiry into these irreducible traits, Dewey wrote, "we shall be saved from the recurrent attempts to reduce heterogeneity to homogeneity, diversity to sheer uniformity, quality to quantity, and so on" (MW 8:7).

The ideas presented in the 1915 essay were given much more complete justification in *Experience and Nature* (1925). The book explores in detail the "generic traits manifested by existences of all kinds."[3] Dewey hoped that an empirical survey of existences would produce a list of generic traits which could then be used as general categories for situated inquiry. In the later book, Dewey reconstructed the notion of "generic traits" so that he now saw most occurring in what can be called "complementary pairs." It is the rates and modes of *interaction* of these traits, and their *proportion* in any specific natural existence, which are the stuff of philosophy (LW 1:67).

Dewey identified at least 30 generic traits in *Experience and Nature* and elsewhere. I have listed these in Table 1. (See LW 1:50, 62-63, 308; LW 3:41; LW 5:208.) This list is labeled "proposed" because Dewey always held his generic traits to be *provisional*. If even *one* existence is found that does not possess a given trait, it can no longer be taken as generic. Note that the list includes several complementary pairs: stability and precariousness, incompleteness and finishedness, repetition and irregularity, and association and individuality. There are also several traits which do not appear to have complements. For example, Dewey never provides a complement for "logicibility." There also doesn't seem to be a complement for "quality" or "temporality." We can then see Dewey's "generic traits" as a category actually encompassing at least two types of traits: (1) complementary pairs, of which both poles are *always* present to some degree; and (2) descriptors of all events *as* events, present absolutely and not subject to the same proportionality.

Table 1: List of Proposed Generic Traits

stability	continuity	repetition	interaction
movement	arrest	potentiality	unity
safe and sane	structure	precariousness	quality
contingency	discontinuity	incompleteness	finishedness
variation	hazard	uncertainty	association
change	ambiguity	irregularity	specificity
indeterminateness	openness	possibility	temporality
logicibility	tendency	bias	certainty
preference	direction	potentiality	constant relations

pluralism of values	pluralism of ends	diversity	qualitative individuality

Additional features of the metaphysics which Dewey develops in *Experience and Nature* are important for understanding its significance for his view of ethics. Most importantly, Dewey reaffirms his abandonment of traditional dualisms. Everything which exists, is *in nature*; nature is *all there is*. As the realm of existence, nature has certain "defining characteristics" (LW 1:126). The first is that existences in nature have a temporal dimension. Nature consists of *events*. *Every* existence is an event, and events are what make up experience. Each event presents "something obdurate, self-sufficient, wholly immediate, neither a relation nor an element in a relational whole, but terminal and exclusive" (LW 1:74). This "something" is the event's qualitative immediacy, its unique individuality. As an event, each existence has a beginning, a history, and an ending. Existences also have *tendencies* which must be apprehended and not simply constructed if events are to be dealt with intelligently. These tendencies are not *final* or *eternal*: Dewey's "natural teleology" (LW 1:279) is provisional and contextual, rather than eternal. Nature is a "challenge," providing -- as Dewey wrote in *The Quest for Certainty* -- "possible starting points and opportunities rather than final ends" (LW 4:80-81). The potentialities of any existent have some stability -- otherwise they would not exist long enough to matter to human agents. This stability means that existences have a structure which Dewey conceptualizes as "form." Nature is *formed*, and these forms enter into experience as possibilities, which can be apprehended by intelligence and utilized to alter the directions of natural events.[4]

Since events are "ongoing and hence as such unfinished, incomplete, indeterminate," nature possesses the "possibility of being so managed and steered that ends may become fulfillments not just termini " (LW 1:127). The transformation from an event's natural terminus to an end-in-view or object of inquiry involves the mediation of reflection and the attribution to events of *meaning*. Meanings result from the attribution to an event of possible consequences, which allow agents to direct the event in preferred directions. This leads directly to Dewey's reconstructed notion of *essence*:

> When an event has meaning, its potential consequences become its integral and funded feature. When the potential consequences are important and repeated, they form the very nature and essence of a thing, its defining, identifying, and distinguishing form (LW 1:143).

This is an important passage for understanding Dewey's reconstruction of Aristotle's metaphysics. Rather than being supernatural, essences are actively constructed through the interaction of an event with an agent. Once an event's essence has been perceived, the event becomes an "object," or "event-with-meaning" (see LW 10:286-87). *Reality* itself is altered by this meaning-attribution. The event-with meaning, or object, is now available as an actual tool for solving problems. Again, inference is existential.

METAPHYSICS AND THE SELF

Dewey's metaphysical perspective as I have outlined it has come under criticism for its seeming abstractness and inapplicability to situated inquiry. Indeed, Richard Rorty goes so far as to call it a "mistake."[5] I believe this view is wrong, and I will argue this point by showing how this reconstructed metaphysics played a role in Dewey's evolving views of ethics and the self.

The Absolute Self. Dewey's earliest ethical theory (as outlined in his *Psychology* of 1887) was blatantly metaphysical. It held that moral growth consists of the gradual realization in the actual self of a transcendent, absolute, and universal Self. This view was roundly criticized by Dewey's mentors. Hence his subsequent decision to remove metaphysics from ethics. In "Self-Realization as the Moral Ideal" (1893), Dewey began "to substitute a working conception of the self for a metaphysical definition of it" (EW 4:50). A "working conception" would see the ideal self "not as

mere possibility of an ideal or infinite self, but as the more adequate comprehension and treatment of the present activity" (ibid). The actual self, as "always a concrete specific activity" (EW 4:43), reveals certain capacities, the realization of which would constitute moral behavior. If the conduct of the agent "maintains" the situation -- that is, fulfills or "functions" its intrinsic capacities -- then the conduct will be moral and will lead to moral growth (see EW 4:234). "To find the self in the highest and fullest activity possible at the time, and to perform the act in the consciousness of its complete identification with self...is morality, and is realization" (EW 4:51).

By defining the actual self as "always a concrete specific activity," Dewey seems to be asserting that the self "exists" only at the present moment, as a *process*. This image of the self approaches the Lockean notion of a "punctual self" who is freed from the burden of *hexis* or character and who can disengage the past, emotion, and the society in the quest for fulfillment of function.[6] In this sense, Dewey's early functionalist self seems to ignore the importance of the self's *structure*.[7]

The Capacities of the Self. In the 1908 *Ethics* , Dewey gave the self a structure. Dewey had always believed that the primary end for an individual is the realization of her capacities and powers.[8] This self-realization ethic was now further naturalized. Within the self, there are both organized, repetitive aspects and unorganized, unactualized possibilities. The organized or "habitual self" represents "those factors of the self which have become so definitely organized into set habits that they take care of themselves" (MW 5:326). This habitual self is conceptualized as the agent's *disposition*: "that body of active tendencies and interests in the individual which make him open, ready, warm to certain aims, and callous, cold, blind to others" (MW 5:234). What allows the self to grow beyond this habitual self are the possibilities, "presented in aspirations…which can get organized into habitual tendencies and interests only by a…difficult reconstruction of the habitual self" (ibid). The set of these possibilities represents Dewey's naturalized ideal self.

Because Dewey held that the self is constituted by the objective interests which it takes into account, the key moral distinction for Dewey is to see that some agents realize or fulfill a set of possibilities which are "too narrow and exclusive" (MW 5:342), and which fail to take adequate account of the interests of others. Moral *growth* is the broadening and deepening of the agent's capacity to take *all* the interests inherent within a situation into account. The determination of "right" conduct involves an empirical survey of the "needs and possibilities" of all the agents in a given situation (MW 5:349). The intelligent and moral agent will choose that action which will fulfill the greatest number of the capacities intrinsic to a situation.

There are several metaphysical issues involved in this conception. There is only one realm of existence: the realm of experience. Both the "habitual" self and the ideal self exist *within* experience. The actual self has a structure or form which reveals possibilities -- these possibilities are the ideal self. Determining which actions are moral and which are not cannot be done according to some *a priori* rule or principle. Rather, all elements of the situation have to be analyzed to determine the right course of action and to assess whether an agent has behaved morally. But this is not to say there are no general moral principles or imperatives. All agents have capacities, and the "capacities which constitute the self *demand* fulfillment" (MW 5:331; emphasis added). Thus the *situation* -- through the intrinsic capacities of the present activity -- always dictates the direction for moral growth. There is *one* "right end" which uniquely satisfies the demands of the situation. The "good" self is the self which meets these demands.

In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey applied the moral philosophy of the 1908 *Ethics* to his theory of education. He further developed his idea that the self is a mixture of incompleteness and finishedness. It is "not something ready-made, but something in continuous formation through choice of action" (MW 9:361). But there is something *there* to be changed: the "finished" part of the self, which possesses some continuity or "structure," and which reflects the agent's native capacities and the dispositional residues of her prior experiences. The most crucial aspect of agency is the "power to develop dispositions" (MW 9:49); this power or capacity is what makes growth possible.

Education is defined throughout *Democracy and Education* as the "freeing" of the capacities of learners. Both the *process* and the *goal* of education are the freeing of capacities. (This is not surprising given Dewey's contention that in all worthwhile activities "the end should be intrinsic to the action; it should be *its* end -- a part of its own course"; MW 9:212.) Dewey describes this "freeing" with several different words, including realization, liberation (MW 9:93), development (MW 9:95), maintenance, and discovery (MW 9:95). Always there is the underlying faith that capacity is the one thing about people that is most valuable.

On this view, the teacher's role is to inquire into the capacities of each student, and to provide environment and experiences which can "function" or realize these capacities. This model avoids two extremes of educational thought which, Dewey believed, had disastrous effects on children. The first was the traditional view that educational ends should be developed outside of the children themselves, relying completely on tradition and the needs of adult society. The second was the romantic view that the child somehow "knows" her own interests and that all adults should do is stand by ready to supply the child with the resources which her interests demand. Dewey wanted adults to have a role in directing the child's interests toward "ends" which were somehow more objective. The notion of the realization of intrinsic capacity appears to place the ends of growth in the objective situation. By developing the capacities of the students, educators would not only develop "happy" individuals but also contribute to the development of a "well organized" democratic, society (MW 9:96).

During Dewey's later middle and early later periods, he further explored the "actual conditions" of moral development, and began to question whether the dual concepts of individual capacity and social democracy could serve the moral function he had built for them in *Democracy and Education*. Specifically, he wondered whether "capacities" provided as "objective" a source for educational ends as he had previously supposed. It is to these shifts that I now turn.

Individuality as Potentiality. In *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922), Dewey further developed his psychology of habits. This marked a return to the Aristotelian view of *hexis* as the "formed" quality of the individual. Habits are "latent" yet "operative" aspects of the self which allow it to respond quickly to environmental conditions (MW 14:29). While a "capacity" is a potential activity, a habit is "working adaptation" of a personal capacity with "environing forces" (MW 14:16). Each habit represents a "confirmed or impaired capacity" (LW 7:170-71), that is, a capacity which has either been actualized or impeded. A habit, in short, is a "working capacity" (MW 14:21).

As long as Dewey characterized the actual self as nothing but "activity" and the ideal self as fulfillment of capacities, he was holding the self as beyond the scope of psychology. Dewey's mature psychology of habit brings the structure of the self into the realm of inquiry. An agent's habits reveal themselves as patterns of behavior. The emergence of patterns over time thus provides clues to the agent's character. Habit thus helps Dewey to move from a rather ethereal notion of conduct as the exercise of situational functions in the present moment to a more *behaviorist* psychology in which conduct expresses the interaction of a formed character with a specific environment. The concept of habit also helped Dewey to apply temporality to his theory of the self. The self, like other existences, is an "event," with a beginning, a history, and an ending. The "interpenetration of habits" (MW 14:30) or *character* which an agent builds up during a lifetime is the operative residue of the agent's history. This conception explains moral growth over time.

These improvements to Dewey's theory are made more explicit in the 1932 *Ethics*. The moral agent is the one who becomes "aware that our acts are connected with one another; thereby an ideal of *conduct* is substituted for the blind and thoughtless performance of isolated acts" (LW 7:168-69). Dewey's use of the word "conduct" here is a technical one. "Where there is conduct there is not simply a succession of disconnected acts but each thing done carries forward an underlying tendency and intent, *conducting*, leading up, to further acts and to a final fulfillment or consummation" (LW 7:168). In other words, when an agent's actions cohere into an integral series of related events, then the agent is showing moral growth. The determination of the "right" action is now made with

reference to the agent's past, present, *and* future -- the entire "event" of her life -- instead of only to the intrinsic capacities of the present action. This is a better account of the continuity of the self than Dewey had during his middle period for it provides more guidance for moral choice.

Growth is dependent upon this construction of a unity of conduct. Because situations constantly change, the *moral* self is open to new possibilities, it "goes forth to meet new demands and occasions, and readapts and remakes itself in the process. It welcomes untried situations" (LW 7:307). The moral agent always looks to interact with possibilities and explore new things. Moral inquiry involves a continual survey of changing conditions; evaluating moral growth involves a recurrent determination of how many of the "demands" for growth the agent responds to. This evaluation must take account of the entire career of the self, paying attention not only to the fulfillment of *present* capacity but also to the development of the self's overall tendencies. "Any other basis for judging the moral status of the self is conventional. In reality, direction of movement, not the plane of attainment and rest, determines moral quality" (LW 7:307). This notion of "direction of movement" indicates that the self has "continuity, consistency," and an "enduring unity of attitudes and habits." The various actions of the moral self "hang together because they proceed from a single and stable self" (LW 7:172).

Dewey brought these various developments into a coherent theory of moral growth based on the ideal of continual and emergent formation of an *individual*. "Individuality" is a trait of every natural being, including the self (LW 1:162). It is at first spontaneous and unshaped; it is a potentiality, a capacity of development" (LW 5:121). Individuality "is not something complete in itself....[I]t develops into shape and form only through interaction with actual conditions" (ibid). Dewey completely rejected the idea of the unif*ied* self, waiting to be discovered. Instead he viewed the self as full of multiple, conflicting tendencies and activities which are gradually and continually *to be* unified.

In "Time and Individuality" (1940), Dewey further elaborated on this model. The essay stresses the importance of the concept of "potentiality." The very fact that growth *can* occur implies "that potentiality is a category of existence" (LW 14:109). This much is a metaphysical statement. But potentialities are not necessarily determinative of the moral self. The possible powers and capacities of an agent are not necessarily *moral* just because they are possible. Dewey wanted to reconstruct the classic Aristotelian formulation in which potentialities are connected with a *fixed* and *intrinsic* end.

Dewey had rejected the idea of a *fixed* end to growth in 1893. But it took Dewey until his later period to give up the notion that moral ends are *intrinsic* to the activities of the self. Potentialities cannot be known in advance. This renders problematic Dewey's suggestion in *Democracy and Education* that teachers should determine the directions, or ends, of growth through examination of intrinsic capacities. Since there are for any existence "things with which it has not yet interacted," it is impossible to say for sure what the future holds for a learner. The implicit challenge for teachers is to arrange for students to interact with "things with which they had not yet interacted," thus giving them the opportunity to express their "unactualized potentialities." New consequences, new possibilities, will be the result. Only the "power to produce these new consequences" (ibid) is *intrinsic* to agency or selfhood. What these consequences *will be* -- and which ones are morally worthy -- is subject to future uncertainties. "[P]otentialities are not fixed and intrinsic, but are a matter of an indefinite range of interactions in which an individual may engage" (LW 14:110). On this view, there is no "Self" to be "realized." There is nothing "*in*" the future possibilities of the self, no *intrinsic* essence, no "brute core of existence" (ibid) toward which to guide personal growth. The potential self is primarily characterized by *incompleteness*. It is neither a unitary nor an essentializable phenomenon; rather, it is "a field of indeterminate (though not limitless) transactionality."[9]

A learner's potentialities are *open* and indeterminate. Since only a subset of the multitude of possibilities can be actualized, each decision has moral consequences for the future. The incompleteness of the self provides the agent with the opportunity to craft her emerging self through altering the conditions of growth. While continuing to hold that there are capacities, directions, and forms in the actual conditions of the present, Dewey now rejected the idea of a "future" self as inherent in or implied by these capacities. The present conditions of the self do not *dictate* the future ideals for the self; rather, the plethora of possible directions constitutes a field of potentiality from which the moral agent must *select* ideal ends.

Moral Metaphysics

Michael Scriven has written that the question "Why should I be moral?" is one of the most pressing of our contemporary age.[10] As Johnson writes in response, "It is our failure to render a justifiable and persuasive answer to this question which has led the young into widespread cynicism about the legitimacy (and hence the usefulness) of thinking and acting in ethical terms."[11] Charles Taylor has suggested that answers to this question are found in the epiphanic experiences of art, and that philosophers can help others to tap into the sources behind these experiences by articulating a language with which it is possible to discuss aesthetic and consummatory experiences and their qualities. Dewey's metaphysics articulates such a language. "To declare this whole kind of thinking without object is to incur a huge self-inflicted wound."[12] Dewey tells us that morality arises whenever an action has possible consequences. If *not* doing metaphysics is to "incur a huge self-inflicted wound," then certainly there are moral consequences to Dewey's metaphysics. I believe it is a *moral* question as to whether we should or should not engage in thinking and writing about metaphysics. Such categories as potentiality, continuity, uncertainty, and stability are moral as well as metaphysical categories, when they are applied to the ongoing "event" that is each agent's self.

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1. John Dewey, *The Early Works: 1882-1898*, vol 4, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969-1972), 53. Hereafter, citations to this five volume set are given in parentheses in the text, in a standard form of reference, consisting of the initials EW followed by the volume number, a colon, and the page number. Thus, "EW 4:53" refers to page 53 of volume 4 of the *Early Works*.

2. John Dewey, *The Middle Works: 1899-1924*, vol. 6, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1976-1988), 88-89. Hereafter, citations to this fifteen volume set are given in parentheses in the text, in a standard form of reference, consisting of the initials MW followed by the volume number, a colon, and the page number.

3. John Dewey, *The Later Works: 1925-1953*, vol. 1, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988-1991), 308. Hereafter, citations to this seventeen volume set are given in parentheses in the text, in a standard form of reference, consisting of the initials LW followed by the volume number, a colon, and the page number.

4. See Raymond Boisvert, *Dewey's Metaphysics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1988).

5. Richard Rorty, "Dewey's Metaphysics," in *New Studies in the Philosophy of John Dewey*, ed. Steven M. Cahn (Hanover N.H.: University Press of New England, 1977), 68.

6. See Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 171-72.

7. See Martin Hollis, "The Self in Action," in *John Dewey Reconsidered*, ed. R. S. Peters (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), 60.

8. See Robert Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 161.

9. See Gary Calore, "Towards a Naturalistic Metaphysics of Temporality: A Synthesis of John Dewey's later thought," *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 3, no. 1 (1989): 12-25.

10. Quoted in Henry C. Johnson, *The Public School and Moral Education* (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1980), 56.

11. Johnson, *The Public School and Moral Education*, 56-57.

12. Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 513.