John Dewey's Metaphysics of Experience

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DEWEY frequently used "metaphysics" as a term of abuse. Metaphysics was viewed as a discipline that reified important functional distinctions into ontological dualities and claimed to have access to a realm not available to other men. Consequently, there is widespread belief that Dewey, like the positivists, was hostile to all metaphysical investigations. But this is a mistake; a more careful look at Dewey shows that, while critical of what he took to be a certain type of metaphysics, he outlined a program for a naturalistic metaphysics which he attempted to carry out in *Experience and Nature* as well as a number of later articles. Naturalistic metaphysics is the study of the generic traits of existence; it is descriptive, empirical, and hypothetical. It makes no claim to have access to a special realm of reality that is independent of the realm of appearance with which we are acquainted. Its task is to isolate, analyze, and exhibit the relations of the most pervasive traits of experience and nature. And Dewey believed that this strain in metaphysical inquiry could be traced back to Aristotle.

In this paper, I want to examine Dewey's analysis of what he took to be one of the generic traits of existence, namely, quality or what Dewey sometimes calls "immediacy." Dewey's analysis of quality is one of the most interesting and original features of his philosophy. My purpose is to clarify exactly what Dewey means by "quality" and to suggest how it is a key for understanding his theory of experience, inquiry, and value. Further, I want to argue that the analysis of quality reveals a fundamental ambiguity in Dewey's philosophy between what we may call the phenomenological and metaphysical strains, an ambiguity which he never successfully resolved. Dewey was forever seeing continuity where others claimed that there were sharp cleavages; but there

1 Read at the meeting of the American Philosophical Association, Columbia University, December 29, 1959.

is a deep crack, a basic discontinuity, that cuts through his nat-
uralism.

There are a number of respects in which Dewey’s analysis of
quality varies from traditional discussions, and we can best begin
our examination by pointing out three basic differences. We will
see that what Dewey intends by “quality” is closer to Peirce’s
conception of Firstness than to the primary and secondary qualities
of the British empiricist tradition.

Firstly, qualities have been understood as objects of knowledge;
they have been taken as the basic cognitive elements that are known
by direct awareness or acquaintance. Dewey persistently argued
that qualities per se are not directly known, if by this we mean that
we have immediate, non-inferential, logically indubitable knowl-
edge of them. Qualities, though not directly known, are directly
experienced, felt, or had. The importance of this distinction be-
tween knowing and having cannot be underestimated, for Dewey
argued that we encounter or experience the world in ways which
are not primarily cognitive. To know anything we must go beyond
what is immediately present, and classify and discriminate it. We,
of course, can and do know that we directly experience qualities,
but this knowledge claim about our experience is not to be confused
with the direct experiencing of a quality. Furthermore, experienc-
ing qualities is a necessary, though not a sufficient condition for
knowledge. Each occurrence of a quality is unique, though quali-
ties can be classified and consequently serve as signs. For example,
each occurrence of the red of a traffic light is unique, though in
each instance it serves the same sign function. Again we must
be careful not to confuse the direct experience of a quality with
its functional use in a sign situation. Nor should we think that
direct experiencing of qualities is some primitive experience that
occurs at an idealized moment in the history of an individual. We
have direct experiences of qualities throughout our lives.

A second major difference with traditional accounts concerns
the locus of qualities. There is an oddity in speaking of the locus
of a quality as being exclusively in the mind or in the external
world. But this very oddity is helpful for understanding Dewey’s
point. Dewey argues that the claim that qualities are either ex-
clusively mental or physical, subjective or objective, is based on
a mistake. Qualities as experienced belong to a situation or con-
text. A situation cuts across the dualism of subject and object,
mental or physical. More precisely, these distinctions are insti-
tuted within an inclusive context or situation. Mental and physi-
cal, subject and object are not independent realms; they are
functional distinctions instituted within situations for specific
purposes. As Dewey writes, "The qualities never were 'in' the organism; they always were qualities of interactions in which both extra-organic things and organism partake. . . they are as much qualities of the things engaged as of the organism. For purposes of control they may be referred specifically to either the thing or to the organism or to a specified structure of the organism." Questions, then, of the type "Are qualities merely mental or physical?" are misleading. Any specific quality may be classified as either or both, depending on the specific situation and the purposes of the classification.

Thirdly—and this is the most interesting and important difference in Dewey's analysis—qualities are not limited to those which have been called sense qualities, or to primary and secondary qualities. There are tertiary or pervasive qualities which are directly felt. A situation may be cheerful, distressing, exciting, fearful, indeterminate, etc. In each instance there is a unique pervasive quality which conditions, and is conditioned by, all the constituents of the situation. "Cheerfulness" or "fear," when used to name a type of quality, does not refer exclusively to subjective feelings which are somehow locked up in an individual. Dewey agrees with Peirce that "we do not define or identify quality in terms of feeling. The reverse is the case. Anything that can be called a feeling is objectively defined by reference to immediate quality: anything that is a feeling, whether of red or of a noble character, or of King Lear, is of some immediate quality when that is present as experience." If one asks, "Does Dewey seriously believe that there are qualities such as 'cheerfulness' which exist in the external world independently of an individual who feels cheerful?" he misses the point and the subtlety of Dewey's phenomenological analysis. For the question presupposes the very dualism of mental and physical which Dewey is attempting to undercut. Any specific quality of experience is the resultant or ending of a transaction of organism—environment. There could not be any qualities of experience unless there were an experiencer. But it does not follow that the qualities belong exclusively to the one who experiences them.

Each of these three points—the claim that qualities are directly experienced or had, that qualities are qualities of natural transactions and are only functionally classified, and that there are pervasive qualities which can unify a situation—already hints at the significance of quality in Dewey's philosophy.

Dewey attempted to steer clear of the extremes of atomistic pluralism and all-encompassing holisms. He viewed experience as a series of interpenetrating histories, each with a temporal and spatial spread. The concept of the situation or context is perhaps the most fundamental in Dewey’s theory of experience. And it is striking today, that in movements as diverse as linguistic analysis and existentialism, the concept of a situation plays a key role. Situations, according to Dewey, are funded with the consequences of past experience and pregnant with new possibilities. At the same time, they have a distinctive unity and stand out against the rest of experience. If we ask what it is that gives a situation its unity and binds its constituents into a single whole, Dewey claims that it is the unique pervasive quality of the situation. Pervasive quality, then, is an essential characteristic of situations.

If we think of a situation in the process of development, we can see another function of pervasive quality. For the qualitative background of a situation can exert a regulative influence on its development. Dewey writes 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.” In a problematic situation, it is a positive quality of indeterminateness which is the background and guiding principle of the inquiry. And this quality is transformed through the process of inquiry.

An understanding of pervasive quality is also essential for appreciating Dewey’s aesthetics. Pervasive quality is aesthetic quality. Anything which is distinctively an experience, i.e., a situation which has a unity and wholeness of its own, has aesthetic quality. Consequently so-called practical and intellectual experiences can have aesthetic quality. Those experiences which we normally single out as distinctively aesthetic are not a unique type of experience which is radically divorced from other experiences. They differ in degree, in the dominance and vital integrating power of their pervasive qualities.

II

From this brief account, it should be clear that a good deal of Dewey’s philosophy is dependent on his conception of quality.


6 For a fuller discussion of the role of quality in Dewey’s thought, see my Introduction to Experience, Nature, and Freedom. See also Professor John H. Randall’s interesting exploration of quality in Nature and Historical Experience (Columbia University Press, 1958), ch. 10.
Difficulties which are discovered here are at the core of his thought. There are many difficult questions that can be raised about the analysis of quality. What is meant by claiming that the qualitative background of a situation is the regulative principle of the situation? Exactly how, and to what extent, does this background control the situation’s development? If each instance of a quality is unique, what precisely is the basis for classifying qualities? What, after all, are the criteria for determining the presence of a specific quality? Dewey was too shrewd a pragmatist to believe that mere confrontation is a sufficient condition for determining the existence and character of a quality, but, at best, he gives us only dark hints rather than lucid explanations about how to answer these questions. But I would like to penetrate further; for, in addition to these difficulties, Dewey’s analysis of quality harbors a more basic confusion.

To make this clear, it will be helpful to take a brief excursion and discuss two critical phases in Dewey’s philosophic development. The first is well known, for it concerns Dewey’s break with idealism. Dewey’s main target had been what he called the “ubiquitous knowledge relation.” Knowledge, reason, or thought (these terms were loosely interchanged when Dewey spoke of idealism) was understood as an all-encompassing system in which all experience and all reality were ultimately consumed. If it is thought that Dewey is attacking a straw man, there was at least one idealist who gave this interpretation to the dictum that the real is rational and the rational is real, and this was Dewey himself in his early neo-Hegelian writings. The pivotal point of Dewey’s rejection of idealism is his insistence that experience is far more extensive than knowing. Knowing is embedded in and arises out of experiences which are active and affective. By exaggerating the role of cognition, the idealists had presented a distorted picture of experience which obscured the multifarious variety of experience. But in his polemical defense of the integrity of experience, Dewey claimed so much for experience that it became increasingly difficult to see what was not experience, what if anything controlled and limited experience. It looked as if Dewey, who had so many harsh words about idealism, was serving it up in another form.

Furthermore, Dewey appeared to betray the insight of modern empiricism that experience is compulsive, that it checks the flights of imagination and the vagaries of speculation. To use the

\[ \text{See "Kant and Philosophic Method," Journal of Speculative Philosophy, Vol. XVIII (1884), pp. 162–174. Professor Randall has pointed out that both Bradley and Dewey were reacting strongly to T. H. Green’s attempt to reduce "qualities" to "relations," or universals (loc. cit., p. 277).} \]
Peircean terminology, Dewey’s view of experience and the relation of experience to nature lacked Secondness, i.e., resistance or other-ness. Dewey was sensitive to these criticisms and, beginning most explicitly with *Experience and Nature*, he sought to answer them.

While it is true that experience reaches deep down into nature, and that nature enters into experiential transactions, Dewey now affirmed that from another perspective experience is continuous with, and a part of, other natural transactions. The range of natural transactions is more extensive than experience and limits and conditions the character of experience. Where the earlier movement had been from knowledge to experience, the movement here is from experience to nature. Initially this line of inquiry seems to save Dewey from the embarrassments of a view of experience which encompasses everything and cannot be contrasted with anything; but closer scrutiny reveals difficulties.

We have spoken of Dewey’s metaphysics as the study of the generic traits of existence. “Existence” in this context includes not only experience, but all natural transactions. This point is crucial, for Dewey glibly passes from experience to nature, where “nature” refers to the totality of natural transactions. And though Dewey claims that this movement is perfectly legitimate because experience is continuous with the rest of nature, there is more of a cleavage here in Dewey’s *analysis* than he admits. We can see this in his approach to quality, for Dewey explicitly claims that possession of quality is not only a trait of experience, but a characteristic of all natural existences.

There are three interrelated points that I want to make in respect to this claim. Firstly, when Dewey claims that all natural existences have immediacy or quality, it is not at all clear what he means. Secondly, his arguments which are supposed to prove that not only experience but all natural existences are characterized by qualitative immediacy are weak, inconclusive, or simply beg the issue. But even if we could get over these two hurdles and agree that all natural existences have immediacy or quality, there is a further difficulty. There appears to be little relation between the type of quality which is characteristic of experiential transactions and the type of quality which is claimed to be a characteristic of other natural existences.

The shift from the discussion of experienced quality to the quality of all natural existences is indicated in the shift in the use of the term “had.” In the discussion of experience, Dewey primarily uses the term to designate a direct experience, e.g., I *had* a frightening experience. But when he turns to the discussion of natural existences, he uses the term to designate the possession
of qualities as inhering in what exists. This fluctuation in the use of "had" from direct experiencing to intrinsic possession is illustrated in a passage from Dewey's reply to Santayana's criticism of *Experience and Nature*. Dewey says "everything which is experienced has immediacy, and... every natural existence, in its own unique and brutal particularity of existence, also has immediacy, so that the immediacy which characterizes things experienced is not specious."  

Or consider another passage from Dewey:

Immediacy of existence is ineffable. But there is nothing mystical about such ineffability; it expresses the fact that of direct existence it is futile to say anything to one's self and impossible to say anything to another.

The ambiguity we are locating is contained here, for it is not clear whether Dewey is speaking of immediacy or quality as experienced or as intrinsically possessed by all natural existences. In the former case, Dewey, who has argued that qualities *per se* are not objects of knowledge and, at best, can be "pointed to" by discourse, has had recourse to the claim that men can and do experience qualitative immediacy. But this line of argument does not support the conclusion that natural existences possess their own intrinsic qualities. In other words, Dewey is on safe ground, when he claims that "immediacy of existence is ineffable," as long as he is speaking about something which is experienced. But when he talks about the immediacy of natural existences, which is neither known nor directly experienced, then it certainly looks as if he is talking about something "mystical."

This leads to our second objection, that Dewey's arguments in support of the thesis that all natural existences intrinsically possess qualitative immediacy are inconclusive. To clarify this objection, we must ask what are Dewey's philosophic reasons for claiming that all natural existences have immediacy which is irreducible and brute. The following passage gives us a clue.

To dispose of things in which relations terminate by calling them elements, is to discourse within a relational and logical scheme. Only if elements are more than just elements in a whole, only if they have something qualitatively their own, can a relational system be prevented from complete collapse.

It is the ghost of internal relations that haunts Dewey here. The claim for the immediacy of all natural existences is a realistic reaction to those who think the nature of anything is exhausted

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9 *Experience and Nature*, p. 85.

in its relations. If we could know all these relations, then there would be nothing left over to know, and there would be nothing left over which is not comprehended by these relations. Here Dewey protests, for to cut a thing loose from its own inherent immediacy is to cut the vine that ties inquiry to brute existence.

However one may sympathize with Dewey’s attempt to keep existence from being exhausted in its relations, his arguments in support of the claim for immediacy do not stand up to critical examination. Dewey uses several types of argument. The arguments of the first type show that there are experienced qualities, but they do not show that all natural existences have a qualitative aspect. The second type is close to the first; Dewey argues that what is found in experience must be found in less complex natural transactions, since experience is continuous with the rest of nature. But the essential premise here is that experience and nature are continuous. Despite all that Dewey has said about this continuity, the status of the principle, or its meaning, is never quite clear. Sometimes he writes as if it is a postulate, and other times as if it is a scientific conclusion. One would have thought that Dewey’s task is to show the continuity of experience and nature, rather than presuppose it as a key premise in proving that qualities similar to those of experience are to be found in less complex natural transactions. Finally, there are arguments which simulate a reductio ad absurdum by supposedly showing the consequences of denying that all natural existences possess their own immediacy. These fall short of the mark, for they do not succeed in establishing the absurdity of the consequences.

But let us suppose for the moment that Dewey had argued successfully that all events or natural existences possess intrinsic quality: there is the further issue of the relation of these qualitative endings to those qualities which enter into experiential transactions, especially those which are consummatory in experience. And this brings us to our third criticism of the analysis of quality. In Experience and Nature, Dewey distinguishes three senses of end:

13 Logic: The Theory of Inquiry, p. 23. Though there are difficulties with the principle of continuity, it should be noted that Dewey was not a reductionist. He had a subtle appreciation for both the continuity and the uniqueness of different modes of natural transactions.
15 See Experience and Nature, p. 85.
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the spontaneous qualitative termini of natural transactions; ends-in-view; and deliberate consummations. The three differ in relation to man's activity. The first class of ends or endings occur indifferently to any conscious plan or purpose, the second are proposed goals to be attained, and the third are ends-in-view fulfilled or consummated. Dewey passes freely from consummations to the qualitative termini of all natural existences, but there is more difference here than he acknowledges. It is certainly undeniable that there are casual consummations, that we accidentally happen upon situations and objects which we directly enjoy. It may also be admitted that such enjoyment are the endings or termini of complex natural transactions. But what is the relation of the qualitative aspect of these consummations to the bruteness and irreducible surd of everything that exists? They seem to be poles apart. When Dewey discusses the role of qualities in experience, he emphasizes that these qualities can be active; they can be transformed and mediated. They can be enriched and funded with meaning. A consummation is not a brute ending that is separated from what comes before and after. It would not be a consummation unless it fulfilled what had come before. No one has made this point more forcibly than Dewey. Our aims, desires, and funded experience condition those qualities which pervade our consummatory experiences. But when Dewey goes on to discuss those qualities which are intrinsically possessed by natural existences that do not necessarily enter into experiential transactions, he is talking about something which is quite different. For in this context he tells us that quality is brute, unconditioned, and unmediated. Quality or immediacy is the "phase of brute and unconditioned 'isness'" possessed by all events. The nature of quality, then, appears to be radically different in these two contexts. The distinguishing feature of experienced quality is that it can be mediated and funded. But when Dewey switches to discuss quality as an intrinsic possession of existences which do not necessarily enter into experiential transactions, he insists that qualities are unconditioned, they are precisely what is unmediated.

These several criticisms converge. Despite Dewey's claim for the continuity of experience and nature, he talks two different languages when he speaks of qualities as they function in experiential transactions, and qualities as the possession of natural existences independent of experience. The first is what I have called

16 Ibid., p. 86.
17 This point, as well as several others in the paper, has become sharper to me as a result of conversations with Professor John E. Smith and Professor Charles W. Hendel.
the phenomenological strain, and it is Dewey’s dominant and most suggestive language. Here we see Dewey arguing for an appreciation of the situation as more fundamental than the distinctions instituted within it. It has strong family resemblances to the insights of the idealists without, however, accepting their holistic view of knowledge. The second is what I have called the metaphysical strain, and it resembles the language of the realists who were not afraid of attributing intrinsic qualities to existence. Dewey thought he had undercut the dispute between idealists and realists, but it now looks as if the old opposition has not been avoided, but rather held together in an unholy alliance.

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Comment on Professor Bernstein’s Paper, “John Dewey’s Metaphysics of Experience”

Unlike most of those who make similar criticisms of Dewey’s philosophy, Professor Bernstein has, to judge from the brief expository section of this paper and from his other writings, a clear and accurate grasp of the main outlines, at least, of Dewey’s “metaphysics.” But he seriously questions the possibility of working out and validating it in detail.

Professor Bernstein asserts, correctly I think, that “a good deal of Dewey’s philosophy is dependent on his conception of quality. Difficulties which are discovered here are at the core of his thought” (pp. 8–9). Of these, he thinks the most important is Dewey’s claim “that possession of quality is not only a trait of experience, but a characteristic of all natural existences.” There are, he says, “three interrelated points that I want to make in respect to this claim”: (1) what Dewey means when he says that “all natural existences have immediacy or quality” is not clear; (2) his arguments in support of this claim are either inconclusive, or beg the question; and (3) if there are qualities “characteristic of other natural existences,” he has not shown how they are related to the qualities “characteristic of experiential transactions” (p. 10).

18 The contrast of “phenomenological” and “metaphysical,” while indicative of the tension in Dewey’s naturalism, may also be misleading. What I have called the “phenomenological strain” is a type of metaphysical viewpoint. At times, Dewey himself realizes that from the perspective of his transactionalism it is more consistent to speak of qualities as potentialities of natural transactions than as intrinsic possessions. For Dewey’s analysis of potentiality see “Time and Individuality,” loc. cit.
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[Footnotes]

12 Nature in Experience
John Dewey
The Philosophical Review, Vol. 49, No. 2. (Mar., 1940), pp. 244-258.
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