

John Dewey and the Prospect of Going “*Beyond Aesthetics*”
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Abstract

Deflationary views have emerged in many areas of philosophy over the past several decades. In the art world, one of the most significant deflationary approaches toward aesthetic experience has been taken by Noël Carroll in his collection of essays, *Beyond Aesthetics* (2001). The modus operandi of such an approach, according to Carroll, is to emphasize the context (historical, cultural, political, etc.) in which an art experience is embedded and explain its significance relative to a particular narrative. Interestingly, there is a precursor to this type of view that predates it by roughly eighty years. This is the account of aesthetic experience given by John Dewey. Although Carroll acknowledges Dewey’s contribution to the concept of aesthetic experience, he fails to see how Dewey laid some of the groundwork for not only his own deflationary account but also for a conception of aesthetic experience that is continuous with other facets of human experience. This paper will highlight the similarities between the two approaches with the aim of establishing Dewey’s work as a forerunner to deflationary-type approaches.

1. Introduction

William James once remarked that all philosophies wear the same form. Wherein, the philosopher launches herself upon a sea of speculation, “ascends into the empyrean, and communes with the eternal essences.”¹ But, as James claimed, if the result of such a voyage does not usher in some new practical directive, or refute some old one, the trip is a waste. Such a statement, while relevant to all philosophical pursuits, is perhaps most noteworthy in connection with aesthetics, since that branch of philosophical inquiry trades on the abstract notions which surround the concept of ideal beauty. In *Beyond Aesthetics* (2001), Noël Carroll echoes James’ sentiment by emphasizing the divide between abstraction on one hand and everyday life on the other within the philosophy of art. On his view, the notion of “the aesthetic” is one of the largest obstacles that any comprehensible account of art must overcome. Art philosophies, according to Carroll, have an inexorable tendency toward abstract notions, rooted in the aesthetic, which have resulted in the estrangement of art from history and culture. In order to recover an intelligible theory of art, philosophers must, as Carroll puts it, “reach beyond aesthetic theories of art and their various prohibitions. That is, we must not identify the essence of art with the intended capacity of artworks to afford aesthetic experience.”²

In this regard, Carroll hopes to rehabilitate the use of history, authorial intent, and emotional and moral responses in the interpretation of art and the aesthetic. He admittedly follows the influence of his mentor, George Dickie, to whom *Beyond Aesthetics* is dedicated, in rejecting a conception of art that is “defined in terms of the

¹ James, William. “Reflex Action and Theism,” from *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*. Dover: 1956, p. 142-3

² Carroll, Noël. *Beyond Aesthetics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. p. 1

intended capacity of certain objects to support aesthetic experiences.”³ Like Dickie, Carroll undermines various, traditional theories of the aesthetic in order to rein them in under a new theory, albeit, not the institutional one expounded by Dickie. Instead, he offers a theory which shares with Dickie’s view an emphasis on the narrative aspects of the art object’s interaction with its audience, but stops short of the assertion that an object’s situatedness within art-world institutions is its only source of aesthetic merit.

In the first place, Carroll rejects a view of aesthetic experience based on “disinterestedness,” *i.e.* the attitude one takes when appreciating art for its intrinsic value, in order to lend primacy to the narrative aspects of art. During the first half of the 20th century, disinterestedness reached its height with the rise of both the object-formalism of Clive Bell, which sought to treat the aesthetic object as being divorced from its cultural/historical origins, and the experience-formalism of Monroe Beardsley, which viewed aesthetic experience as being divorced from both authorial intent and emotional response.⁴ However, the particular sense in which these thinkers used the term “experience,” and that which has led to Carroll’s misunderstanding of Dewey, will have significant import for this analysis. In posing his alternative theory – what he calls “the narrative approach” – the lion’s share of Carroll’s criticism is leveled at Bell, Beardsley and others of their ilk, who treated the capacity of a work to generate aesthetic experience as the deciding factor in its status as art. In the third essay of *Beyond Aesthetics*, “Four Concepts of Aesthetic Experiences,” Carroll makes his most overt challenge to this view by critiquing three of the prevailing accounts of aesthetic experience – *viz.* the traditional, the pragmatic, and the allegorical. Therein, he hopes to replace these established views of

³ Ibid. p. 2

⁴ cf. “The Intentional Fallacy.” & “The Affective Fallacy.” in Wimsatt, W. K., and Monroe C. Beardsley, *The Verbal Icon*. Lexington, KY: U of Kentucky, 1954.

aesthetic experience with an account that he calls “deflationary,” due to its emphasis on the content (formal, cultural, emotional, or otherwise) of aesthetic experience, on one hand, and the significance such an experience holds for the observer, on the other.

On a deflationary view, “interpretation (in contrast to aesthetic experience) is an art-appropriate response at least as significant as aesthetic experience.”⁵ With this account, Carroll hopes to debunk the myth that aesthetic experience is solely an interaction between an object and a detached observer, an interaction that would be primarily “perceptual.” In general terms, a deflationary account of aesthetic experience is a clear rejection of traditional empiricist notions about experience, *i.e.* those notions based on, at least, an epistemological dualism (between knower and known) if not a metaphysical one (between mind and world.)

However, one oddity in *Beyond Aesthetics*, is the wholesale rejection it apparently makes of the pragmatic conception of aesthetic experience, which Carroll attributes, almost exclusively, to John Dewey. In light of the pragmatist aversion, especially Dewey’s, toward traditionally empiricist explanations, this rejection seems misplaced. As I will argue in what follows, Carroll bases his summary treatment of the pragmatic account on a very narrow interpretation of what Dewey called “consummatory” experiences, an interpretation that is, at best, only marginally supported by Dewey’s writings. I believe ample evidence can be found, particularly in Dewey’s *Art as Experience* (1934), to undermine Carroll’s interpretation. Furthermore, it seems clear that a rejection of a Deweyan stance toward aesthetic experience is vital neither to Carroll’s proximal goal of underscoring content and interpretation in aesthetic experience, nor his ultimate goal of offering a narrative account of art.

⁵ Carroll, p. 2

I shall contend that Carroll missed the opportunity to enlist Dewey as an ally in framing his deflationary account. As such, the first third of this essay will largely consist in exegesis of Carroll's attack on theories of aesthetic experience and will highlight how well the alternative features of his deflationary view aid in accomplishing a narrative account of art. The second part will address Carroll's treatment of Dewey, with special attention paid to the notions of consummatory experience and what Dewey called "selective interest." The final portion will be devoted primarily to Dewey's notion of context, since it is my belief that, given the evidence, it is this concept which makes his notion of experience contiguous with Carroll's attempt to move *Beyond Aesthetics*. Thus, the point of this paper, while mostly an academic one, could lead to a change in how Dewey's influence on contemporary aesthetics is viewed, not merely among Americanists, but for aestheticians, generally.⁶

2. Aesthetic Experience and a Narrative Approach

In the realm of art criticism, Carroll tells us, there are two types of critic – decipherers and aesthetes. Decipherers are those who look for and interpret the relevant conceptual schemes that are implicit in a particular work, *i.e.* they decode the (often political) message for the rest of us. Carroll calls this school of criticism the interpretive, for obvious reasons. On the other hand are the aesthetes, who demonstrate (Carroll also calls this school the "demonstrative") the important concrete features in a work in order to elicit in an audience a sense of appreciation. For the aesthete, art should not have a message, especially one of a political bent, but instead should promote aesthetic experiences. Carroll points out that the decipherers, who developed their interpretive

⁶ In this regard, my presentation and interpretation of Dewey's philosophy is particularly indebted to the work of Thomas Alexander, James Gouinlock, and Richard Shusterman.

school partly as a reaction to earlier aestheticism, have been more prevalent in recent critical practice – corresponding roughly with the rise of postmodernist philosophies. Much of the art world, he explains, “has come to be dominated by identity politics, rhetorically advancing, for the sake of emancipatory empowerment, claims for equal treatment toward women, gays, the disabled, and ethnic and racial minorities.”⁷ More recently, Carroll claims, this trend has been beset by a growing number of critics who “call for artists to return to the vocation of producing beauty.”⁸ But Carroll sees the battle between decipherer and aesthete as largely artificial, and the key to reuniting the two, he believes, is aesthetic experience.

It should be noted that Carroll’s distinction between aesthete and decipherer corresponds roughly with the distinction others have made between analytic and continental approaches to aesthetics. Richard Shusterman, for one, has pointed out in his *Pragmatist Aesthetics* (1992) that the distinction can be traced back to a Kantian/Hegelian divide and has suggested a pragmatic approach (particularly Dewey’s) is a “promising middle way and mediator” between these views.⁹ And, a *via media* between the aesthete and the decipherer is just what Carroll seeks. As he puts it,

...no comprehensive approach to the arts can ignore aesthetic experience...There is no reason to suppose that interpretive criticism and aesthetic criticism cannot coexist; indeed, they are generally mutually informative and often complimentary.¹⁰

Yet, instead of employing Dewey’s pragmatic approach, Carroll hopes to bring together the best parts of descriptivism and interpretivism by critiquing the treatment of aesthetic

⁷ Carroll, p. 42

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Cf. Shusterman, Richard. *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*. New York: Blackwell, 1992.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 43

experience among some of the more canonical movements in the philosophy of art, including Dewey's pragmatism.

The first account of aesthetic experience that Carroll examines is what he calls the "traditional" one. This view could just as easily be called the contemplative, due to the emphasis it places on rational contemplation, for its own sake, of artworks. The form this account most often takes, Carroll tells us, follows Kant and Hutcheson insofar as it frames its argument in terms of disinterested pleasure, *i.e.* it views contemplation as pleasurable without any instrumental or ulterior motives. Claiming to find an experience worthwhile or pleasurable in and of itself is the hallmark of the traditional account, which is most obvious in philosophical accounts of the sublime.

Carroll notes that the traditional account has been most often associated with demonstrative (or aesthetic) theories of art, and more particularly, with the primary target of *Beyond Aesthetics*, the formalism of Clive Bell. "Formalism," according to Carroll, "is the best known example of an aesthetic theory of art."¹¹ Yet, he believes that formalism fails empirically. As he puts it,

Undoubtedly, formalists place emphasis on abstract structures just because those are less likely to invite contemplation of the artwork in terms of ulterior interests, like political content...it is an unpersuasive theory of art for the obvious reason that much art has not been produced with the intention to afford appreciable experiences of structure [Ibid.]¹²

Formalism may also fail insofar as it alleges that functional responses to works are inappropriate, despite a rather large number of works that seem aimed at eliciting just those types of responses. Moreover, there are many cases where appreciation for the structures of a work is dependent upon understanding its functional content.

¹¹ Carroll, p. 45

¹² Ibid.

Of course, there are other expressions of demonstrative/aesthetic theories, not so heavily reliant upon the formal structures of artworks, which still place a premium on the contemplative appreciation of art and hold to a version of the traditional account of aesthetic experience. However, these fail as well when one considers the numerous works which demonstrate intention of producing something quite apart from aesthetic experience (*e.g.* the imagery used in voodoo artifacts).

As Carroll notes, the failure of demonstrative theories of art need not imply the traditional account is itself deficient. If we consider this account apart from the function of defining art in which demonstrative theories employ it, it may yet be a worthwhile explanation of aesthetic experience. After all, it seems quite natural to claim that we value the experience of beauty for its own sake. Philosophers have made similar intrinsic claims about other notions like truth, justice, and even humor. But, as Carroll points out, such an assertion cannot answer the question about whether this intrinsic worth resides in the objective or in the subjective realm. That is to say, if one asserts that the intrinsic value is actually something inherent within the object, then one will be hard pressed to demonstrate objective criteria without appealing to some psychological explanations. On the other hand, if one bites the bullet and claims that the intrinsic value of beauty lies in the viewer's belief that it is valuable for its own sake, then the traditional account takes a Kantian turn and seems to say more about the pre-existing conditions for having an aesthetic experience than it does about the experience itself. What this amounts to, concretely, is the claim that we must be mentally prepared to have an aesthetic experience before we can actually have one. However, this flies in the face of our everyday experience, wherein aesthetic moments often times just sneak up on us. It is not difficult to imagine someone being unexpectedly enraptured by some particularly

beautiful vista, and yet continue to insist that the experience was an aesthetic one. Thus, Carroll believes, the traditional account fails insofar as it cuts us off from much of what we would consider perfectly natural aspects of everyday life.¹³

The next target Carroll chooses is what he calls the pragmatic account of aesthetic experience. But, since it is that account I wish to compare directly with Carroll's own deflationary view, I will postpone treatment of that analysis until the end of this section. Instead, I will move directly to the third account of aesthetic experience from which Carroll hopes to disabuse art philosophies, *viz.* the allegorical, which he traces back to the work of the Critical Theorists, Herbert Marcuse and T.W. Adorno.

Although Marcuse and Adorno never explicitly touted a particular view of aesthetic experience, they did share a belief that encounters with art could serve as sobering agents that could provide clarity about a social milieu. As Carroll sums up Marcuse's stance,

By being unreal...fiction awakens experience to the possibility that things could be otherwise – experience in general could be more like what is now often only found in aesthetic experience, an opportunity to allow imagination and sensibility free rein.¹⁴

In this regard, Carroll claims, Marcuse believed that aesthetic experience could provide us with a suggestive resemblance, an immediate symbol, for a better social order, *i.e.* it could offer us social hope. Likewise, according to Carroll, Adorno believed that the basic

¹³ This is essential; for the opportunity Carroll squanders in not enlisting Dewey hinges on the difference between the common philosophical understanding of experience and the manner in which Dewey employed the term. In several of his early essays, Dewey laid the foundation for the more robust treatment of experience, exemplified by *Experience and Nature* (1925) and *Art as Experience* (1934), which he hoped would redeem the term by having it “returned to its idiomatic usages.” But, he did not mean an idiom that is tantamount to vulgarity or simplicity. Rather, Dewey sought a return to thinking about experience in less dissected, philosophically abstract terms that could avoid many of the conceptual eddies plaguing philosophy for centuries by reminding us “that philosophy must not be a study of philosophy, but a study, by means of philosophy, of life-experience and our beliefs about and in this experience.” [Dewey *Experience and Nature*, p. 37]

¹⁴ Carroll, p. 52

social function of art was to have no function, to be free from and thus to negate the extant social order, engendering at once both the conditions for social hope *and* social criticism. The implication of the critical theorist's approach to art is that aesthetic experience sits in relationship to social reality in much the same way as a particular allegory sits in relationship to a larger narrative. Aesthetic experience affords us a glimpse of the "moral of the story" of our social plight, it can be utopian and hopeful as it was for Marcuse, or emancipatory and revolutionary as it was for Adorno. On the allegorical view, Carroll explains, aesthetic experience is pitted as a protagonist against instrumentality and market rationality in the struggle to save intrinsic value. Through aesthetic experience, the imagination is opened up to play, free from the conceptual apparatus of concrete life. But, this view of aesthetic experience, then would be strikingly similar to the traditional view. Critical theorists, like Marcuse and Adorno, who held up the allegorical account believed that by positing free play of the imagination, they had accounted for the content of aesthetic experience for which the traditional account had simply glossed over. But, by failing to account for how the imagination is to freely play without concepts, these thinkers allowed the nose of the camel back into the tent. For, if aesthetic experience is a *coup d'oeil* of an ideal society, or even the progenitor of social criticism, then it would seem as dependent on the notion of disinterestedness as the traditional account. Consequently, Critical theorists should hardly be surprised when the camel of disinterestedness noses its way back in – and devours the whole tent.

The reasons the allegorical account fails, then, are along similar lines to those of the traditional account, but with perhaps an even more damaging conclusion. While it is unclear that disinterestedness and imaginative free rein are actually components of every aesthetic experience, Carroll believes that the most important counter claim to the

allegorical account is the availability of other likely narrative explanations. In other words, because neither disinterestedness nor cognitive free rein provides the force of argument that demands that we accept it, the opposition of aesthetic experience to market rationality and instrumental value turns on what is, at best, considered a contingent fact about art – that it affords insight into social order. Or, as Carroll puts it,

...if the allegorical account is supposed to figure aesthetic experience as a metaphor for the possibility of noninstrumental, nonmarket rationality, then, since the features of aesthetic experience it valorizes seem questionable, the metaphor is inapt.¹⁵

Now that Carroll's objections to both the traditional and allegorical accounts have been elucidated, we turn our attention toward his account of aesthetic experience. Although Carroll does not offer an explanation for why he chose to call his account "deflationary," the name is appropriate in at least two regards. First and foremost, he hopes his account will diminish the importance of disinterestedness to art theory, i.e. "deflate" it. Secondly, he believes that his account renders the notion of aesthetic experience more inclusive, insofar as it widens the parameters that other accounts had used to define it. In this way, Carroll's account is "deflationary" insofar as it grants the notion of aesthetic experience more purchasing power.

The first thing that should be noted about this alternative is its emphasis on the content of aesthetic experience. Carroll is concerned with what actually goes on during the process of aesthetic experience, and believes that, paradigmatically, it hangs on one of two features. The first of these is what he calls "design appreciation," which occurs whenever we regard the structural elements of an artwork. As he puts it, "The formalists were wrong to think that this is the only sort of thing that counts as aesthetic experience. But surely it is one of the possible ways of attending to artworks that we standardly refer

¹⁵ Carroll, p. 58

to as aesthetic experience.”¹⁶ The second feature is what Carroll calls “quality detection,” which, by his lights, depends more on sensuous cognition than it does formal structure. Whenever we are moved emotionally by a particular artwork, we can properly say that we are having an aesthetic experience. According to Carroll, these two features – design appreciation and quality detection – are each sufficient for aesthetic experience. Whenever one is present, we can properly say that an aesthetic experience was had. But, this is not meant to suggest that they are mutually exclusive, either. Both can, and often do, occur together in one art encounter. The deflationary account, Carroll claims, “does not propose some common feature between these two kinds of experience, like disinterestedness, that constitutes the essence of aesthetic experience,” and, more importantly, it allows for other “modes” of experience to be included as art-appropriate responses wherever they exhibit “the same intuitive fitness and convergence on precedent,” as these more typical modes.¹⁷

“Intuitive fitness” and “convergence on precedent” are important for Carroll because of their narrative aspects. As he puts it, “following a narrative involves a sense of the direction of the narrative as it unfolds, and a sense of intelligibility or *fitness* when earlier events are conjoined with later events in the narrative.”¹⁸ Non-aesthetic art responses can, on Carroll’s account, be considered appropriate whenever they fit within the set of common responses shared by a community. That is to say, if a response makes sense within the story a community can tell about itself – including where it has been and where it sees itself heading – then that response is just as appropriate as design appreciation or quality detection are to the overall experience of the work. Of course, it

¹⁶ Carroll, p. 59

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 60

¹⁸ Ibid. p. 132

must be noted that Carroll's point is descriptive, not prescriptive. He is not trying to decide for us which responses we *should* have, he merely hopes to show that the experience of a particular work is as dependent upon our historical, cultural, and geographical situatedness as it is upon our formal and emotive discernments; he hopes to show that the way we react to art is less a matter of discovering structures as it is a matter of interpreting, or conversing with, an artwork. In this vein, Carroll says, interpretation is not only a response that is as basic as the typically aesthetic responses, but it is intimately connected to each, as well. "For," Carroll writes,

insofar as design appreciation involves discerning the structure of an artwork relative to its points or purposes, design appreciation will generally require interpretation in order to isolate those points and purposes. Likewise quality detection will usually be ineliminable in interpreting the thematic viewpoints of artworks.¹⁹

Thus, Carroll believes, he has successfully reunited the approaches of the decipherer and the aesthete by pointing to what they have in common with regard to aesthetic experiences. To re-capitulate, those commonalities are:

- a) design appreciation,
- b) quality detection,
- c) intuitive fitness, and
- d) convergence on precedent.

3. The Pragmatic Notion of Aesthetic Experience

What is left for us to distinguish is the difference between Carroll's deflationary account of aesthetic experience, and what he takes to be the central tenets of the pragmatic account. Of this view, Carroll claims, "It might just as easily be called the structural account, since it characterizes aesthetic experience in terms of its putative

¹⁹ Carroll, p. 61

internal structure or rhythm.”²⁰ However, the pragmatic account, by Carroll’s lights, is different from the traditional account insofar as it leaves aside the issue of the viewer’s belief about an experience and focuses squarely on the content of the experience. In this regard, Carroll sees the pragmatic account as rejecting the notion of disinterestedness and embracing a model of aesthetic experience that is “interactional” rather than “perceptual.”

With regard to this last point, Carroll’s characterization is accurate, since the most salient point of Dewey’s philosophy, particularly during his later “naturalist” period (1925-1952) in which *Art as Experience* appeared, is that experience is inextricably linked to the context of nature.²¹ Dewey’s naturalism hinged upon the notion that human beings can best be understood through their relationships with their surroundings.²² As he put it, “The nature of experience is determined by the essential conditions of life. While man is other than bird and beast, he shares basic vital functions with them and has to make the same basal adjustments if he is to continue the process of living.”²³ On such an account, experience becomes a singular, holistic affair precisely “because the interaction of live creature and environing conditions is involved in the very *process* of living.”²⁴ And, “if one wishes to describe anything truly, his task is to tell what it is experienced as being.”²⁵

This last thought is what led Dewey to look for the general characteristics of experience. Perhaps this is the feature of Dewey’s thought that Carroll views as too much

²⁰ Carroll, p. 49

²¹ In his introduction to Dewey’s *On Experience, Nature, and Freedom*, Richard Bernstein identifies three distinct periods in Dewey’s thought, each lasting approximately twenty years.

²² Richard Shusterman has called this Dewey’s “somatic naturalism.” See his *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*.

²³ Dewey, John. *Art as Experience*. Vol. 10 in *The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925-1953*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967-1987, p. 19

²⁴ Ibid. p. 42

²⁵ Dewey, John. “The Postulate of Immediate Empiricism,” Vol. 3 in *The Middle Works of John Dewey, 1899-1924*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967-1987, p. 158

“like an abstract scenario.” He points out that a few of the characteristics Dewey identified, *viz.* “duration, qualitative unity, and temporal integration and closure,” are far too restrictive to be criteria for an aesthetic experience. However, Carroll is mistaken if he takes Dewey to have asserted that these features are necessary structures of experience, aesthetic or otherwise.

Carroll seems to have fallen prey to the common mischaracterization of Dewey’s work as the “metaphysics of experience” – a phrase Dewey himself used and later lamented having ever written. Richard Rorty, among others, helped make the phrase part of the mainstream of Deweyan scholarship by comparing it with what he often called “the metaphysics of presence.” Under this reading, Dewey’s conception of experience is the cornerstone upon which the edifice of his theory of reality is built, *i.e.* Dewey allegedly presents experience as a metaphysical first principle. Rorty often counted Dewey among the thinkers he liked to call “system builders” or (more disparagingly) “metaphysicians.” Yet, while Dewey’s account of experience *could* be characterized as systematic, and Rorty is not the first philosopher to refer to Dewey’s work on experience as a “metaphysics” (*cf.* the first chapter of John McDermott’s *The Philosophy of John Dewey*), he is probably not a metaphysician in the sense that Rorty portrays him.²⁶ As Michael Eldridge puts it in his *Transforming Experience* (1998), “Rorty’s view, moreover, still seems infected by the psychic interpretation – experience is a person’s thinking-feeling reaction to events.”²⁷ Likewise, Raymond Boisvert has pointed out in the introduction of his excellent volume entitled *Dewey’s Metaphysics* (1988) that Dewey

²⁶ Rorty has also written that “it is unlikely that we shall find, in *Experience and Nature*, anything which can be called a ‘metaphysics of experience’ as opposed to to a therapeutic treatment of the tradition...” (*Consequences of Pragmatism* pg. 77) However, this statement seems more an emphasis on the “therapeutic Dewey” of Rorty’s fashioning and less a claim about Dewey’s work on experience.

²⁷ Eldridge, Michael. *Transforming Experience*. Vanderbilt University Press, 1998, p. 14

followed Aristotle in his conception of “metaphysics”, *i.e.* he viewed metaphysics as a study of existence *qua* existence.²⁸ As Dewey saw it, since existence is comprised of countless subject matters, “metaphysics” is the study of the generic traits that all subject matters of existence share in common, one of the most important of which is “change” – which for Dewey was completely infused with Darwinian insights. Such a study, then, would be concerned with the relationship of active organisms within a dynamic natural world, and accordingly, the study itself should be organic and dynamic. Boisvert goes on to explain that Dewey’s view of metaphysics is perhaps better aligned with the current conception of “ontology”, and as evidence points to the fact that he used the terms interchangeably in his writings. This is perhaps one reason why many Deweyan scholars tend to agree with R.W. Sleeper that, “It would be better to say that Dewey’s metaphysics of experience is not a metaphysics of experience at all than to risk assuming that it is just another species of the kind of metaphysics embodied in Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*.”²⁹

Carroll would be correct were he to suggest that Dewey, *at one time*, hoped to account for the structure of experience via the generic traits of experience (particularly in his 1903 *Studies in Logical Theory*), however, by the time Dewey reached his naturalistic period, he had abandoned such a project. Dewey discovered, through the course of his career, composing a complete list of the generic traits of experience would prove virtually impossible. He gave one last effort in *Experience and Nature*, but he *never* claimed to offer an exhaustive account. In later works, he would often seemingly discover new traits, *ad hoc*, in order to make a point in some other line of argumentation. But, to attempt a

²⁸ Boisvert, Raymond. *Dewey's Metaphysics*. New York: Fordham University Press, 1988, p. 3

²⁹ Sleeper, Ralph W. *The Necessity of Pragmatism*. New Haven: Humanities Press, 1986, p. 7

comprehensive list of such traits would undermine the naturalistic conception of experience that Dewey hoped to put on the gold standard. After all, if experience is a natural affair, then it *must* adapt to changes in the environment, which would amount to most of its generic traits being wholly contingent. When understood naturalistically, *i.e.* as an organism's method of negotiating its way through an environment, the once limited concept of experience could be tied together with the broader concept of culture. But, this point seems to jibe well with Carroll's project. This is also why Dewey himself preferred to speak of the modes (rather than the structures) of experience – a term Carroll also employs liberally.

However, Carroll balks at Dewey's identification of the "duration" of aesthetic experiences for being "too restrictive." He argues,

Not all aesthetic experiences extend over any appreciable duration. Some paintings just overwhelm you in one shot. Pow! Some Rothkos are like this...Nevertheless, we still regard experiences of those kinds of paintings as aesthetic, though they do not abet experiences of temporal integration or evolution...³⁰

Yet, Carroll's reference to "duration" fails to capture what Dewey was after when he thought about the temporality of experience. In his writings, Dewey most often characterized experience as "eventful," "precarious," and "hazardous" in association with time. Perhaps "*change*" could serve as a catchall for these descriptions. And while many critics have attributed Dewey's emphasis on change to an abiding Hegelianism, the way he wrote about change and experience during his later years seems colored more by Aristotle and Darwin than it does by Hegel.

This way of thinking came to Dewey through his teacher G.S. Morris from the German thinker Trendelenberg. The latter had been sharply influenced by Aristotle's

³⁰ Carroll, p. 51

notion of potentiality-actuality and Darwin's theory of evolution and he synthesized these ideas into what he called "constructive motion" – which he saw as the common trait between thought and being.³¹ On one hand, thought moves from potentiality to actuality, per Aristotle, as it *becomes* the object that is known, on the other hand, being moves from potentiality to actuality, per Darwin, through natural selection. This reading rendered the notion of *telos* into a type of biological end, in both nature and organisms, and set the table for Dewey to speak non-linearly of progress as something occurring in a means-ends continuum, *viz.* as something that occurred in *situations*. The echoes of Aristotle and Darwin can be seen much later in *Experience and Nature*, in passages such as,

If we consider the *form* or scheme of the situation in which meaning and understanding occur, we find an involved simultaneous presence and cross-reference of immediacy and efficiency, overt actuality and potentiality, the consummatory and instrumental,³²

It is by virtue of those hazards and uncertainties which attend experience, that the live creature has any experience, and consequently any growth, at all.

Not until the philosophical upshots of Darwin's work were truly felt (something Dewey helped to precipitate) would Greek views of permanence-through-change finally be relevant again in Anglo-American thought. By suggesting that a species need not be viewed as an antecedent "Form" or "potentiality" (something that had stymied Platonists and Aristotelians for ages) but rather as a dynamic, emergent, and transient, organic structure, Dewey's Darwin provided the groundwork for a new naturalistic philosophy to take root, one that could forego divine teleological explanations and provide an organic point of view without re-instituting the old language of Being. As Dewey put it,

³¹ For a more detailed description of Trendelenburg's "constructive motion" see Boisvert, p. 22-24

³² Dewey, John. *Experience and Nature. Vol. 1* in *The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925-1953*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967-1987, p. 150

The force of this term [species] was deepened by its application to everything in the universe that observes order in flux and manifests constancy through change. From the casual drift of daily weather, through the uneven recurrence of seasons and unequal return of seed time and harvest, up to the majestic sweep of the heavens – the image of eternity in time – and from this to the unchanging pure and contemplative intelligence beyond nature lies one unbroken fulfilment [sic.] of ends. Nature as a whole is a progressive realization of purpose strictly comparable to the realization of purpose in any single plant or animal.³³

This “order in flux” is what led Dewey to posit *continuity* as a generic characteristic of experience. Alexander and others have asserted this to be key to Dewey’s metaphysics and to his notion of “an experience” in his aesthetics. In Alexander’s words, “By connecting potentiality with naturalism, Dewey successfully allowed for the realization of human meanings, values, and ideals as genuine possibilities of nature. In this manner he avoids a reductionistic naturalism by espousing an emergentism.”³⁴ Carroll fails to recognize this, and instead speaks reductively of the “qualitative unity” in Dewey’s aesthetics. He reads Dewey as advocating a “bounded unity” for individual experiences. Yet, on Dewey’s view, experience is not at all atomistic, but rather is “pregnant with connections,” *i.e.* experience continuously flows from one part to the next – it is not simply a succession of events.

Continuity, for Dewey, is of vital importance to experience since, without it, the moments of change would spill over into chaos. As Dewey wrote in *Art as Experience*, “To overpass the limits that are set is destruction and death... In a world of mere flux, change would not be cumulative; it would not move toward a close. Stability and rest would have no being,”³⁵ But, this order is not fixed in the sense of being static; it is dynamic and rhythmic, “fixed” in the sense of being directed and connective. Again,

³³ Dewey, John. “The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy,” Vol. 4 in *The Middle Works of John Dewey, 1899-1924*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967-1987, p. 5-6

³⁴ Alexander, Thomas. *John Dewey’s Theory of Art, Experience and Nature: The Horizons of Feeling*. New York: State University of New York Press, 1987, p. 57

³⁵ Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 22

Dewey wrote, “All interactions that effect stability and order in the whirling flux of change are rhythms. There is ebb and flow, systole and diastole: ordered change. The latter moves within *bounds*.”³⁶

Carroll hears “bounds,” and takes Dewey to be advocating a type of experiential compartmentalism, whereas Dewey used the term to indicate that the only reason we can even make sense of a new moment in experience is because of the moments that came before it, coupled with the expectations of what future moments may provide. Simply put, any notion of boundaries must be set by the flow of experience alone. In this way, according to Dewey, experience is also *historical*, *i.e.* it has narrative characteristics which seem to raise particular events above the otherwise continuous flow of moments. Averted catastrophes, a meal enjoyed in Paris, a storm passed through on an oversea voyage, all exemplify the type of event which Dewey would call, “*an experience*.”

However, it is important to note that the movement “toward a close” to which Dewey alluded does not signify a move toward some ultimate end. Rather, for Dewey, it is a move toward an intermediate “end-in-view,” which is itself, along with the means to attaining it, still a part of the flow of experience. This is the crux of Carroll’s misunderstanding of Dewey. Carroll believes that the locus of Dewey’s structuralism is his notion of “consummatory experience,” which is a mechanism Dewey introduced to account for how we might cultivate aesthetic experiences. As Carroll puts it,

Dewey thinks that with regard to encounters with artworks something like a qualitative feeling tone emerges that selectively governs our sense of what belongs and what doesn’t in our experience, thereby setting up an internal boundary between aesthetic experiences and surrounding circumstances.³⁷

³⁶ Ibid. [emphasis added]

³⁷ Carroll, p. 51

This “qualitative feeling tone” to which Carroll refers is what Dewey called “selective interest,” and he described it in the active terms of significance, inquiry, and communication rather than in the passive terms of “feeling.” On Dewey’s account, *an* event – such as an averted catastrophe, a meal enjoyed, or a storm endured – is historical insofar as, “the points of its incidence shift in successive observations of it... It carries on and is, therefore, instrumental as well as final,”³⁸ Like Carroll, Dewey urged that each of these experiences has a unique quality that defies communication, some attribute that is wholly immediate and therefore not an object of knowledge. These qualities are not subjective, they belong, as Dewey asserted, both to the thing experienced and the one experiencing them. Dewey claimed that,

In such experiences, every successive part flows freely, without seam and without unfilled blanks, into what ensues. At the same time there is no sacrifice of the self-identity of the parts. A river, as distinct from a pond, flows. But its flow gives a definiteness and interest to its successive portions greater than exist in the homogenous portions of a pond. In an experience, flow is from something to something.³⁹

Accordingly, experience consists, writ-large, of innumerably intertwined beginnings and endings in which these types of affairs may arise. Selective interest allows us to pick out which moments we will bundle up together out of the continuous flow to call *an* experience. When this happens, meaning is imparted to the event and it becomes *communicative* insofar as it directs us back to something beyond itself, namely the background of surrounding moments. Thus, another generic trait of experience is communication, or expression. The immediacy of the event is unified and heightened by the stable order of expression. Dewey tells us this is life in its most robust form.

Experience in the degree in which it *is* experience is heightened vitality. Instead of signifying being shut up within one's own private feelings and

³⁸ Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 144

³⁹ *Ibid.* p. 43

sensations, it signifies active and alert commerce with the world; at its height it signifies complete interpenetration of self and the world of objects and events. Instead of signifying surrender to caprice and disorder, it affords our sole demonstration of a stability that is not stagnation but is rhythmic and developing.⁴⁰

Dewey refers to these heightened moments as “consummatory experiences.” But, Carroll has been misled by the ambiguity that the term ushers in. On one hand, it can mean “closure” in the sense of completion or culmination as in “the consummation of marriage,” which is how Carroll has understood it. On the other hand, it can refer to something that is complete in the sense of needing no qualification, as in (pejoratively) “the consummate fool,” and it is this latter meaning, *i.e.* “without qualification,” that Dewey wished to evoke. A consummatory experience, on his view, is a grouping of moments that stand out from the rest of experience, like a great meal, a terrible storm, or a beautiful sculpture. Dewey called such a grouping “*an* experience” because it needs no further qualification. It stands alone as a representative of the rest of the moments surrounding it. These consummatory experiences serve as exemplars that structure our experience into manageable components, and since reflecting upon *every* moment in experience would prove impossible, we could not reflect upon anything at all without this ordered structure. That is not to say, however, that once an experience reaches consummation, that it has come to an end, but rather, as Dewey claimed, “The time of consummation is also one of beginning anew.”⁴¹ Consummatory experiences, then, are pauses, not breaks, in the continuity of experience. This is how a rhythmic order is established.

In rhythmic ordering, every close and pause, like the rest in music, connects as well as delimits and individualizes. A pause in music is not a blank, but is a rhythmic silence that punctuates what is done while at the

⁴⁰ Ibid. p. 25

⁴¹ Ibid. p. 23

same time it conveys an impulsion forward, instead of arresting at the point which it defines.⁴²

But, this rhythmic order is not merely established temporally, “The proportionate interception of changes establishes an order that is spatially... patterned,” as well.⁴³ With this, Dewey hoped to establish that a consummatory experience, while dependent upon the surrounding moments of experience, is also dependent upon the surrounding environment and the surrounding community of observers. If musical rhythm is the temporal analog to consummatory experience, then the spatial analog might be the rhythm of ocean waves. Each trough delimits each wave crest, but to say that waves are separated by troughs would belie fluid dynamics. On the micro level, water molecules are all connected in a processional, circular movement, on the macro level, troughs flow into waves and call attention to them, giving significance to each. If we understand this connection and are able to internalize it, we will understand what Dewey meant by experience and operate within our surroundings more harmoniously. As Dewey put it,

Contrast of lack and fullness, of struggle and achievement, of adjustment after consummated irregularity, form the drama in which action, feeling, and meaning are one... Inner harmony is made only when, by some means, terms are made with the environment.⁴⁴

Because these consummatory experiences are dynamic, *i.e.* they move through experience with us, they can always be re-evaluated. The consummatory phase, therefore, is an ongoing process, it has duration and recurrence, and it can rise and subside in relation to the flow of experience. This feature of experience, that it can be consummatory, illustrates the formation of context. As Dewey wrote in “Context and Thought,” an essay that sits in his career roughly halfway between *Experience and*

⁴² Ibid. p. 177

⁴³ Ibid. p. 22

⁴⁴ Ibid. p. 22-23

Nature and Art as Experience, “Context includes at least those matters which for brevity I shall call background and selective interest... *Background is both temporal and spatial.*”⁴⁵ In what follows, I will explicate how consummatory experience leads to the formation of context and what Dewey meant by calling context a ‘background.’

4. Experience and Context

What is of the greatest importance for Dewey’s account of experience is the context within which the experience takes place. But, what exactly is context? In Dewey’s philosophy it is,

...the whole environment of which philosophy must take account in all its enterprises. A background is implicit in some form and to some degree in all thinking, although as background it does not come into explicit purview; that is, it does not form a portion of the subject matter which is consciously attended to, thought of, examined, inspected, turned over.⁴⁶

But, merely calling it a background, offers little in the way of clarification. Again, this notion must be tied to Dewey’s naturalism in order to grasp its import. The generic traits of an experience are not foundations or primitives on Dewey’s view, but rather arise from the commerce of organisms and environments; *i.e.* they arise from the “situation.” As Dewey would put it in a famous exchange with George Santayana,

Experience, thus conceived, constitutes, in Santayana's happy phrase, a foreground. But it is the foreground *of* nature...Apparently he conceives of the foreground as lying between human intuition and experience and the background; to me human experiencing is the foreground, nature's own. He also may think that the background alone is nature to the exclusion of the foreground; I am not sure. But I am sure that the foreground is itself a portion of nature, an integral portion.... So I repeat that while "consciousness" is foreground in a preeminent sense,

⁴⁵ Dewey, John. “Context and Thought,” *Vol. 6 in The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925-1953*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967-1987, p. 11

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

experience is much more than consciousness and reaches down into the background as that reaches up into experience.⁴⁷

This view of experience as a foreground *of nature* can be summed up in Dewey's phrase – “the live creature” – which he made heavy use of in his aesthetics. For Dewey, the live creature was a designation for organisms which could emphasize the relational link to an environing bio-social context while at the same time account for cognition. Dewey identified three manifestations of the background he referred to as context, each corresponding to a particular type of interaction within experience.

The first manifestation of context, according to Dewey's account, arises from the physical interaction of creatures with environments. The context of this interaction is the organism itself. Simply put, all experience is embodied; it is *of* bodies, not *in* them. As Dewey argued, the context of any experience is both organic, *i.e.* it is of and related to an experiencing organism, or live creature, as well as holistic, *i.e.* its organic aspects should not be separated from non-organic ones. He wrote,

The organism, self, ego, subject, give it whatever name you choose, is implicated in all thinking as in all eating, business, or play. Since it cannot in its entirety be made an explicit object of reflection and yet since it affects all matters thought of, it is legitimately called a phase of context.⁴⁸

But, as we have seen, Dewey rejected the distinction between subject and object, and his use of terms commonly associated with subjectivity should therefore not be construed as a moment of hedging. He used these terms in this passage in order to distinguish between subjectivity understood as a kind of “detached observer” and subjectivity as a “determining attitude” or “interest.” Of the former sense, which is often set in opposition to the “view from nowhere” of objectivity, he claimed, “A standpoint which is nowhere

⁴⁷ Dewey, John. “Half-Hearted Naturalism,” *Vol. 3 in The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925-1953*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967-1987, p. 76-8

⁴⁸ Dewey, John. “Context and Thought,” p. 14

in particular and from which things are not seen at a special angle is an absurdity,” and of the latter sense, “Interest, as the subjective, is after all equivalent to individuality or uniqueness.”⁴⁹ The difference, according to Dewey, arises out of a special characteristic of subjectivity, *viz.* that although it is involved in all thinking it can never itself fully be made into an object of thought.⁵⁰ Subjectivity in this second sense, *i.e.* as selective interest, then, is also a phase of context. Again, Dewey warns against letting selective interest run amok in philosophical thought,

Thinking is always thinking, but philosophic thinking is, upon the whole, at the extreme end of the scale of distance from the active urgency of concrete situations. It is because of this fact that neglect of context is the besetting fallacy of philosophical thought.⁵¹

But, as we saw above, selective interest is necessary in order to form a consummatory experience. So, if one wants to avoid letting selective interest run amok, it would seem that selective interest is only desirable up to a limit. Dewey argued that selecting out of specific contexts, such as selecting a particularly good meal out of the context of a Parisian vacation, only becomes a problem when it is converted “into abstraction from all context whatsoever.”⁵² This raises an issue of inclusion. Dewey implies that it is possible to select out of a particular context and yet still have that which has been selected be included within some still wider context. As we have seen, when the appropriate amount of selective interest is applied to the continuous flow of experiential moments “*an* experience” is formed. The ensuing background of *that* consummatory experience represents the second manifestation of context, *viz.* the background of consummatory experiences as such which arises out of the psychophysical interaction of experience that

⁴⁹ Ibid. p. 14-5

⁵⁰ Dewey followed Peirce in this regard [cf. Peirce, Charles Sanders. “Some Consequences of Four Incapacities.” *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, vol. 2 1868, p. 140-157].

⁵¹ Dewey, “Context and Thought,” p. 17

⁵² Ibid. p. 16

is known as reflection. Or, simply put, the second layer of context involves thinking about the projects one sets for oneself.

Just as Carroll invokes “intuitive fitness” in his deflationary account, so did Dewey see the natural way of dealing with objects that arise in the problematic situation in terms of *value*, *i.e.* they either have positive or negative value in regard to aiding the organism in escaping indeterminacy. He saw value a product of inquiry, arising from a non-cognitive mode of experience. Dewey believed [and Carroll seems to agree] that there is nothing – no fact, object, or entity – that has intrinsic value antecedent to whatever purpose the situation brings to the table. For instance, the philosopher, carpenter, artist, and environmentalist may each view a particular tree in different ways, but it would be senseless to assert that any one of them sees the tree “as it is in itself.” The tree has a value, of course, regardless of whichever view one takes, but its value is always dependent on a particular end. So, the environmentalist may value the tree because of its ability to slow erosion, the artist for its symmetry, the carpenter for the quality of the wood, and the philosopher because of the noise it might not make when it falls, but each values the tree for the function it fulfills in attaining some end. Dewey called this type of transaction with one’s surroundings, “valuation.” Simply put, valuation involves the habit, or capacity, of ranking several preferences in the order of which will be most beneficial in alleviating the irritation of indeterminacy. But, this habit is only a proto-process of means-ends manipulation, it lacks the more complex capacity of dealing with objects as abstract signs, and as such, Dewey saw it as *affective* rather than *cognitive*.⁵³ While the affective types of strategy toward indeterminacy may involve

⁵³ There have been many thinkers who sought to cast aside the fact-value distinction. Dewey was one such thinker. He argued that the relationship between facts and values resembles a spectrum more than it does one of polar opposites. There are many things on the fact side of that spectrum. But, even those things have

minimal cognitive capacity, since it gets “worked out in terms of concrete conditions available for its realization, *i.e.* in terms of *means*,” it still cannot provide knowledge, but only a type of repeatable norm, *i.e.* a “value” that can help avoid indeterminacy.⁵⁴

If selective interest leads both to the formulation of consummatory experience and to context, then it would seem that experience is, in the very least, intimately related to context. But, Dewey claimed that in the most general terms, they are not merely related but are actually identical. As he put it, “If the finally significant business of philosophy is the disclosure of the context of beliefs, then we cannot escape the conclusion that experience is the name for the last inclusive context.”⁵⁵ In this broad sense, experience and nature are contiguous, if not synonymous, and since Dewey saw experience as a matter of interaction between organisms and environments, perhaps a better word for experience in this regard would be “culture.” And, if we understand culture as any particular group’s body of knowledge and values, each of which involves belief, then the “business of philosophy” would be the disclosure of culture. Understood in this way, experience bestows meanings on an environment, meanings that can be transmitted to later generations through narratives. Once experience in general has gained these communicative, contextual qualities it can open up the possibility for new, more exclusive, contexts. As a result of this communicative interaction within experience, culture/nature would represent the third and most inclusive manifestation of context. As Dewey wrote in an unfinished revision to the first chapter of *Experience and Nature*,

The name "culture" in its anthropological...sense designates the vast range of things experienced in an indefinite variety of ways. It possesses as a

some value imparted to them by the organism, through the process of valuation. Likewise, those things that sit far on the value side, *e.g.* the morally or aesthetically praiseworthy, still have some fact of the matter about them.

⁵⁴ Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, Vol. 14 in *The Middle Works of John Dewey, 1925-1953*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967-1987, p. 217

⁵⁵ Dewey, “Context and Thought,” p. 20

name just that body of substantial references which "experience" as a name has lost.⁵⁶

And, elsewhere he wrote,

Were I to write (or rewrite) *Experience and Nature* today I would entitle the book *Culture and Nature*...because of my growing realization that the historical obstacles which prevented understanding of my use of "experience" are, for all practical purposes, insurmountable. ..."culture" designates...that immense diversity of human affairs.⁵⁷

Thus, it would seem Dewey's view of experience could be summed up in a single word – "contextualism." By making the connection of human bodies, affairs, and communities with the natural realm the primary focus of his empirical method, Dewey "deflated" the need for explaining reality, and *ipso facto* art, in any absolute form.

As we have seen, whether one is experiencing an art object like a decipherer or an aesthete, Carroll's deflationary view holds that all one is doing is simply weaving that experience into a narrative through intuitive fitness and convergence on precedent. Dewey's view, which highlighted the continuous, historical, and communicative elements of experience in order to disclose context, seems aimed at the same point. This seems apparent once we consider the statement offered by Abraham Edel and Elizabeth Flower in their introduction to the seventh volume of Dewey's later works:

The extension that the reference to context gives may be spatial as well as temporal, bringing in the circumambient phenomena that illuminate: for example, a picture of a person running will not tell us whether he is in a marathon, trying to catch a bus, or escaping from a bull. Temporally, an event is illuminated by being set as part of a narrative in which it has interrelations to other events. Finally, identifying the context as including a background of culture and theory opens the door to full sociocultural interpretation under the rubric of "context" – that is by relation to people around the agent in both space and time and their ways and characters and institutions.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, p. 363

⁵⁷ Ibid. p. 361

⁵⁸ Dewey, John. *Ethics. Vol. 7 in The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925-1953*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967-1987, p. xxxii

This passage is worth quoting at length, because it demonstrates how Dewey's view could be used as grist for Carroll's mill insofar as he seeks to call into question the habits and institutions which have historically colored our ways of thinking about art.