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Neither “True Being” nor “Cosmic Pyrotechnics”: Dewey’s Naturalistic Metaphysics as Environmental Pedagogy Aid

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Résumé de l'article

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Neither "True Being" nor "Cosmic Pyrotechnics": Dewey's Naturalistic Metaphysics as Environmental Pedagogy Aid

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Drawing primarily on John Dewey's Experience and Nature, *but putting his metaphysical commitments into conversation with pedagogical experience, this article asks: how might a Deweyan understanding of nature and our experience within it support environmental progress? More specifically, how might we respect pluralistic relationships with philosophy in the classroom while simultaneously cultivating an understanding of experience that clarifies the embodied nature of our meaning-making within it and the contextual urgencies of today? How might observing the "generic traits of existence" and their particular and qualitative manifestations foster an appreciation for how the natural world acts as wellspring of human values? For Dewey as well as William James, experience is "double barreled," designating both the "planted field" and "the one who plants and reaps": functional distinctions serve a purpose, but experience emerges at, and astride the tensional energies that characterize, the permeable boundaries of self and world. Taking Dewey's insights to heart illuminates how issues like biodiversity preservation are deeply existential concerns that are ripe for a Deweyan pedagogical intervention.*

Deweyan Metaphysics in the Environmental Humanities Context

Theory has no shortage of bodies these days – and the boundaries of these bodies are becoming increasingly porous. From the Husserlian project of transcendental analysis, devised to bracket the world in favour of distilling apodictic knowledge of the *eidos* of phenomena (i.e., achieve certain knowledge through complex mental exercises), Maurice Merleau-Ponty emerges as a corrective: he reminds us that human bodies mediate experience not merely contingently (as though one simply *happened to have* a body), but essentially and substantively. Out of the linguistic turn, in which selves seem to dissolve into an effervescent cloud of lexical play, surfaces a slew of new materialisms that worry the coherence of the body-subject, preferring to explore the greater-than-human dimensions of thickly complex self-world relations. New subfields of the environmental humanities – from vegetal ecologies to the nascent arboreal humanities – spring into view like fungal fruiting bodies after a quenching rain. Theory, in short, is finding a comfortable foothold in the world once again. In the context of looming environmental catastrophe, this prompts metatheoretical questions circumscribing the relationship between theory and praxis. How can we mobilize growing materio-biological interest into tangible environmental benefit? And how, as teachers, can we facilitate this progress?

These queries build on broader concerns arising alongside surging environmental humanistic interest – concerns that peg "the theorist's new outerwear" as, if not disingenuous, at least worthy of a skeptical eye. Environmental problems, from colony collapse disorder to desertification, are scientific

problems. The interventions required for their rectification are not, it is argued, literary or philosophical, but applications of the scientific method to empirical situations where gaps in knowledge or technological sophistication compromise our ability to bring about positive change. Fungal bioshields comprised of mycelial inoculations may provide an innovative solution to colony collapse disorder, but abstract discourses contemplating the inherent worth of honeybees are unlikely to contribute much of practical value. Worse yet, might there not be something suspect in the very *idea* of the environmental humanities? An oxymoronic commitment to naturalistic sentiment as, perhaps, a last-ditch effort to preserve the prestige of humanistic programming whose purview must remain bound by the confines of "skin and skull"? If the theorist's new outerwear is ultimately no more than fast fashion, contingently adorned by the vicissitudes of fate, then there is a very real danger that this fashion will soon pass – its empty rhetoric leaving the world, it is worried, worse for the wear.

What these worries quietly belie is a fundamental misrecognition of the value of the environmental humanities and the social value of their teaching. John Dewey, I argue, provides a powerful antidote to such thinking *avant la lettre*. While it is incontrovertibly true that Dewey worked tirelessly on behalf of social good, seeking empirically sanctioned solutions to the genuine problems that attend human existence, such "genuine problems" are inextricably intertwined with his metaphysical view of how life goes on in the world, and how meaningful experience can only be properly understood through its unfolding as transactions between organism and environment. Living entails the constant negotiation of the individual's circumstances in tensional relation to those "generic traits of existence" that essentially characterize human life. Taking this idea seriously is the key to understanding how humanistic education with an eye toward naturalistic phenomena provides an inroad to environmental action.

Blazing the Path Ahead

This paper builds its argument as follows. The first section, "Dewey's Metaphysics: From Intelligent Map-Making to the *Oikos* of Eco," provides an overview of Dewey's metaphysics, highlighting both key concepts ("experience," "generic traits of existence") and how they relate to life as it actually goes on within the world. Dewey's metaphysics reflect neither a state of "true Being" (idealist stability) or "cosmic pyrotechnics" (pure flux), but an empirically funded reality based on natural history that is "as wide and deep and full as all history on this earth" and, importantly, amenable to intelligent transformation (Dewey, 2008a, p. 370). The second section, "Illustrating with Art: Deweyan Metaphysics as Naturalized Aesthetics," demonstrates how Dewey's metaphysical thought is clearly and persuasively exhibited in his aesthetic theory – a subject to which I return, with pedagogical aims, later in the paper. The third section, "Dewey and the Environmental Humanities," both acknowledges Dewey's importance to philosophy of education and offers an overview of some recent developments in how Dewey has been embraced as an ecological (or, at least, proto-ecological) thinker whose theories and ideas could be fruitful for positive environmental transformation (here broadly construed). This section paves the groundwork for thinking of Dewey's work in education and metaphysics as not entirely discrete, but complementary. The fourth section, "Dewey, Metaphysical Cartography, and Pluralism in the Classroom," speaks to how course design (especially text selection) might benefit from a Deweyan understanding of metaphysics: a robust appreciation of the generic traits of existence gives us insight into how different metaphysical ground-maps will speak more or less powerfully to different problematics which are unequally resonant with diverse student experiences. The fifth (and final substantive) section, "Dewey, Experience, and the Biodiverse Aesthetics of Everyday Life," makes the argument that Dewey's emphasis on a naturalistic account of experience provides a compelling means of cultivating awareness of the critical role of biodiversity in promoting existential richness. Returning briefly to the subject matter of the second section, I argue that art provides a powerful humanistic access point for bringing this basis for existential richness into sharp relief.

Dewey's Metaphysics: From Intelligent Map-Making to the *Oikos* of Eco

For Dewey, metaphysical representations of the world – claims about what exists and what these existents are like – are never value-free affairs. How we understand the world is always in response to how the world has a grip on us, and how this "grip" manifests contingently will dictate the way in which we carve out our ontological reliefs, knowingly or not, in our orienting "metaphysical maps." In this sense, there is no "true" metaphysical map to guide our understanding of the world any more than there is a "true" answer to the meaning of life. Life is a plenitude whose multifarious dimensions demand multifarious engagements; metaphysical maps, as tools to guide productive inquiry, will therefore dynamically shift according to the needs of the day and the values with which they connect. Steven Fesmire (2015) puts this aptly when he comments that, in Dewey's view, "the monistic quest for the all-encompassing meaning and purpose in the singular – the correct metaphysical map that allows us to sit on our hands and avoid revising – has been a distracting exercise in futility" (p. 58). While there is a sense in which Dewey can be accurately described as a neutral monist, since the effort to cleave apart subject and object (or any other kindred dualism) can never be done apart from some specified purpose (a "functional distinction" made only provisionally to further an identified goal), there is another sense in which such loaded terms clash with a Deweyan temperament. Ontological ossification might be, if somewhat hyperbolically, described as the wilful killing of a dynamic world whose significant relations are always in flux. Dewey's preferred identification of immediate empiricist holds place of privilege because he prefers to look to the world of empirical experience to determine what features we can most assuredly observe; if we do so, *change* is one of the most obvious and salient to our everyday lives (Dewey, 1915, p. 343). Trying to evade this observation is more than an innocent inclination toward rigid ontological taxonomies. It is a roadblock to creating the ontological imaginaries that assist us in not only making sense of the world, but in actively and responsively taking action to make this world amenable to our own needs and desires.

This description throws into negative relief what Dewey does *not* contribute to metaphysical thought: a ready-made account that proposes sturdy and reliable first principles based on *a priori* deductions. Such ready-made accounts, those which "begin and end with analysis and definition" (Dewey, 2008a, p. 308) lead to an uninspiring outcome: the cultivation of "curiosities to be deposited, with appropriate labels, in a metaphysical museum" (p. 26) – ideological butterflies, deprived of lively motion, pinned to blank display board. While his investments in aesthetic experience are unquestionable, this is one kind of museum with which Dewey will have no truck. Dead metaphysics – or, at very least, sterile metaphysics, one-size-fits-all varietals whose static forms claim timeless relevance – cannot help us negotiate a living world and the demands that it makes of us. A dead metaphysics, in being static, is a "disembodied metaphysics" that, as Thomas Alexander (2013) claims, "tries to live without an environment" (p. 101). Philosophy, he rightly argues, "must accept the place where it lives and dwells, its home, or *oikos*, which it has a responsibility to manage as well as within which it draws its life" (p. 101).

Metaphysics is less an issue of taxonomization and representation than of *choice* dynamically mobilized on behalf of fundamentally instrumental aims. It asks us to look to the world and ask, "How might parsing up the world in *this* way versus *that way* result in genuine empirical differences?" Making these decisions entails selective emphasis: ignoring, suspending, or otherwise neglecting thought on one facet of experience in favour of privileging another, a focalization of experience that assists with a given task. In theory, such decisions are "the heart-beat of mental life" (Dewey, 2008a, p. 51): discriminating within experience to isolate the most salient factors in a given situation is what allows us to intervene on our own behalf, guiding events such that they more readily yield value. Historically, however, abuses of selective emphasis have hidden the thick social and ethical valences of "metaphysical castle-building"[1]: for instance, the relegation of the "uncertain and unfinished" to "an invidious state of unreal being,"

1. The idea of "building philosophical castles" as a misguided aim of traditional metaphysics is drawn from Martin Holbraad, who is keen to distinguish anthropological reflexivity from more "depoliticized generalizations of grand theory" occurring under the banner of the "ontological turn." See Pedersen, 2020, p. 27.

while exalting the "assured and complete" to "the rank of true Being" (Dewey, 2008a, p. 51). For those privileged few with the resources to spend contemplating the *eidos* of Platonic Forms, this is suspiciously good news. For the majority whose lives do not admit of reflectively accessing realms of "true Being," however, but rather depend on navigating the influx of the new within everyday personal experience, it is less so. It is important to Dewey that, when we invariably make a choice about how to frame the world, we do so avowedly: that we take ownership over how our circumstances guide our conceptualizations, and the very real consequences that come in tandem. Such consequences, when avowed, transform stagnant theorization into intellectual tools with instrumental value. After all, there is no escaping the connections between theory and praxis: "The more sure one is that the world which encompasses human life is of such and such a character," Dewey attests, "the more one is committed to try to direct the conduct of life, that of others as well as of himself, upon the basis of the character assigned to the world" (p. 309). What we *can* do is theorize our worlds intelligently, reflexively considering how thinking the world *thusly* will help guide or thwart our securing of strived-for goods.

If Dewey proffers no reliable metaphysical road map, the question becomes: what *does* Dewey offer us of metaphysical value? One preliminary answer might be to point to his notion of the "generic traits of existence" (p. 50), an empirical curation of those perennial features that gather together what is exhibited by worldly existents: not causal relationships nor conjectured substances, but qualities that, in their recognizing, enhance our ability to understand and engage the continuities and breaks between self and world.[2] While no exhaustive list is given by Dewey on the subject of these traits, a handful can be reasonably distilled from his work: precarity, stability, qualitative immediacy, continuity, relationality, and temporality are all telling examples of metaphysical traits that any particular existence – "a person, a culture, a molecule, a gaucho hat, Einstein's smoking pipe" (Cherlin, 2023, p. 53) – must manifest as a condition of its very being. These "generic traits" are thoughtfully named: in being "generic," they are not "particular," and thus are not themselves amenable to scientific inquiry; in being "traits," they are not "essences," are not yet immutable structures standing apart from mundane experience. They are, in the words of Paul Cherlin, those "non-contingent ontological constants" that, despite this non-contingency, "provide the grounds for interaction, diversity, and change" (p. 54). Together, these generic traits weave the shimmering tapestry of human life from which a person strives to derive an agreeable pattern. The predominance, at any given time or in any given context, of one or another hue within this tapestry reflects the changing conditions of experience; this is why metaphysics must always remain an ongoing project, constantly requiring renewals of attention and intervention. Furthermore, these traits do not exist as polar opposites in isolation from each other, but rather are characterized by their tensional rhythms and exchanges. Life, Dewey (2008a) remarks, is a constant striving to wrest evanescent goods from the grasp of change; the individual person finds themselves living in an "aleatory world" whose dangers are "irregular, inconstant, not to be counted upon as to their times and seasons" (p. 43). Understanding the nature of nature, the "metaphysics" of existence and experience, gives us a leg up in these struggles.[3] "The issue of living," he claims, "depends upon the art with which these things are adjusted to each other" (p. 67) – "these things" being the mode of conjunction, the meeting grounds, of generic aspects of existence. We can see, then, how such an account is especially valuable in light of environmental crisis and our need to negotiate ever-changing risks: there is practical value having a

2. Dewey himself comments along this vein when he states that these traits "are found equally and indifferently whether a subject-matter in question be dated 1915 or ten million years ago B.C.," and, accordingly, "would seem to deserve the name of ultimate, or irreducible traits … to which the name metaphysical may be given" (Dewey, 1915, p. 340).

3. I take these two terms – "existence" and "experience" – to be equivalent here for the reason that, while "existence" and "experience" may be functionally distinguished (as indeed anything can be) within a Deweyan project, the notion of a metaphysics of existence that somehow undercuts experience to reveal speculative existential truths is not coherent within Dewey's thought. John Stuhr (1997) captures this well when he explains that "the generic and pervasive traits that Dewey discusses are not traits of existence – *where existence is understood as ontologically independent of experience*" (p. 128; emphasis added). To fashion a list of "experience-free, generic features of existence" would inevitably route back to experience *of* existence, to existence *as known* to experience (p. 129).

wealth of tools with which to responsively frame and address changing threats and how they manifest within experience, influence interactions, generate novelty, transform values, etc.

Perhaps Dewey's most famous contribution to metaphysical thinking, however, is his notion of "experience," which is where the ecological aspect of his thinking shines.[4] Experience for Dewey is not some primarily cognitive affair whereby the mind, seizing upon a knowledge-object, comes into full possession of said object as a mental construct. Experience outstrips knowledge and, furthermore, outstrips the very subject that claims to take ownership over it. Instead, it inheres within relationalities that transpire between an organism and its environment as the qualitative immediacy of events leads toward or thwarts consummatory satisfactions – in short, Dewey's experience is an effort to re-ecologize human life (roughly, "culture") by recognizing it as fundamentally embedded within a worldly reality populated by materio-biological forces and actors (roughly, "nature"[5]). "Experience," Dewey (2008a) claims, was never "some person's," but rather was always "*nature's*, localized in a body as that body happened to exist by nature" (p. 178; emphasis added). It is, as Mark Johnson and Jay Schulkin (2023) explain, "our way of inhabiting – being *at home in and with* – nature" (p. 15). It is "a serial course of affairs with [its] own characteristic properties and relationships" which "occurs, happens, and is what it is"; it is only through later purposive reflection that "those events which are denominated selves" are discriminated (Dewey, 2008a, p. 178).[6] "Nothing but unfamiliarity," Dewey remarks, "stands in the way of thinking of both mind and matter as different characters of natural events," like "the convex and the concave in a curve" (p. 66). Nature, in short, *is* experience: it comprises "the planted field, the sowed seeds, the reaped harvests" *and* "the one who plants and reaps, who works and rejoices," "recogniz[ing] in its primary integrity no division between act and material, subject and object, but contain[ing] them both in unanalyzed totality" (p. 18). I stress these remarks and cite at length because this naturalistic view has significant implications. This full-throated naturalism presses us to fully appreciate that there *is no outside* of natural experience; that our loftiest cultural refinements remain palimpsest traces of naturalistic encounters; that subjectivity is fully predicated on, rooted in, the world in which individual and social meaning come to have practical significance.

Illustrating with Art: Deweyan Metaphysics as Naturalized Aesthetics

Dewey's notion of the aesthetic – what Alexander (2013) frames as more of akin to "existential phenomenology" than a traditional theory of art (p. 11) – is perhaps the most accessible and concrete manifestation of his metaphysical commitments. Dewey bemoans accounts that would have art posited as some ineffable work of inscrutable genius that channels its aesthetic impetus from some transcendent or unknowable beyond. Certainly art may have – and, in fact, the fact of qualitative immediacy means that it *does* have – some degree of ineffability that colours how it is registered by the viewing public, but this observation is tethered only to the ineffability at the core of *all* experience rather than something distinctively aesthetic. Nor should we look to find some inconvertible standard of taste to pattern our own sensibilities after, as though the refined judgements of subject matter experts indicate privileged access to knowing what makes some art "good" or "fine art" and other art "bad" or "base." What makes art constitutionally what it *is* is instead the way in which it intentionally refines experience at large into a condensed form – how it translates the aesthetic quality common to all experience into something "more intensely and concentratedly felt" (Dewey, 2008b, p. 54).

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4. Eilon Schwartz (2009) has an excellent analysis of Dewey's relationship with Darwin and the inextricable relationship between human life/culture, the natural world, and education, although the subject matter of this text exceeds what can be covered in this article.

5. I do not mean to introduce a dualism here (how thoroughly un-Deweyan!), but rather to make (in a much more Deweyan fashion) a loose functional distinction.

6. This is what Dewey means when, citing William James, he claims that experience is a "double-barreled word": it encapsulates the experienc*ing* and the experience*d*. See Dewey, 2008a, p. 18.

To understand this fully, we need to return to the Deweyan concept of experience. Experience, walking the invisible line of self and world, expresses how this world (broadly construed) unfolds between an organism and the possibilities and constraints imposed by its given situation. Subject and object (as described by Matthew Crippen and Jay Schulkin) "are built up in one and the same continuing operation" (Crippen & Schulkin, 2020, p. 182). The language of negotiation employed previously is telling. "Were there complete harmony in nature," Dewey (2008a) remarks, "life would be spontaneous efflorescence"; without disharmony, "man would be ruthless overlord of nature, or its querulous oppressed subject" (p. 314). But this is not the case, and it is "precisely the peculiar intermixture of support and frustration of man [*sic*] by nature which constitutes experience" (p. 314). As embodied beings, we have needs: we need air, water, nutrition, shelter, and a constellation of other variables, some more unique to each individual person than others, in order to feel at ease with our situation. When we feel these needs as a lack, we must take up some project to adjust our situation such that it becomes adequate to us. This is ultimately, for Dewey (2008b), what most essentially characterizes life: life goes on in the environment which only by chance accommodates us, and so life consists of "phases in which the organism falls out of step with the march of surrounding things and then recovers unison with it" (p. 12). And this process, it is key to note, is the very germ of the aesthetic – it is aesthetics "in the raw" (p. 3). The transformation of disorder to order, the tension of the movement from the disequilibrium to harmony, and the fulfillments affectively felt as pleasurable outcomes: when we land at a resolution that is felt as a satisfaction, this is a consummation which, when guided strategically by the skilled hand of an artist, manifests as art.

Of course, not all worldly engagements end in aesthetic satisfactions. The artfulness of everyday life is often – in fact, *most* often – thwarted by the socio-political conditions in which we find ourselves. "Anesthetic" experience, experience wherein our guiding interests insufficiently shape our forward momentum, is disjointed, distracted; causality carries us forward, but there is no binding thread that weaves between and scaffolds toward successive parts, no cohesive unity that integrates past experience and immediacy such that it colours the experience and imbues it with its own distinctive and unified tone (p. 41). *An* experience, by which is meant any experience that is more than merely anesthetic, need not be any special occasion. Dewey remarks that, when we look to understand the nature of art, we should be attentive to the rhythms of everyday life from which artistic works spring. We see this in his comment that "the intelligent mechanic engaged in his job, interested in doing well and finding satisfaction in his handiwork, caring for his materials and tools with genuine affection, is artistically engaged" (p. 4), or even his entreaty for us to turn to "the zest of the spectator in poking the wood burning on the hearth and in watching the darting flames and crumbling coals" (p. 3). What differentiates these experiences – the experiences of the mechanic, of the wood-tender – is a matter of the degree of control: how the artist can skillfully develop an object from a fund of experience such that it anticipates its coherence into a new object appreciable by the senses. The artist executes well: the potter has a gift for the shaping of clay, the musician arranges and performs melodies in a pleasing way for the ear. But art is more than a mechanical gift spontaneously manifested as a kind of artistic exudate. It is, simultaneously, an asterisk ever-present for the artist: the asterisk that stands in for the projected, the hypothetical, audience, whose own experience guides the artist in determining form.

What we see in Dewey is thus a relentless naturalization of experience – yet a naturalization of experience that insists on the fact that organism and environment and the relations that inhere between are not merely mechanistic, but represent all that is richest in human life. The question that now remains to be answered is: how can a Deweyan metaphysics lend itself to environmental pedagogy? And how can these metaphysics uplift the meaningfulness of the environmental humanities in classrooms?

Dewey and the Environmental Humanities

Dewey's influence on philosophy of education is indisputable. His commitment to education as a vehicle for democratic citizenship, his emphasis on prioritizing student growth over a teaching-centric "banking model of knowledge," his urging to reform assessment such that it is robustly responsive to the goals of

education: these ideas have proven to be fecund sources of pedagogical critique that remain as salient today as they were when they were written. What is less obvious is how his metaphysics, specifically, has something noteworthy to offer here. Certainly Dewey's metaphysics "hang together" with his work on education – philosopher of continuity *par excellence*, allergic to dualisms that might bifurcate aspects of experience that thereby generate frivolous philosophical puzzles, it is unsurprising that one can productively read his works as companion pieces even when, as with metaphysics and education, the subject matter might reasonably be thought to be quite discrete. But is there something pedagogically unique to his metaphysics that cannot be so readily gleaned by reference to his other works?

Much territory has been tread in an effort to show how Dewey's transactional naturalism can be read as embodying an ecological (or proto-ecological) approach to understanding our place in the greater environment and bringing about change within it, even if this early transactional naturalism might be seen as having "one foot in the pre-ecological world and one in the ecological" (Colwell, 1985, p. 265). Alexander (2013) remarks that, while the term "ecology" was not yet popularized in his time, Dewey's naturalism "is one of the most impressive efforts to think along ecological lines, emphasizing the fundamental dynamism of the orgasm–environment interaction and the interrelated, temporal webs of events that have bearing on each other" (p. 18). Larry Hickman (2007) claims that "Dewey's naturalism is consistent with and anticipatory of at least one current version of the Gaia hypothesis" and, furthermore, "is consistent with, and anticipatory of, some forms of 'restoration' ecology" (p. 150–151). Hugh McDonald defends Dewey against charges of anthropocentrism, arguing that not only are such imputations based on myopic readings, they also fail to recognize how Dewey's ideas are well-positioned to help us avoid some of the trickier conceptual snares within environmental ethics (especially debates around the loci of values) (McDonald, 2012, pp. 143–158). Despite reservations as to Dewey's robust awareness and interest in emerging environmental issues, Zachary Piso yet acknowledges how Dewey's "metaphysical environmentalism" provides a "strong basis for recognizing environmental problems today and for formulating responses to them for tomorrow" (Thompson & Piso, 2019, pp. 724–725). Speaking of environmental pragmatism more generally, Kelly Parker (1996) points out that pragmatism is uniquely capable of advocating not only on behalf of far-flung wilderness habitats, but *all* environments, since "[u]rban and rural; wilderness, park and city; ocean and prairie; housing project, hospital and mountain trail – all are places where experience unfolds" (p. 29). This is especially important in light of critiques of purportedly "sentimental" accounts that marshal environmental rhetoric on behalf of only a small parcel of "worthy" environments – environments replete with "green charisma," but whose stewardship does not necessarily optimize environmental outcomes (and whose histories, furthermore, rely on Indigenous erasure and classism) (Cronon, 1995, pp. 69–90). This is but a small sampling of how Dewey's more metaphysical thought has been enjoying increasing attention in environmental circles.[7] Still, what is notably less well-represented in this conversation is an integration of Dewey's metaphysical corpus with pedagogical best practices and sustainability goals. It is one thing to say that Dewey provides the basis for a sound ecological worldview; it is quite another to say that teaching such a worldview is pedagogically efficacious and environmentally advantageous.

In what follows, I will circle back from previous exegesis to show just that – making an explicit link to how a Deweyan metaphysics guides us in recognizing a role for the humanities in environmental education. More specifically, I will argue that using Dewey's metaphysics as a pedagogical aid can help teachers increase student engagement through text selection and enhance student understanding of the latent ecological values undergirding everyday life.

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7. It is worth noting that the cited literature circumscribes contributions that are principally interested in Deweyan metaphysical thinking rather than, for example, more applied projects at the intersection of pragmatism, environmentalism, and public policy. The latter is indeed an active field with valuable insight into how Dewey can further be connected to environmental issues and practice, but is adjacent to the immediate interests of this paper. For examples of such adjacent conversations, see Ben Minteer, *Refounding Environmental Ethics: Pragmatism, Principle, and Practice* (2011) or Bryan Norton, *Sustainable Values, Sustainable Change: A Guide to Environmental Decision Making* (2015).

Dewey, Metaphysical Cartography, and Pluralism in the Classroom

As teachers, we are given extensive training on – and (hopefully) care deeply about – pluralism in the classroom. Diversifying the canons of our literature, normalizing personal experience as a resource to individualize learning goals, and being mindful of the situatedness of our own epistemologies are some of the many tasks that are essential to ensure that learning is, in the words of bell hooks (1994), a "practice of freedom": something that does not constrain, but enables, students (p. 4). This work is genuine, and hard, work. Rubbing up against the limitations of our own imaginative capacities, on the one hand, and professional obligations, on the other hand, is part of this struggle. How can we know what texts and methods will speak to students? If we have core curriculum to teach, how can we do so in a way that does not make learning dogmatic? How can we make room for individuality within specificity of content?

An anecdote might be illustrative here. In a recent environmental philosophy course, I had the pleasure of teaching Merlin Sheldrake's *Entangled Life:* a recent mycology bestseller that deftly weaves between informative biological teachings and colourful (and thus accessible) narrative. Sheldrake is knowledgeable and, furthermore, charming – it is hard to not be drawn in to his impenitent enthusiasm for the frankly astonishing capacities exhibited by mycelial networks and their fruiting bodies. As a class, we discussed together how the text pressed against what we had hitherto considered specifically anthropic behaviour: how fungi might be said to think, talk, and collaborate. Most students were very engaged. They were coming across ideas that seemed, *prima facie*, ludicrous – talking fungi! – but that, with careful investigation and reflection, were perhaps not so far-fetched after all, if we could only loosen the reigns of anthropocentric influence. There was, however, one notable exception: a student who commented with some degree of disgruntlement that (to lightly paraphrase) he had been expecting to read about Kant and Hegel, not *bioluminescent mushrooms and their digestive properties*. The remark was in some measure intended to be comedic, but it stayed with me past the small wave of chuckles. Somehow, this text just had not "clicked" for this student. Fair enough: not every student will love every text and conversation equally. But had I done something wrong? Had I failed in some way? How could I make this student see this mycological foray not as a form of scientific voyeurism, but as something with a real bearing on their life?

In a fortunate cross-pollination of texts, I found myself shortly thereafter revisiting Dewey's notion of metaphysical "maps" and how they might be best viewed as a guide to inquiry. Metaphysics, Dewey claims, is a "ground-map of the province of criticism" (or, the valuation of values) – and in this pithy statement is a core Deweyan insight (Dewey, 2008a, p. 309). The reason why metaphysical work can never be done, that it does not "begin and end with analysis and definition," is that the generic traits of existence do not "[exist] in water-tight compartments," but are "actually so intimately intermixed that all important issues are concerned with their degrees and ratios they sustain to one another" (308–309). Life goes on contingently and, recognizing this contingency, we must find ways of drawing metaphysical "maps" that allow us to responsively navigate this contingency in such a way that we proliferate the values that emerge from our experience. We cannot help, Dewey argues, but act in accordance with how we view the world – but the world changes, and so too must our views. Dynamic metaphysical maps are thus a necessity in pursuit of the good life.

What does this have to do with my mycological detractor? Continuing with the idea of pluralism, it might be said: Dewey's notion of metaphysics is inherently pluralistic *in some sense* because, while the generic traits of existence are not relative to any particular experiencer, how any individual person might "map" these traits in order to guide inquiry, or their productive investigations of the world, may very well be. As Alexander aptly describes: "The aim of inquiry is the transformation of conflicted, vague, or indeterminate experience into an integrated, meaningful situation, and judgments function as the outcome of inquiry" (2022, p. 11). But what constitutes "integration" and "meaning" is not universalizable. The idea of the "situation" is fundamental to Dewey: if life goes on at the most intimate level between the organism and its environment, then variegated experiences will accordingly result in the most intimate differences in temperament and values. As instructors, we have no course atlas. We cannot anticipate the maps that our students bring to the classroom – and they themselves may not even know them. But what we *can* do is be mindful of these differences when we select course texts, reflecting

on how they facilitate engagement across a spectrum of dispositions and temperaments, and how this engagement can bring about pedagogical transformation.

Johnson and Schulkin (2023) capture this position well, if indirectly, when they comment that the issue "isn't whether you have a metaphysics (you do!)" but rather "whether you have merely unreflectively accepted some culturally inherited metaphysical system" and not a suitably "comprehensive, rich, deep, and adequately critical" system (p. 199). The metaphysics that one brings to bear on a problem will constrain (in the worst case, even "distort," "mangle," or "deny" [p. 198]) the dimensions of experience that fall outside of its metaphysical focalizations (that is, the "generic traits" that it foregrounds). Whereas Johnson and Schulkin see this as a reason to caution the philosopher to take seriously the implications of configuring a metaphysical map in a given way – focusing on the stable and fixed, say, at the expense of understanding flux and change (pp. 197–198) – what I am here highlighting is how, as teachers, we should remain aware of how these configurations will appeal to and assist differently people with diverse personal experiences and interests. In teaching the environmental humanities, we pair environmental issues with theoretical texts that illuminate how to contextualize and engage with these issues (each of which exhibits its own latent metaphysical preoccupations). Dewey's generic traits of existence can act as a touchstone for investigating what metaphysical assumptions undergird such texts, how these assumptions relate different selves to the world that they inhabit and value differently, and the pedagogical implications therein.

Speaking after class to another student, I was glad to observe that her response had been markedly more positive. Mushrooms, she thought, were thrilling. She found it difficult to articulate precisely why – we might hypothesize that her enthusiasm was somewhat more rooted in the aesthetics of the qualitative immediacy of encountering mushrooms. Perhaps my detractor, more attuned to the precarity baked into our ecological situation, was unimpressed by nigh-sublime fungal monoliths in the Pacific Northwest. Regardless, Dewey here offers us a promising pedagogical tool: a self-reflexive exercise that enables instructors to gauge how to best connect environmental humanities texts to the concerns that populate our student bodies and, in so doing, mobilize transformative behaviours.

Dewey, Experience, and the Biodiverse Aesthetics of Everyday Life

I have argued that Dewey's metaphysical "maps" might help instructors to cultivate more robust engagements with students. But I would argue, further, that his full-throated naturalism – his early work in collapsing the nature–culture binary – is a promising approach to helping students see how work within the environmental humanities has a very direct and meaningful relationship with the existential richness of their lives, thereby motivating environmental action.

What, here, is meant by "existential richness"? We know that, for Dewey (2008a), all of experience is only reflectively, secondarily, our own: experience is the name for the tensional movement from past to present, always in anticipation of the future, that is only coherent as a holistic project of establishing harmony with our embodied situation. There is nothing "grafted onto nature," no supernatural addendum, that lends social and cultural life their unique tones and rhythms. He has "no room for a theory of values separate from a theory of nature" (p. 295). Even the aesthetic and its refinements in art are fundamentally naturalistic operations. The values that we have (values that, unlike huckleberries, are "as unstable as the forms of clouds" [p. 298]) grow from naturalistic soils. Our enjoyments are palimpsest traces (some darker, some lighter) of extant ecologies – and these ecologies are more precarious than ever before. What I mean by "existential richness," then, is the idea that the complexity and meaningfulness of experience is directly tethered to the events of experience, which are themselves predicated on a diversity of natural materials. If we take seriously the idea that experience is double-barrelled, then we must also acknowledge the implication for personal experience and the meaning that we find within it: that, by diminishing what might be experienc*ed*, we curtail the fulsome possibilities of experienc*ing*. The connection with biodiversity protections should be clear.

What this point amounts to is a lens through which we can see, via Dewey, how biodiversity is more than an instrumental or sentimental concern – the loss of future medicines, the extinction of

charismatic mega-fauna – but, at a more fundamental level, the threat of impoverishment of experience. With the rubber tree (*Hevea brasiliensis*) comes latex, a distinctive chemical mixture of proteins, alkaloids, starches, sugars, oils, tannins, resins, and gums produced by the organism to ward off harmful herbivorous insects; with some measure of intelligence applied, we then come to the rubber eraser, through which we may abrade rejected thoughts from paper as we work through the problems of the day. Many other means of erasing have, of course, existed throughout history: wax tablets, pumice stone, and even crustless bread. The point is moot, however, when we consider their own earthly origination. But my claim is not merely that our technologies might be hampered by untimely extinctions. These technological interventions are means to new enrichments and values: they facilitate communications and codify best practices. Less instrumentally, natural entities also afford direct enjoyments. Hugh McDonald makes a compelling case for how the loss of unique landscapes threatens a precious aesthetic resource, but anyone who has derived pleasure from a hike through the forest will recognize that even mundane habitats can be a source of thrill (McDonald, 2012, p. 137). Things, before cognized, are "just had" – and in this having, in the qualitative immediacy of the thing, comes the depth and nuance of feeling (Dewey, 2008a, p. 28). Things, too, are not, as Dewey (1915) stresses, static. The actual things of nature bear within them the seeds of new possibilities: potentiality "implies not merely diversity, but a progressively increasing diversification of a specific thing in a particular direction" (p. 344). The loss of nature is not only the loss of what *is*, but the loss of *what could be.* Of course, nature is dynamic; to aim to preserve all that *is* in service of values tied to creative utilities, direct enjoyments, and future possibilities for both is, in a sense, an aim that runs contrary to naturalistic processes themselves. Tending to biodiversity, however, does not entail a radically arbitrary conservation project in service of a "snapshot" of biology as it exists today. Rather, it demands that we protect the conditions that *promote quantitatively comparable degrees* of these utilities, enjoyments, and possibilities – work that will certainly involve protecting many of these valued species and their unique futurities, but will also require navigating sensitive ecological interventions that may well run against the grain of sentimental intuitions (thinking, for instance, of regional eradication of beautiful but invasive non-native species).

My pedagogical points here are two. First, Dewey's account of experience can help ground students in texts, drawing their attention toward how ecological histories and concerns are closer to the self than they may initially appear. Proponents of publicly funded education often make the argument that, even if one has no children that need educating, they still benefit from such a system: after all, one presumably wants to exist in a society populated by literate people with the capacity for critical thinking and self-reflection. Similarly, even if one does not care about the fate of the New England violet (*Viola novae-angliae*), they may yet have a concern for protecting vulnerable species with a view to maintaining rich and complex ecosystems that provide the basis for meaningful worldly engagements and developments. Perhaps my mycological detractor was not very interested in the fungus *Armillaria ostoyae*, but could be persuaded to care if they understood not only its greater connection to forest ecosystems, but also how these interactions spill into wide-ranging causal relationships with human lives and values. These recognitions, comprehending the kinship of environmental entities with ourselves, has a positive correlation with the adoption of pro-environmental behaviours (Diehm, 2020, p. 102).

My second point comprises an aesthetic extension of this idea: the idea that art, what is arguably best and most vivid in human life, is cut from the warp and weft of naturalistic experience. Dewey's account of art saves it from the sterility of white-walled establishments; for this alone it has considerable value. But it *also* provides an access point for bringing into sharper relief how environmental discourse touches on, if indirectly, what we prize as the most uniquely human of accomplishments. One of my favourite pedagogical activities I have used to date was the temporary transformation of my environmental philosophy class into one of art history. Students, having dutifully read their assigned text in environmental ethics, were somewhat bewildered to discover that the first ten minutes of class were spent carefully scrutinizing classic paintings, free writing on their observations of subject, form, colour, and meaning. What this activity helped us discover was less a positive feature than a negative one: a lacuna rooted in the experiential factors that quietly undergird works of art. What is *Girl with a Pearl Earring* without the adornment of a pearl? Or *American Gothic* without the historical backdrop of rural struggles in the Great Depression? If there is symbolism in these paintings, how do these symbolizations

speak to the rhythms of life persisting in a world? And how are these persistings always responsive to the contingencies of the present? Dewey's account of art brings a lively and living perspective to art that otherwise might seem impenetrable. More than this, however, it also offers a helping hand to environmental humanistic thought that must make clear the stakes of environmental thinking to an enormous breadth of human life.

Conclusion

What this paper has strived to show is that Deweyan metaphysics, not only coherent and compelling in their own right, can serve as a pedagogical aid in teaching within the environmental humanities and, as such, provide an inroad to motivating environmental action. The environmental humanities provide a critical discursive space for students whose sensibilities may not reside within scientific practice, but who yet retain an interest in how environmental issues come to bear on their own lives. One practical difficulty for instructors resides in how to pedagogically approach delivering scientifically informed content in a way that speaks to a diverse student body with a humanistic temperament – a problem, I have maintained, that Dewey's metaphysical map-making can help us negotiate. Another difficulty concerns how to help humanistic students, often raised on a philosophical diet of mind–body dualism, appreciate the naturalistic basis of human life – a problem for which Dewey's notion of experience and aesthetic theory can provide invaluable aid. If, as Simon Jorgenson (2011) claims, "[d]eep and reflective work by green teachers liberates a rich storehouse of cultural, ecological, and pedagogical energy" (p. 56), then Dewey is a welcome intellectual resource for energizing environmental discourse so badly needed in our time of climate catastrophe.

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