

Response to Craig Cunningham's "The Metaphysics of John Dewey's Conception of the Self"

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Craig Cunningham's paper can be taken in two very different ways. On one hand, it can be taken as endorsing a philosophical position calling for an enhanced conception of the role of metaphysics in moral thinking. He suggests that "thinking and writing about metaphysics" is a "moral question." On the other hand, most of Cunningham's paper is centered on explaining Dewey's conception of self from an historical position. In this sense, one could respond to his paper, not by questioning Cunningham's affiliation with those arguments he purports belong to Dewey, but rather by questioning whether or not he can claim that Dewey ultimately embraces the idea that metaphysics gives useful advice in our descriptions of a moral self. I will consequently respond to both the philosophical argument (that we need a metaphysical conception of the self in order to enhance our moral themes), as well as the historical argument (which considers whether or not Dewey clung to a metaphysical concept of the self during the latter part of his life).

Cunningham's philosophical position presupposes an historical evolution in Dewey's thinking with regard to the usefulness of metaphysics. He describes this evolution in the following manner. First, Dewey introduces the concept of inquiry as bearing upon reality by presenting the "object" of inquiry as the process-relating perception to what is yet to be determined, rather than what merely is. This not only renders the object of inquiry applicable to the investigative tools of science; it also leads to a reconstructed metaphysics which takes into account the relationship between the natural conditions of existence and the experiencing subject.

From this point, according to Cunningham, Dewey moves on to the event horizon of experience suggesting that it is copotential with the consequences of possible action or the window of possible interactions and events. This, in turn, relates both the "object" and "meaning" in the potential for action that we comprehend *as* an "event," thus allowing *meaning* access to natural circumstances and existential problems.

Cunningham describes Dewey's distinction between the habitual self and the ideal self as dependent upon this event horizon of the possible. The more possibilities one can recognize in the horizon or window of possible actions and outcomes, the more one expands one's understanding of the relation between the agency of human actions and the moral consequences of objective relations. Consequently, what is moral is linked with the very processes of growth or insight into objective consequences and possible outcomes; in other words, moral growth is linked with learning. Further, science is given prime consideration as an objective tool for reexamining the possibilities and outcomes of potential actions under objective circumstances -- the overall continuity of a person's actions from past to future -- providing the necessary "unity of conduct" to identify the self as moral.

However, Cunningham then goes on to relate Dewey's dissatisfaction over "fixed" or "intrinsic" ends as classically understood, with the self's potentiality in growth, leading to the idea that only the ability to recreate or redescribe possible outcomes is intrinsic to human "agency." Next he describes the importance for Dewey of indeterminate potentiality while raising his own point about the importance of moral coherence as a metaphysical issue in the final section of his paper.

There seem to be two directions we can go with Cunningham's Dewey at this point with regard to what is "intrinsic" to human agency. On the one hand, we can move toward a quasi-communitarian

position, requiring an end or telos in which a coherent, yet pluralized, moral vision is cast over the self, blanketing our intentions, desires and aims. Dewey, at times, sounds as though he wants something like this, for example in *The Public and Its Problems* when he emphasizes the "social idea" of Democracy.

On the other hand, if we focus on Dewey's pluralism and Cunningham's insistence that it is toward "open and indeterminate" potentialities of the self that Dewey was moving (which I think is more likely the case), we can then pass on beyond communitarian sentiments to a more interesting question. Is Dewey's desire for an increasingly pluralized conception of human potential consistent with his aforementioned passion for a naturalized, albeit pluralized, metaphysics of the self? More particularly, do we not misread Dewey's position if we believe that he was increasing his metaphysical focus by insisting upon a consistently more open and pluralized descriptive basis for human potential and action? Given that Dewey can just as easily be interpreted to have evolved to this final position by de-emphasizing his metaphysical priorities, a difficulty arises in understanding just how Cunningham connects Dewey's emphasis on an indeterminate horizon to his own arguments in the final section of the paper supporting the moral importance of metaphysics.

At this point, I would contend that Cunningham's philosophical and historical positions on Dewey's later preferences falsely intercede in behalf of one another. Cunningham uses Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self* to illustrate the idea that without an "object" or end for our moral desires and attitudes, we are laying ourselves open to problems of moral incoherence which will leave our most precious values and aims gasping for air. Taylor, like so many before him, looks to "aesthetic and consummatory experience" for a ground in which moral coherence can be grounded. However, Taylor's intentions aside, we clearly do not need metaphysics to provide an account of the relation between consummatory experiences and our attempts at providing moral coherence through redescribing our options.

Cunningham uses Michael Scriven's notion that the legitimacy and persuasiveness of our moral beliefs are predicated on our having an identifiably concerted response to the question: "Why should I be moral?" I am reminded that Arthur Schopenhauer, rather than viewing art as an endorsement of moral coherence in the world, saw the "epiphanic experiences of art" as therapy for ameliorating the emotional burdens of his conviction that there is no coherence or legitimacy to moral thought and action in the world.

All of this is merely to emphasize the point that much of the notion of coherence in our moral aims and intentions lies in the manner in which we continually fit our desires to the changing conditions of the world around us. In other words, moral coherence seems to have equally to do with our ability to redescribe moral standards to fit the needs and conditions of diverse situations and circumstances. In this sense, moral coherence merely points to our ability and creativity at readapting to new situations by redescribing our circumstances in order to provide a greater possibility for getting what we want or desire, rather than applying a metaphysical standard for moral coherence to our desires and intentions.

I now briefly turn to the historical question of whether or not Dewey, in his later life, really intended that any metaphysical conception of the self can provide moral coherence to thought or action. I have already revealed my own prejudice regarding this matter, redescribing moral coherence as relative adaptability to new circumstances. It seems to me that Dewey, in using the concept of "transaction" to move away from more "interactive" notions like the object of inquiry residing in the "event-meaning," is, in fact, deemphasizing the importance of finding a metaphysical coherence between moral inquiry and objective or natural experience. Dewey seems, at least in his later life, content with furnishing the grounds for a general predisposition toward moral activity solely on the basis of the descriptive possibilities inherent in the transactions of day-to-day living, rather than focusing on the conditions by which moral activity can be rendered "coherent" through metaphysics.

Further, it appears that Dewey, at least from the mid-1940s on, is giving more respect to common sense, rather than philosophical or theoretical grounds in general, for designating what is to be given valuative importance in matters of moral coherence in both personal and cultural affairs. Although Dewey continues to maintain that science has merit in discriminating the needs and tasks of inquiry in general, it seems unlikely that he intends science as a means for discerning the constructive potentialities of metaphysics in lending coherence to our moral landscape -- even in a limited context.

At the end of Cunningham's paper I am still left wondering about the relation he draws between Dewey's desire for an indeterminate or open ground for potentialities and Cunningham's own need for moral coherence. It seems to me that these two ideas can as easily be drawn in opposition to one another as in complement of one another. Where does Cunningham make his connection?
