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Experience

Dewey's Novel Insight

“Experience” is one of the most common words in our vocabulary. We say someone is experienced or we comment on how someone needs further experience. It is often used as a positive term and frequently connotes wisdom, superior skill and even a virtuous quality. As we say “Let’s give this task to a very experienced person.” Furthermore, we equate experience with learning and the ability to cope with many different and difficult situations. Conversely, lack of experience is regarded as a drawback and something to be overcome. So there is a general agreement that experience is a good, even a valuable quality.

So why is it that when Dewey began using the term to describe the centerpiece of his philosophy, so many professional philosophers went out of their way to lambaste him for destroying all that philosophy had achieved over the centuries? To many of his colleagues it appeared that Dewey had sold out to the man in street. He was seen as a crude popularizer and a mouthpiece for the worst sort of American materialism.

But this vicious criticism is also evidence that Dewey had touched a raw nerve in the groves of academic philosophy. By the time Dewey had reached a preeminent position in philosophy’s professional hierarchy, another style of philosophizing was gaining recognition. It sought to purify philosophy of concerns with the problems of everyday life. Academic philosophy began to ape the sciences with their concern for exactness and absolute certainty. Epistemology, logic, philosophy of science, and verification procedures replaced debates about experience,

inquiry, and culture. Various called analytic philosophy or positivism, these schools had traded in their street clothes for the pure white lab coats favored by the sciences. Matters that mean the most to human beings took a back seat to abstract ruminations far removed from the problems of men and women. This “New Philosophy” was largely an import from Anglo-European schools of thought. It was almost totally unaware of the rich tradition of classical American philosophy. Thinkers like Royce, James, Peirce, and Dewey were scorned for their lack of sophistication. The fact that there was a thriving indigenous American philosophy rooted in its own soil and grappling with its own cultural problems escaped the notice of these “new” thinkers.

Such a valuable retrieval of our philosophical past can be gained by understanding why Dewey chose experience as the touchstone of his philosophy of culture. It also sets the stage for understanding the remarkable similarity between Dewey and Confucius. Both philosophers seek a category that can embrace in the widest possible terms the richest view of human existence. Dewey calls it experience. Confucius calls his fundamental category, “the Way” or “the *Dao*.” It, too, depends upon the act of undergoing experience.

I will begin by describing what Dewey means by experience. Then we will be in a position to see how emphatically the ancient Chinese sage Confucius underscores the cultural philosophy of the modern American philosopher. What will result is a vital working connection that can serve as a tool for future efforts to understand the issues that divide China and America. What follows revolves about the meaning of value and the terms of its achievement.

The reconstruction of the idea of experience remains Dewey’s enduring contribution to philosophy. One reason for this is the fact that Dewey was never afraid to send his thoughts out into the streets and see how they fared. And his account of experience continues to repay those who seek to understand it. His distinctive use of the term also distinguishes his way of doing philosophy from other philosophies. Experience became for him what the Forms were for Plato, Substance for Aristotle, and the “I think, therefore I am” for Descartes. And he employed it with the same sense of rigor that Kant used his *A Priori*, and Hegel his *Dialectic*. To understand Dewey’s concept of experience is therefore to head straight for the heart of his philosophy.

A good place to begin would be with Dewey’s own personal experiences with experience. In his early life, he tells us, he suffered from

“inward lacerations of the spirit” brought on by the conflicts he underwent while growing from boyhood to manhood.¹ A laceration is a cut that causes deep fissures in the skin. It divides a naturally seamless surface into separated parts. These moments of alienation weighed heavily on Dewey, for he experienced them as conflicts keeping him from a wholehearted life. One finds the same sense of separation in the early writings of Dewey, where he struggles with the giants of European philosophy (Locke, Hume, Kant, and Hegel). A great interior clash goes on inside Dewey as he seeks to record his respect for these thinkers but also point out their limitations. And whether the thinkers are Kant and Hegel or the issues those of psychology or science, the enemy is always the same: *separations that make it impossible to feel, think, judge, will, or act as a whole human being*. What bothered Dewey most was the fact that the discipline traditionally charged with presenting an integrated view of nature, human beings, and the universe was guilty of devising ways and means to separate these interrelated domains. Philosophy had become the enemy of experience, not its champion.

But what is experience? We speak of good experiences and bad ones. We talk about something being “an experience” and we also say someone needs experience or lacks experience or even has to gain more experience. It appears to be quantitative as well as qualitative. It has an ethical edge to it and also some kind of transformative power. It teaches us and can also damage us. It can shock us and it can reassure us. It can lead us into strange new lands and it can frustrate our most cherished plans. It appears to be the most common of activities and at the same time the most mysterious. It seems to be everywhere in our lives; yet, when we seek to specifically locate it, it is nowhere to be found. It happens in space and in time but it also transforms these fundamental backdrops of experience. Without it human life would not be as we know it. At the same time it can not simply be reduced to human life itself. Neither is it the same as culture, although culture does depend on it. It changes its forms and expressions but also maintains a fundamental structure throughout all its appearances. It begins, it develops, and it comes to an end. But it is then succeeded by other experiences. It has unvarying elements but also registers its presence in varying ways. It is richly attuned to the situation within which it is had and at the same time, it can profoundly alter that situation.

Experience happens. This is the most important thing to know about it. It occurs. It is therefore an event and not a thing. All the

categories we normally use to define things are not helpful here. In fact, they tend to lead us away from the meaning of experience. We can wrap our hands around a stone and we can focus our minds on an idea. But having an experience is something quite different from those activities. Experience happens as an experience. It brings itself about.

Where does experience happen? It always happens within a context or situation. To be more precise, experience happens within a field of other experiences. To express this aspect of experience I will say that experience always happens within a specific environment. It is partly dependent on and partly creative of the context within which it finds itself. A beaver finds itself in an environment within which it needs a stable supply of water. In building its dam, it alters its environmental field and thereby transforms its own experience as well as those of others connected to this particular region (for example, the fish, birds, plants, and insects that share the ecology of the region). But it does this not by changing these other beings but by transforming the field within which they and it live. These other beings are forced to react to these new conditions. They do this through their own experience.

Experience has many different elements. These components can come from the side of the experience or the environment itself. Whatever the origin, the complexity of experience should warn us against the very natural tendency to look for easy and simple answers to the question of experience. Even at this rudimentary level of analysis, we are already talking about an event that incorporates into its being a wide variety of different factors. In its drive to organize its world the beaver continually encounters what is different from itself. The tree it gnaws on. The bark it strips. The water it must hold back. Just how well it deals with these and other environmental elements will prove the merits of its experience.

This side of experience deals with the unfamiliar and therefore it has clinging to it an element of strangeness. This foreign feeling attached to the very beginnings of experience is significant. It provides a clue as to why experience is so powerful a force in our lives. Without it we would never encounter anything new or creative. It also tells us why so many humans are deathly afraid of experience. It invites the different into our lives and by unsettling our beliefs, changes our habits of being. Encountering the different is one hallmark of experience.

Every experience is also individual. The individuality of an experience derives from the ways in which it draws together the relations

that make up its texture. Its way of dealing with the unfamiliar is unique to itself. Dewey sees each and every experience as a creative act introducing new ways of bringing harmony into the world. It is the special weaving introduced by each experience that deepens the value of the world.

It is for this reason that Dewey always associates experience with both *doing* and *undergoing*. Confronted with a situation, the act of experience always entails a double effort on the part of those involved. On the one hand, there is effort and strain as the situation is confronted and modes of action are undertaken in order to deal with it. We set out to correct an imbalance. This means we must devise schemes to bring about equilibrium. At the same time this effort meets resistance as we discover just how recalcitrant the world can be. We then undergo the push and pull of the world and encounter in the most concrete ways the otherness of the universe. We are part of nature, not all of it. This is when true learning and development begins. Experience is the teacher of the double fact of the need for effort and the need to suffer.

This is also the heart and soul of the transformative dimension of experience. It acts through direct engagement with the world. It is also why Dewey came to see it as the most important feature of a wise way of living. It unites thought and action, thinking and doing *naturally*. For Dewey came to see (largely under the influence of Darwin) how all of nature was a matter of experience. Every aspect of the natural world is involved in some form of experience—that is to say, some form of doing and undergoing. Each step in evolution is the outcome of learned responses to environmental experiences. Each shift in anatomy is the result of doing and undergoing in patterns of continuous experience. There is in other words an instrumental purpose embodied in experience. It has a built-in intelligence by reason of the factors of doing and undergoing. Natural beings learn about themselves through experience. Experience for Dewey is the medium within which we act. And as we engage it, we become more and more immersed in its intricate dance:

Experience is primarily a process of undergoing: a process of standing something, of suffering and passion, of affection, in the literal sense of these words. The organism has to endure, to undergo the consequences of its own actions. Experience is no slipping along in a path fixed by

inner consciousness. Private consciousness is an incidental outcome of a vital objective sort; it is not its source. Undergoing, however, is never mere passivity. The most patient patient is more than a receptor. He is also an agent—a reactor, one trying experiments, one concerned with undergoing what is still to happen. Sheer endurance, side-stepping evasions, are, after all, ways of treating the environment with a view to what such treatment will accomplish. Even if we shut ourselves up in the most clam-like fashion, we are doing something; our passivity is an active attitude, not an extinction of response. Just as there is no assertive action, no aggressive attack upon things as they are, which is all action, so there is no undergoing which is not on our part also a going on and a going through.²

Within the push and pull of experience we find the reason why Dewey insists on the double features of experience, doing and undergoing. Experience works both ways. It shapes the environment within which it works and in turn it shapes the one undergoing the experience. This is experience's interactive side. It constitutes the engaged quality always to be found within the contours of genuine experience. Experience is an active presence in the world that makes a real difference in both the field within which it occurs and the one undergoing the experience. This means that the presence of resistance within an experience is a sign of the need for more intelligence in the process of doing and undergoing. We learn from experience because we are not totally in charge of the results of any authentic experience. Genuine experience is the best antidote for the narcissism that poisons our culture.

This interactive dimension demands that the push and pull of experience undergo continuous interpretation. To interpret is to locate the meanings that reside within an experience. Therefore, experience is always oriented toward questions of value. At its center there exists a demand for an interpretation of the values resident within its boundaries. There is no such thing as bare, empty experience. Something of value happens. Either experience makes a difference or it is not an experience. Therefore, to experience authentically is to undergo a profound transformation due to the interpretive imperative built into its heart:

[T]he gist of the matter is that the immediate existence of quality, and of dominant and pervasive quality, is the background, the point of departure, and the regulative principle of all thinking. Thought which

denies the existential reality of qualitative things is therefore bound to end in self-contradiction and in denying itself. "Scientific" thinking, that expressed in physical science, never gets away from qualitative existence. Directly, it always has its own qualitative background; indirectly, it has that of the world in which the ordinary experience of the common man is lived. Failure to recognize this fact is the source of a large part of the artificial problems and fallacies that infect our theory of knowledge and our metaphysics, or theories of existence. With this general conclusion goes another that has been emphasized in the preceding discussion. Construction that is artistic is as much a case of genuine thought as that expressed in scientific and philosophical matters, and so is all genuine aesthetic appreciation of art, since the latter must in some way, to be vital, retrace the course of the creative process. But development of this point in its bearing upon aesthetic judgment and theory is another story.³

This brings the discussion to the problem of meaning. What then is meaning? Is meaning merely a subjective response to some objective situation. Are values really just preferences? Dewey maintains that meaning is experienced through the difference that our experience makes. One finds the meaning of love by experiencing its many dimensions (from infatuation to commitment and all the stops in between). Interpretation is therefore an essential element in the process of growth. Unless one can move from level to level of meaning within experience, no real possibility of expansion in width and depth of value is really possible. To grow as a human being demands the capacity to range through levels of depth of meaning within one's experience. This is the essence of human culture.

What is required for such cultural growth is the attainment of a delicate balance between the stable and the precarious. In nature all live beings seek this state of homeostasis. The cultural equivalent of this drive for equilibrium is experienced as the achievement of harmony. Cultural harmony balances novelty and regularity. Now this is no easy task for the two qualities appear diametrically opposed. But we must remember Dewey's refusal to accept separations. What heals the gaps between the permanent and the changing is experience itself. For what happens in an experience is a transformation of the situation into one that flows into an entirely new dimension of reality—an environmental field no longer infected by the divisions that shrink growth.

This shows that experience is not only interpretive but also corrective. It changes our perspective on things. It tells us that the situation was not what we thought it was. We sense an imbalance in our situation. Things are not what they used to be. What was once in phase is now out of phase. What most often happens in a genuine experience is that our initial anticipations of what the situation was all about need to be corrected. "We fell in love but it didn't work out." This familiar refrain is often misinterpreted as "things happened" and love ended. What is closer to the truth is that our anticipations of what love would be like changed during the course of the relationship. Thus two paths present themselves. I can say, "It just didn't work out" and leave it at that. Or I can say, "Maybe my idea of what love is has to change." One dismisses the possibility of misinterpretation; the other builds on it. Depending on one's answer, experience stalls or grows.

This presence of an end in view right at the start points toward a crucial dimension of experience. Experience has its own pace and tempo. It follows a unique temporal pattern that emphasizes a rhythm of cumulative growth interspersed with resistances, pauses, returns, reenactments, and novel opportunities for risk taking. Experience is organic and the opposite of the mechanical. Where the mechanical repeats itself without difference, endlessly and in a serial formula, the organic is full of surprises, changes in pace, and novel expressions that take advantage of opportunities felt during the creative process. The organic includes the different within its process of formation; the mechanical merely uses it. The mechanical consists of parts arranged in external relations; the organic is created by means of its internal relations. The mechanical is preprogrammed for success and when that is thwarted, its uselessness becomes apparent. The organic finds a way around resistances. It continually reinvents itself by reason of enlarging the scope of differences that it can embrace.

The tempo of the organic is rhythmic. A rhythm is a repetition with a difference. There is a sameness to the beat of its growth, but that unvarying quality is changed by novel expressions coming from the heart of its experience. Consider "The Last Rose of Summer." We study it as it presents itself to us. There are rings of growth inscaped into its form. There are unfoldings of vital expression within each petal as it curls itself around its neighbor. The bush has grown throughout the summer and now as that season fades together with its special rhythms and tempos, the last rose sums up in its beauty and goodness

the varying times of this season of growth. The experience of "The Last Rose" is that of a consummation of experience wherein all the turns and twists of time are embodied in a single living creature. Through convolutions and involutions, "The Last Rose" expresses in its own unique form the rhythms of experience that made it what it is and the summer what it was. Organic time literally beats its way into the doings and undergoings that characterize the transformative, corrective, and interpretative quality of experience. To know is to appreciate.

Experience is always cadenced. It is no mere mechanical repetition of what has been going on in a particular environmental field. Experience establishes its rhythmic tempo by reason of the establishment of polarities that balance each other. For example, what unites body and mind is experience itself. Any attempt to remain satisfied with separations, divisions, and dualisms is for Dewey a surrender to the vicious gods of abstraction. The basic polarity in every experience is that of a field and its focus. A tension is established between these two elements. The rhythm that results marks out the boundaries of the struggle for balance and equilibrium. Each experience therefore has its own unique quality. The first step in analyzing any experience is to identify what is at play within the experience in question.

The cadences that are the unique signature of each experience are the expressions of the dynamic form that guides it to completion. Form harnesses the energies at play in a situation and turns them to advantage. The pressures, resistances, disappointments, successes, and accomplishments that are undergone and achieved in the course of an experience—all these elements and much more go into the final result. And even then, the scene merely shifts to another dimension of the search for balance. There is no such thing as absolute unmoving perfection in a world characterized by process:

Experience, in other words, is a matter of *simultaneous* doings and sufferings. Our undergoings are experiments in varying the course of events; our active tryings are trials and tests of ourselves. This duplicity of experience shows itself in our happiness and misery, our successes and failures. Triumphs are dangerous when dwelt upon or lived off from; successes use themselves up. Any achieved equilibrium of adjustment with the environment is precarious because we cannot evenly keep pace with changes in the environment. They are so opposed in direction that we must choose. We must take the risk of casting our lot with one movement or the other. Nothing can eliminate all risk, all adventure; the one

thing doomed to failure is to try to keep even with the whole environment at once—that is to say, to maintain the happy moment when all things go our way.⁴

What carries the experience forward to its conclusion is the continual reinvention of forms suitable to the experience being had. Thus the doings and undergoings that mark experience never predict its eventual outcome. I doubt Leonardo knew what the *Mona Lisa* looked like before he painted it. If he did, then it was a mechanical effort lacking the inventiveness and ingenuity of a genuine organic experience. One neither can nor should know in advance what will happen in a significant experience.

Experience builds upon itself. It uses its past (however shallow or deep) to advance into the future (however unknown or predictable) and it uses the future to reflect on what is happening within the present experiential moment. The present is the moment when the measured rhythms of experience find themselves in polar opposition. For Dewey this is the “great opportunity,” for we either “grow or go.” At the moment when all doors seem closed, there may appear to the sensitive person an opportunity to do something different. This suggestion could come from the environment itself, the person’s history, or one’s goal in the future. In any case what must be understood is the fact that all this occurs *within* experience itself. The phases of experience mark out the moments of resistances overcome, new forms invented, old forms reinterpreted, anticipations corrected, and goals redirected.

Experience is therefore cumulative. It advances not in a monotonous serial manner. It starts and stops. It hesitates. It leaps forward. It rests. It slowly advances. It quickly pulls back. Experience does not dwell in the past. That is nostalgia. Neither does it forecast certain results. That is the quest for certainty, a false hope that diminishes the human spirit and deprives us of the courage needed to persevere in the face of difficulties. When a genuine experience is accomplished, then the whole is seen to have been present in all the parts and each part even in its difference is seen to be reflected in the whole. What culminates when a full experience is authentically had is the completion of a process that began with a sense of imbalance, proceeded through various phases, and finally reached a moment of satisfaction. The rhythms of experience establish a balance between the push and pull of forces alive within its environmental field. What results is a live

feeling resting on the tensions active within the experience. What was out of phase is now in phase. Whatever began the process of experience has now yielded to another way of being. And that mode itself becomes another starting point for more experience. Experience is the way in which humans (and all nature for that matter) seek stability. Each success is both a resting point as well as a starting point for the next experience. Experience breathes fire into the universe.

This is why Dewey maintains that there are two basic types of experience, that which is *instrumental* and that which is *consummatory*. Instrumental experience is the subject matter of the next chapter. Here we concentrate on the consummatory dimension. That in turn will allow us to match up this uniquely American angle of vision with some major Confucian themes.

Dewey identifies consummatory experience with deeply felt human values. His model for such felt experience is art. Understanding how a work of art “works” extends the discussion of experience in several important directions. To review: rich and full experience—what Dewey calls *consummatory*—is marked by several significant qualities. In the first place, it is made of flowing wholes that reassert themselves in varying rhythms as the experience moves forward. These wholes are transformed as the experience is undergone. In having such experiences there is a radical transformation of the field of meaning from one where imbalance and trouble ruled to one in which creative forces unite to express entirely novel ways of being in the world. This is why art is the signature mode of this way of experience. For the artist takes what is already known—material, colors, shapes, words, musical notes, melodies, cultural values and traditions—and so reconstructs them that new forms of unity and variety are provided. What began as a mere problem—how do we get in out of the rain?—turns into a Frank Lloyd Wright house.

But the introduction of novelty is not the essence of art. If that were so, any zany project would do. The work of art has several special features. A work of art lets wholes and parts work together in rhythmic tempos that increase the intensity of experience. Furthermore, it does not merely reject the past for the sake of what is new. Rather it transforms the most important aspects of the past and finds new ways to distribute those energies within the present moment. It builds the values of the past into the present. Likewise, it anticipates profoundly important aspects of the future and, thereby, makes palpable the

changes culture is about to undergo. It entices us to come to grips with what is about to happen and offers important clues as to how to engage new meanings. It brings the full weight of experience to bear upon the present moment. It provides us with intense feelings. These feelings wake us to what our past has been, what our future might be like and what our present holds in its hands. All the disruptions of the past and the interruptions of the future are resolved in a consummatory moment in the present.

But that is only part of the story of a work of art. Within aesthetic experience we find a model for bringing to a satisfactory conclusion the imbalances suffered within human experience. Such an enjoyment is the result of achieving integration. The completion that marks an aesthetic experience reworks in a novel and creative fashion the resistances felt between parts and wholes within a troubled situation. What results is a consummation that is also an initiation. New adventures are made possible through new energies released by the work of art. The work of art “works” to release those dimensions of experience previously bottled up due to poor connections and a lack of purpose and direction.

A genuine consummatory experience dissolves separations and heals the splits in culture. What was previously felt as the division between form and content is now experienced as the unification of what is going on with how it is going on. The distinctions between mind and body drop away and are replaced by new feelings that convey both the resistances overcome as well as the new understandings gained. There is now a consummatory experience leading its participants into creative directions that cancel a past once filled with gaps, hesitations, and a profound lack of wholeheartedness. Energies are regathered around forms of completion that promise more insights for the future. Dammed up emotions are released. A special union of thinking and feeling now has its day. Similarly, on the social level the person and the community complement each other.

What has happened is the reconstruction of a situation previously neglected. In place of lacerations of the spirit, novel feelings of wholeness emerge—novel in the sense that they were never felt or even guessed at prior to this consummatory experience. What was once separate is now whole. A reinvigorated common sense sees relationships where once there were only isolated feelings and activities. How things fit together and why they go this way and not that way

become pressing human questions. The great cultural task is to do justice to our enriched sense of the possibilities of value lurking in experience. For Dewey as for classical American philosophy in general, the mantra is always the same: "Relations, relations, relations (and then more relations)."

Consummatory experience creates modes of felt intelligence never had before. In painting, the cube becomes a factor in feeling the presence of the human body. A new arrangement of notes opens an unnoticed path to unheard sounds of joy. Domestic matters long buried are now the stuff of drama. Action becomes a form of fleshed thought as it simultaneously weds body to mind. Direction, purpose, and aim are expressed *through* the body, not merely *by* it. The body "is" full of sorrow or "is" full of tension and strain. Our eyes feel the radiance of the luminous in a particular painting. Ritual is no longer a technique. It is a part of the emerging whole that marks consummatory experiences. What are put to rest within these consummatory experiences are the dualisms so embedded in our way of viewing the world. We experience the unity in variety that is the stamp of authentic consummatory experience. It is this rhythm of the mutual adaptation of parts within an experienced whole that is the central feature of consummatory experience.

A culture that can consistently integrate its multiple dimensions so that effort is drawn onward towards ever more novel fields of experience requires certain strengths. It must provide new energies to its members so that they can create different forms of experience, even ones that challenge traditional values. Otherwise, a culture is consumed by a fatal disease: narcissism. The split between the self and the world becomes so intense that what is different must be killed if the narcissistic one is to survive. Totalitarian regimes that stifle all forms of creativity not approved in advance come into being. But the creation of the different is what great art is all about. Art helps culture press forward into unknown regions of experience.

But the truth is that sometimes consummatory experience does not happen. The issues involved are too intractable or too confused or too little understood. And then a kind of aesthetic patience must take over and experimental efforts drawn in part from previous experience and in part from risks taken by the present generation come into play. It is precisely here that culture must encourage the cultivation of the new. Consummatory experience is not mechanical. It does not deliver

the goods on time, serially and without interruption. The consummatory is the organic. It deals in surprises that can only be understood by whole, free, and unfrightened human beings. When it occurs, it is a treasure for the entire society since split worlds of fact and value heal and psychic pain is reduced.

Cultures need to endorse the freedom of their members and refuse to see attacks on orthodoxy as threats to social stability. It is here that wise governments withdraw the censor and initiate campaigns of education. For a people coerced is a people incapable of summoning up the kind of commitment required to push the curve of culture forward into new uncharted territories—regions of experience and value promising deeper forms of unity needed by the community. The factor of the integer (the addition of that one thing more that catalyzes an experience mired in disruptions) only comes into play when a people is given the right to risk experimentation with cultural forms. For culture is not about enjoying pretty things or having a refined sense of beauty. That is a decadent form of culture characteristic of a society in decline. Culture is about finding forms of experience that help us stay alive, then thrive, and finally become even better at bringing together our varied worlds of experience.

Consummatory experience is the apex of vitality. It is the primary way in which human beings have historically been coaxed into successful dealings with the separations that weaken their experience. The consummatory heals the lacerations inflicted on the human soul by a culture maimed by its own abstractions. In place of isolated objects and ideas, consummatory experience initiates and then sustains a rhythm of integration just right for the cultural spirit of an age. This vibratory pulse is transmitted through various physiological, psychological, and social forms until the experience of unity is had by the community. Art is a consummation, a celebration, and a new starting point. It dissolves the resistances that previously split experience. It then proceeds to celebrate what has been achieved. In bringing about such a closure, the consummatory experience then provides a new starting point for further cultural growth.

A consummatory experience transcribes the energies at play within a culture so that acts of blending and fusion replace what was once isolated and separated. The background pervades the foreground and the foreground uses the grace of such a background of importance to heighten, detail, and finally fully express its own qualities. When

this occurs, the community is helped to cooperate intelligently. It struggles to find resolutions of past difficulties and fresh insights with which to face the future. John Dewey's own words aptly summarize what goes on in this kind of experience:

Esthetic recurrence in short is vital, physiological, functional. Relationships rather than elements recur, and they recur in differing contexts and with different consequences so that each recurrence is novel as well as a reminder. In satisfying an aroused expectancy, it also institutes a new longing, incites a fresh curiosity, establishes a changed suspense. The completeness of the integration of these two offices, opposed as they are in abstract conception, by the *same* means instead of by using one device to arouse energy and another to bring it to rest, measures artistry of production and perception. A well-conducted scientific inquiry discovers as it tests, and proves what it explores; it does so in virtue of a method which combines both functions. And conversation, drama, novel, and architectural construction, if there is an ordered experience, reach a stage that at once records and sums up the value of what precedes, and evokes and prophesies what is to come. Every closure is an awakening, and every awakening settles something. This state of affairs defines organization of energies.⁵

Dewey and Confucius agree that human beings are primarily social. Their identity, their achievements, and their possibilities are the outcome of how they were raised. This act of "raising a child" is not simply the responsibility of parents. Rather Dewey and Confucius would argue that the act of raising a child begins with parents, extends to the immediate family and then reaches out to include the culture within which that human being lives. The failure of one citizen is an indictment of the whole culture.

As a public intellectual Dewey came to see the importance of providing an integrated cultural vision for the citizens of his time. He did this largely by trying to recapture for philosophy its traditional role as the critic of values. He did not see himself as doing something new when he spoke out on education or economics or art or science and technology. Nor was he the victim of some sort of megalomania that seduced him into thinking that he could speak about anything at any time. Dewey saw philosophy as the critic of culture and what he meant by that phrase goes straight to the heart of his philosophical vision.⁶

Remember what turned Dewey toward philosophy in the first place. It was his abiding suspicion of dualisms. Every science or humanity or art operates from a select point of view. Physicists concern themselves with atomic particles and painters concern themselves with shapes, colors, and lines. Each has a distinct perspective that allows it to pursue its own special form of excellence. This is a cultural commonplace. But for Dewey it also presents a major cultural problem. Is there no discipline that ties them together so that we can live as integrated human beings? At some level we do live well or poorly as unified human beings. How does the “live creature” live in a fractured cultural environment?⁷

Philosophy for Dewey is the effort to attain a unified vision of the values and activities dominant in our culture and to assess their worth. I have elsewhere called it normative thinking.⁸ Every other mode of estimating values—art, religion, ethics, and science—establishes a particular horizon that brings along in its train a limited set of structures. What each of these shares is an organization of the real into a foreground and a background. What makes philosophy different from these other cultural pursuits is the fact that it concentrates on the adequacy of these structural modes of shaping and having an experience. Each cultural pursuit is in itself a criticism of a level and a region of experience. It asks, why paint with this technique rather than that? Or why must ideals always remain locked into a transcendental horizon that is immutable? Philosophy on the other hand asks about the most general types of horizons. Are they adequate to experience itself? What about the concept of a foreground/background structure to all events in the natural world? Is it a worthy explanation of how reality functions?

Philosophy in its role as critic has a special cultural office. It must stand up for the ultimate unification of experience even as it provides room for the particularity of its parts and the power of the relations that hold those parts together. Philosophy is that mode of reflective experience that watches over the organic unity that characterizes each authentic event of experience. Philosophy must therefore be rooted in time as a depository of past achievements. It must also look to the future as the locus of future values. And it must live in the present where the quality now affecting reality is being forged. Without philosophy as his home discipline, Dewey never could have seen widely

enough or felt deeply enough to come to grips with the separations weakening the human spirit.

The other cultural pursuits proceed by way of selective abstractions that present the world from different angles and perspectives. Philosophy, on the other hand, seeks the most general cultural perspective. It challenges our most basic concepts of what is real. It asks whether our relations with each other are just and satisfactory. It seeks to provide an adequate response to the question of the ultimate meaning of life. It asks if those in authority are carrying out their responsibilities in a worthy manner. It tries to ascertain the meaning of the most important concepts in our cultural world. It seeks *wisdom*.

Now what is wisdom? It is certainly connected with knowledge but it is not the same as the possession of elegant theories and indisputable facts. It is concerned with values, but it does not proclaim dogmatic views as to the nature of the good. It is not silent about wrongdoings and evil but it is not simply a moral scold. It is grounded in and has to be won through long experience. It is not the work of amateurs and at the same time, it is not the result of any special expertise. Its possession by a sage is marked by both action and contemplation. It is directly connected with the world of everyday affairs but it can move beyond such perspectives to a wider view of what is really happening.

Philosophy, as its name implies, is the love of wisdom. It is not the possession of wisdom itself but rather the effort to become intimate with wisdom. It is a discipline grounded in fallibilism. It can learn from its mistakes, and its history is therefore organically connected to its proper development. Even the most contrary theories are part of its heritage, for to know what is wrong is also to know what to avoid and why. Philosophy must also display a disciplined character. It is not merely the sharing of opinions on a talk show. It has to know how to apply its insights and when to hold back. Philosophy is therefore the crowning achievement of an experience-based culture. Without it we cannot go very far in our pursuit of the good. With it we can at least know the nature of our errors as well as which path is more likely to bring wisdom.

At the same time philosophy is always in danger of becoming deracinated and abstract. It easily loses sight of its goal of wisdom and can settle for the empty enjoyment of elegant theories. As a result, it is

continually exposed to the danger of being separated from experience. This is why it must always be tested in real life. It has to be adequate to our experience and match up to what we actually feel in the situations of which philosophy so eloquently speaks. Philosophy is therefore poetic in the sense that it tries feebly to express the feelings that actually go into particular experiences. Philosophy seeks also to make thinking a practical instrument that can be effective in the real world. And finally, philosophy is about identifying and creating the most successful ways of communicating the meanings of the feelings and ideas fashioned in the course of our cultural growth and development.

Our reality is one in which relationships are more important than objects and things. It is how we connect with our world that determines its value for us. At the same time this is not an invitation to a rampant subjectivism, for the world also has its relations and conditions that we must learn to respect and understand. Therefore experience is, as said before, both a doing and an undergoing. Philosophy studies these relations in their widest contexts and seeks to determine their character. They show themselves to us in the feelings experienced through the orders of the world. Physical compulsion and emotional discharge are not the same but neither are they so widely different. Similarly, the establishment of effective habits of character mirrors the general traits of order experienced in the natural world. Once again, they are different but what also makes them generically the same is a chief concern of philosophy. All this is congruent with Dewey's primary complaint about his culture: *No more separations!*

Thus philosophy takes seriously the radical situatedness of the relations that make up experience. There can be *no fixed ends* in nature or culture. Furthermore, there is no ultimate good that beckons us either in this life or some other. What is really here and what is really our destiny is the process of discovering new and more satisfying connections with both the natural and human environment. Therefore wisdom is a kind of practical intelligence that is directed toward more and more consummatory experience through more and more effective instrumental experience. This is what allows philosophy to unite the abstract and the concrete. For philosophy is the critic of abstractions insofar as these inevitably partial perspectives do or do not do justice to concrete experience.

Philosophy is a direct attempt to live life fully in the face of the radical contingency infecting our experience. We really do not know

what is going to happen. This fact of life must be engaged. Philosophy's obligation is to lay down the most effective framework for confronting the task of living creatively in a universe of chance. This is why experimentalism is so important for cultural growth. Without a disciplined way to approach the contingencies of life, human beings are the consistent victims of the inconsistencies characteristic of a process universe. To learn is to experience uncertainty and make something good out of it. Thus learning is as much about how our heart feels as it is about how our mind thinks. To learn is to establish effective habits of felt intelligence that can be concretely embodied in practical human activity. The truth of such attempts to widen and deepen experience is to be found in the differences that such effort makes in our lives. These consequences are the carryover of value from the past into the future by way of the present. The instrumental leads to the consummatory, which in turn releases new energies useful for further growth.

Philosophy therefore seeks to establish the most concrete contact with reality by formulating the widest and deepest possible view of what it means to experience the world in which we dwell. Given the vastness of the task, it is inevitable that failure and error block philosophy's progress. Nevertheless, there is a master key: *experience*. Philosophy's cultural duty will continue to be misunderstood as long as it is confused with the other cultural pursuits. The best way to avoid this error is to make clear the kind of knowing involved in philosophy's use of experience. Art uses material to express consummatory moments of unity and difference. Religion grapples with the sense of transcendence and immanence that haunts our worldly experience. Ethics and science concentrate on the instrumental dimension of experience. Technology applies the results of scientific instrumental experience. But when philosophy encounters experience and seeks to express its generic features and basic traits, it finds that the vocabulary and theoretical framework of the particular pursuits (art, religion, ethics, science, and technology) are not up to the task. Their abstractions are too selective and each in its own way leaves out something central to experience.

Experience, philosophically understood, is wider than the act of merely knowing objects. Dewey therefore assigns philosophy a double task. Indeed, it must continue to strive to understand the goals and means of particular cultural pursuits. But it must also find out what it is that brings all such cultural pursuits together. For even as each takes

a uniquely individual approach to experience, each at the same time is grounded in experience itself. There must therefore be some common ground out of which these different versions of experience arise. What is it? How is it encountered? These are the primary philosophical questions. Philosophy's answer, according to Dewey, ought to be that the most general and concrete dimension of experience is the felt presence of value. Everything that constitutes experience is at its heart saturated in a particular quality. The very fact that it exists announces that something worthwhile has actually happened. We live in a world charged with importances of different kinds.

Now there ought to be a cultural discipline dedicated to the discovery and articulation of these forms of value. It must seize the cardinal dimensions of these events. It must show how they develop and out of what soil they grow. It must also respond to the question, what is their destiny? Furthermore, how they link up to other experiences and what emerges from these relations is also part of philosophy's vocation. Now all these questions are deliberately put in the widest and therefore potentially most abstract manner. For philosophy must seek wisdom about such matters and wisdom is only wisdom when it can be effective in the widest possible manner.

Philosophy is the search for the most sweeping traits of existence. What it finds first of all is that existence comes about within situations. Then it understands that these situations are marked by a character that Dewey calls experience. This experiential dimension concerns the emergence of actual values that play out their destiny within the scope afforded them by other experiences. Philosophy is the search for the value expressed by experiential events arising out of particular situations. It must answer the questions, why? how? and what? Its answer must be general enough to apply to experiences had at different times. But such generality must prove its effectiveness by showing how such answers can make a difference in the lives of human beings. Here is the origin of the pragmatist's concern for results and consequences. What matters most is *the difference* such experiences make. The difference made is the value expressed. If there is no difference after the experience has been had, then there was no experience to be had. When the value is absent, so too is the reality that it expresses. Put another way: what happens either makes a difference or it did not happen.