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Action and Inquiry in Dewey's Philosophy

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Abstract¹

Dewey's conception of inquiry is often criticized for misdescribing the complexities of life that outstrip the reach of intelligence. This article argues that we can ascertain his subtle account of inquiry if we read it as a transformation of Aristotle's categories of knowledge: *epistèmè*, *phronèsis*, and *technè*. For Dewey, inquiry is the process by which practical as well as theoretical knowledge emerges. He thus extends the contingency Aristotle attributes to ethical and political life to all domains of action. Knowledge claims become experimental, the result of which makes them revisable in the context of experience. As a result, when we say a person (e.g., scientist, craftsman, or citizen) displays practical wisdom we are reading their judgments within a complex horizon, whose success as judgments require alertness and discernment of salient features in response to an uncertain environment. Contrary to his critics, he seeks to make us attuned to the world's inescapable, and sometimes, tragic complexity.

Keywords: John Dewey, Charles Darwin, Aristotle, Action, Judgment, Deliberation

John Dewey's attempt to connect science to ethical and political action has always generated concern. Dewey, the argument goes, carries forward the commitment of his time to reformism and progress based on a carefully worked out epistemology that leads to an exaggerated vision of social engineering.² In doing so he wrongly assimilates ethical and political life to science, obscuring the messiness of the two former domains of action. From this description develops a series of attacks that see him as hopelessly optimistic regarding inquiry (*à la* Cornel

West) and as encouraging self-assertion over and against humility (*à la* Reinhold Niebuhr, John Patrick Diggins, and Patrick Deneen).³ There are subtle differences among these thinkers to be sure, but their claims are nonetheless underwritten by a singular worry: Dewey's conception of inquiry is based on an ontology that orients the self to the world in such a way that denies the fragility of life that a thorough-going experimentalism demands.

The primary target of these criticisms is Dewey's project of social engineering. There is a substantial body of literature that addresses these worries by elucidating his pragmatist account of science, social science, and technology and their connection to his moral and political philosophy.⁴ In doing so, defenders of his work reveal Dewey to be a more careful and circumspect reformer than his critics would allow—a circumspection that is fundamentally bound up with his account of inquiry. We can strengthen this defense, I argue, by focusing more explicitly on the ontological underpinnings of Dewey's theory of inquiry as revealed in what I refer to as his philosophy of action. That is to say, the accuracy of the criticisms is partly addressed by the emphasis Dewey accords contingency in his philosophy of action, and the precise relationship between that account and what he says about inquiry. This approach permits me to ally myself with those that focus on the chastened character of his reformism by elucidating the ontology upon which it is based.⁵ To put the matter differently, instead of directing our attention to the front-end of his social philosophy, I seek to explicate the back-end of that philosophy.⁶

To make good on the larger claims above, I argue that the complexities of Dewey's account of inquiry emerges if we read it as a transformation of Aristotle's categories of knowledge: *epistèmè* (scientific knowledge), *phronèsis* (practical wisdom), and *technè* (technical knowledge). This claim will seem strikingly odd to anyone with a cursory understanding of Dewey. After all, among all the ancient thinkers, it is Aristotle to whom Dewey often directs his harshest criticism. But to rest here, I argue, obscures the fact that Aristotle's formal categories of knowledge best capture the internal complexity of what inquiry attempts to track in experience, and the epistemic status we as agents can accord the knowledge that inquiry produces. By way of hermeneutic imposition, we can extrapolate from Dewey's texts against the backdrop of Aristotelian categories to cast into relief the originality and subtlety of the former.⁷

Proceeding this way, allows us to see that integral to Dewey's philosophy is the claim that inquiry is a process by which practical as well as theoretical knowledge emerges. For Aristotle, this account would undoubtedly present a problem precisely because theoretical activity (*theoria*) produces a kind of knowledge that is universal and unchangeable (*epistèmè*).⁸ Practical wisdom, however, is a capacity to act, rather

than a kind of knowledge; it requires more than the application of universals to particulars, but the ability to understand, discern, appraise, and manage the complexities of specific situations. Yet for Dewey, knowledge claims are experimental at their core, the result of which makes them fallible and revisable in the context of experience.

What, then, is the difference between the two thinkers that partly explains the approach pursued here? In a striking passage from *Experience and Nature* (1925), Dewey provides the answer with reference to Aristotle: “Aristotle perhaps came the nearest to a start in [the direction of naturalism]. But his thought did not go far on the road, *though it may be used to suggest the road which he failed to take*. Aristotle acknowledges contingency, but he never surrenders his bias in favor of the fixed, certain and finished” (LW 1: EN, 47 [emphasis added]).⁹ The kind of contingency Aristotle attributes to ethical and political life, I maintain, Dewey extends to all domains of action. Although he emphasizes the procedural structure of inquiry, he intends much more. His aim is to underscore that when we say a person (e.g., scientist, craftsman, or citizen) displays wisdom, we are reading their judgments within a complex horizon, whose success as judgments require alertness, cultivation of perception and imagination, and discernment of salient features in response to a demanding environment. Contrary to the claim that Dewey simplifies the landscape, he seeks to make us aware of the world’s irreducible complexity.

In part one, I deal with the relationship between Aristotle’s distinctions and what Dewey has in mind when he discusses inquiry. My point here is to show that we can read Dewey as disrupting the ontological rigidity upon which Aristotle bases his distinctions. This allows Dewey to broaden the status of what Aristotle calls practical wisdom beyond the ethical and political realm in which he locates it exclusively. In the second part, I deepen my analysis by showing the importance of contingency to Dewey’s philosophy of action and knowledge formation, which he distills from Charles Darwin’s biological framework. This is how he gets us further down the road suggested by Aristotle, thus acknowledging the pervasiveness of uncertainty. In his seminal 1896 article, “The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology,” Dewey clearly announces his organic view of experience (EW 5: RA, 96–109). But it is with his appeal to Darwin’s biological model in his 1910 essay, “The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy,” that Dewey highlights the way in which contingency infuses the social and natural world, potentially defying human mastery and control. As a result, the structure of action, I argue in the third part, places demands on agents’ cognitive resources (i.e. inquiry) such that they must be sensitive *to* and perceptive *of* the particularity of the situation in which they operate in order to make an informed judgment of action.

But does this approach add value? Does it deepen our understanding of Dewey? After all, the emphasis on contingency as distilled from

Dewey's interpretation of Darwin is not new. We find the claim expressed in several works, most notably, Raymond D. Boisvert's *Dewey's Metaphysics*, James Campbell's *Understanding John Dewey*, and John Shook's *Dewey's Empirical Theory of Knowledge and Reality*.¹⁰ Yet, even in these works, attention is focused on inquiry's aim and not the background domain of action from which it flows and to which it must return for assessment. Shifting our attention to the latter holds in view the potential success as well as failure of inquiry. This essay, then, does not radically depart from these thinkers above, but seeks to crystallize more explicitly than they have done Dewey's philosophy of action so that his talk of human progress (which I do not deny) is consistently understood as a claim about historical possibility rather than ontological fact. Above all else, it is this observation, which, in Dewey's view, prompts human intervention even as it recommends humility.

I

In book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle lays out the differences among *epistēmè*, *phronèsis*, and *technè*. These refer to the determinant character of understanding associated with scientific action (*theoria*), ethical and political life (*praxis*), and artistic or technical production (*poiēsis*).¹¹ Since I have already described the first in the introduction, we can focus on the other two categories. For Aristotle, *phronèsis* and the capacity for judgment denote a performative quality of practical action, while *technè* signifies a qualitative evaluation of action based on its productive results.¹² To say that *phronèsis* is displayed in practical action means for Aristotle that it is inseparable from the person who displays it—that is, it cannot be distilled as a formula to be learned, used, and appropriated in the same way the craftsman or expert teaches his trade. This is because *phronèsis* belongs to the ethical and political practices relating to human goods that admit of change and variation.¹³ He is clear that these correspond to ontological distinctions and are not merely descriptive features of one account of action.¹⁴

For Dewey, to locate inquiry against the backdrop of contingency foregrounds the pressures under which living well takes place—the extent to which humans are, as he says, always both agents and patients (MW 10: NRP, 10). With this claim, we find a point of positive contact between Dewey and Aristotle: action denotes a kind of intelligence that is constitutive of the agent. Individuals display a form of wisdom in their judgments throughout life that make them an object of respect. His understanding of the proper functioning of inquiry in any given case can thus be read as including Aristotle's account of *phronèsis*. What needs to be observed, however, is that while Aristotle confines *phronèsis* to moral and political deliberation, in Dewey's view, the necessity of wisdom is part of the fundamental character of human action *in toto*. The entire process of inquiry, for instance, makes the agent attuned to

the uniqueness of the situation and potential disruptions. We might call this inquiry's internal good; the agent becomes sensitive to the complexities *of* and uncertainties *within* situations that demand a response.

But to speak of this as constituting the total picture is inaccurate in Dewey's view. Here, his outlook departs from the ontological claim upon which Aristotle bases his distinctions in at least three ways. First, inquiry's internal good is realized through the productive dimension of action. That is to say, inquiry is always enacted with an end-in-view: "[I]ntelligence develops within the sphere of action for the sake of possibilities not yet given" (MW 10: NRP, 14; cf. MW 8: LJP, 48). Inquiry thus realizes goods that are external. The result is that Dewey, in Aristotle's language, collapses the rigid distinction between *phronèsis* and *technè*. The efficacy of one's actions is what justifies identifying the person as possessing practical wisdom.

Second, Dewey believes that this point above applies to all domains of human endeavor: science, art and craftsmanship, and moral and political reflection. For him, a person's readiness for and sensitivity to pressures that affect the context of concern bears fruit in experience. It would be odd in his view to speak of someone, whether the person was a scientist, politician or craftsman, as successfully engaging in inquiry, if they consistently made bad choices, were subject to constant misfortune in their projects, or unable to successfully conduct experiments that had fruitful results. We would begin to make judgments about their character, their intellectual abilities, and insensitivity to the complexities of the situations in which they find themselves.¹⁵

This brings me to the third point. Continuity between action and production is the origination of knowledge, which, in turn provides points of departure for future encounters with an uncertain world that either reaffirms that knowledge or throws it into question. Here, we should note a point that we will consider more closely in the next section. Dewey is taking his cue from the late nineteenth-century science of human development with its reliance on probability. The Darwinian paradigm is the framework in which he works. As Robert Brandom remarks, this framework emphasizes "situated narratives of local, contingent, and mutable . . . reciprocal accommodations of particular creatures and habitats" in which the expected is coeval with the unexpected.¹⁶ The result is that Dewey allows us to employ the notion of *phronèsis* and to foreground, as I argue in §II, practical action's experimental core in a more expansive way than Aristotle.

Of course, Dewey concedes that the knowledge of the craftsman or physical scientists is often "more precise and more technical" in contrast to the complexity and imprecision of knowledge associated with ethical and political life (LW 4: QC, 158). But this is not an ontological difference. As he points out, the "object of specifically physical knowledge is the same thing as being an object of operations that dis-

criminate definitely fundamental relations of the experienced world from others, and that deal with them in their discriminated character" for engaging other aspects of the world (LW 4: QC, 158).¹⁷ "The objects thus known," he contends, "lay no claim to be final. When used as factors for inquiring into phenomena of life and society they become instrumental" (LW 4: QC, 158). He thus assimilates *epistèmè* to *phronèsis*, transforming knowledge once thought certain and unassailable into knowledge that is fallible.

Dewey's underlying claim is that experience constitutes the beginning and terminal points for both the "normative" and "empirical" sciences, giving the actions of both a logical form and experimental character in which explanation and defense can be provided.¹⁸ What hypothesis we should endorse or ideal we should follow equally unfolds against the background of past experiences and future expectations relative to a specific problem. The validity of the hypothesis is no clearer before action than the normative ideal, and so both must be tested by way of action. The difference lies not in the operations responsible for the emergence of knowledge, but rather in the scope of such knowledge: "The more complex the conditions with which operations are concerned . . . the more significant . . . is the resulting knowledge" (LW 4: QC, 159).

Dewey does not deny that we can still speak of technical or scientific knowledge, thus marking off the distinctions between art and science for functional purposes (MW 4: QC, 159). His point is that the acquisition of such knowledge is not qualitatively distinct from the knowledge of ethical and political life. All share the same logical structure that leads to their acquisition, testing with regard to their possibility, and maintenance. We would want the agent of inquiry, the craftsman, and the scientist to be capable of responding to the vicissitudes of life that confront them in their respective domains. This allows us to say when they are successful that they have skill or knack for making good judgments. We long to be the apprentice or use them as models of good conduct, with the hopes that something of what they have might "rub off" on us. But before addressing the internal dynamism of inquiry in §III which this claim suggests, we need to understand the precise relationship between contingency and action.

II

In "The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy," Darwin helps Dewey dispense with permanence as the primary category in which to think about the human species, and simultaneously foregrounds the world of practical action as the primary locus for where knowledge is meaningfully possible. Darwin provides him with a model that accentuates both the creative and contingent dimension of practical action. Here, experimentalism emerges at the nexus where contingency and practical

action meet (LW 4: QC, chap. 4). Dewey signals this in the Darwin essay, but develops it more fully in some of his principal writings after 1910—*Democracy and Education* (1916), “The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy” (1917), *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (1920), *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922), and his famous Gifford Lectures, *The Quest for Certainty* (1929).

In the essay, Dewey explicates Darwin’s contribution to our understanding of species development: “If all organic adaptations are due simply to constant variation and the elimination of those variations which are harmful in the struggle for existence that is brought by excessive reproducing, there is no call for a prior intelligent causal force to plan and preordain them” (MW 4: IDP, 9). His point here is straightforward. Darwin’s empirical work indicates that the generative structure of species’ development is located in varying and unpredictable pressures on existence resulting from the external environment.¹⁹ This shifts attention away from belief in some prior directive force in or outside of nature that has dominated much of Western philosophic and religious thought. Instead, the biological paradigm indicates that since we encounter nature in experience, direction—that is, ways of and theories about coping, dealing, enduring, and surviving—emerges out of that transaction.

The impact is threefold. First, the conception of knowledge derived from a fix notion of the species falls away. Philosophic and scientific investigation, Dewey argues, “forswears inquiry after absolute origins and absolute finalities in order to explore specific values and the specific conditions that generate them” (MW 4: IDP, 10). Knowledge comes to fruition within experience understood as an “affair of the intercourse of a living being with its physical and social environment” (MW 10: NRP, 23). In short, knowledge is emergent.

Dewey treats experience as a potential experimental domain, the result of which defines the ends of science, ethics, and political life in probabilistic terms. For him, this re-describes our expectations regarding inquiry by abandoning the quest for certainty in favor of security (LW 4: QC, chaps. 8 and 10). We are thus poised to become more reflective vis-à-vis traditionally sacred hierarchies or political arrangements, exposing them to potential reconsideration and alteration. This description makes his account a descendent of Aristotelian naturalism—but with a difference attributable to the more thorough-going experimentalism of Dewey’s scientific milieu. The relevant line of descent, as indicated by the passage quoted earlier from *Experience and Nature*, is marked by Aristotle’s sensitivity to contingency in relation to ethical life. But when Aristotle says of ethical life that “we must be content, then, in speaking of such subjects and with such premises to indicate the truth roughly and in outline, and in speaking about things which are only for the most part true,”²⁰ we can read Dewey as extending this caution to all domains

of human action (LW 4: QC, 5–6). For him, in all human endeavors theories are not an exemplification of first principles, but suggestions to be tested as practical guides in future action.

Second, inquiry no longer sets itself up to prove that “life *must* have certain qualities and values—no matter how experience presents the matter—because of some remote cause and eventual goal” (MW 4: IDP, 12 [original emphasis]). What Dewey means here is that the meaningfulness of life does not hang on a logical argument of causal antecedents in which determinate values are identified. As such, human investigation can orient itself positively to the plurality of life, taking this as a starting point for yielding values that sustain and direct human conduct. For him, the conditions of modernity mean that we have transitioned from customary to reflective morality where the latter is defined by the formation of competing values, and the necessity of discovering *how* and *if* they can be successfully incorporated into the larger moral and political economy of society (LW 7: E, chap. 10).²¹

Third, the biological paradigm introduces responsibility, determined by how well the agent locates and interprets “the more serious of the conflicts that occur in life” and offer “ways for dealing with them” and accepting the consequences which follow (MW 4: IDP, 13; cf. MW 9: DE, 153). Inquiry is thus prospective and experimental rather than retrospective and submissive. It constitutes “a method of . . . diagnosis and prognosis” that rejects ontological distinctions between the empirical and normative realms (MW 4: IDP, 13). That it introduces responsibility among agents is to say with Eric MacGilvray, that the “appeal to experimental intelligence is egalitarian in the sense that all may reasonably be thought capable of developing this faculty more fully and profiting thereby.”²²

What, then, is the precise character of this experimentalist response to uncertainty? We risk obscuring the role Dewey attributes to inquiry, if we do not attend carefully to what he means in connecting contingency to action. Cornel West, for example, misrepresents the matter when he argues that Dewey does not maintain a “delicate balance between excessive optimism and exorbitant pessimism regarding human capacities.”²³ Raymond Boisvert adds to West’s mischaracterization when he suggests that “sensitivity to inherent natural limitations is decidedly underemphasized” in Dewey’s work.²⁴ But how can West and Boisvert—sympathetic interpreters—make such claims? This is especially noteworthy considering the latter’s treatment of Darwin’s importance to Dewey.²⁵ Essentially, what they argue is that inquiry presupposes a description of the relationship between action and the environment (broadly conceived), which obscures the uncertainty that connection involves.²⁶ In their view, contingency does not run deep enough. As we shall see in a moment, however, Dewey’s account of inquiry takes on the shape that it does precisely because contingency

frames human action from the outset. This requires us to place inquiry in the background for a moment and focus our attention *only* on Dewey's phenomenology of action—that is, its function in constituting the self, its temporal quality, and the pressures it generates.

In linking the world of action to uncertainty, Dewey refers to something very specific about our relationship to the environment. Action in this instance does not mean the commonsensical notion of movement or series of movements. That action is this for Dewey cannot be denied, but action is more like organized activity to achieve ends, the necessity of which is set by the pressures of the environment. Hence the examples he offers of the world of practical activity: “Man constructs a fortress out of the very conditions and forces which threaten him. He builds shelters, weaves garments, makes flame his friend instead of his enemy, and [this] grows into the complicated arts of associated living” (LW 4: QC, 3; cf. MW 9: DE, 146). The relationship between action and uncertainty reveals the self-reflective character of identity. In other words, human beings find themselves located within problematic environments and the potential corrective to those situations are partly dependent on how those individuals respond.

There is, however, another revelatory dimension to action. This refers to the intentionality of consciousness as realized through action that orients the self to the larger context (e.g., nature, other individuals, and social arrangements). The self is not focused on its needfulness, but the problematic situation that generated the need from the outset. Action thus discloses to us a world that is unfinished, in the process of becoming, and which demands a response. The “stimulus to thinking . . . implies that the situation as it stands is, either in fact or to us, incomplete and hence indeterminate” (MW 9: DE, 158). An uncertain world thus impinges on and provokes the self, bringing action into existence. The dual dimension of action exposes the self and creates space for commendation and condemnation or critique and affirmation by other subjects. In doing so, action also opens up the possibility for uncertainty to materialize. As such, we do not know how the world will respond to us, both in its natural movement and in the reactions by others that inhabit the world. The uncertainty implied by the presence of other human beings is what Dewey has in mind when he refers to the *complicated* arts of associated living.

Dewey's claim is that we do not think about being creatures of action, constructing ways of managing and navigating our environment. Rather, this is simply what we are in a primordial sense. “We are,” he says, “active beings from the start and are naturally, wholly apart from consciousness, engaged in redirecting our action in response to changes in our surroundings” (MW 8: LJP, 52n16). In this respect action discloses the contours of reality and commitments of our agency. This claim rejects the Cartesian thinking subject as the appropriate beginning

point of analysis because this thinking subject is prefigured and constituted by specific problems. Nor does this account embrace a kind of romantic notion of the sovereign self, since the reflexive dimension of action bespeaks our sustained dependence on the external world.

At this juncture, critics often emphasize the progressive view of Dewey's account, arguing that embedded in his view is the assumption of a world open to human intervention, waiting to be bent and altered to human desire. As John Patrick Diggins maintains: "Although Dewey has been hailed for ridding philosophy of epistemology in order to bring it into the modern world . . . he appears to be returning to the eighteenth-century French Enlightenment in his conviction of a rational world responsive to scientific manipulation."²⁷ The implication is that the obstacles to human intervention for Dewey have nothing to do with the world as such—that is, the impediments do not inhere in the subject matter.

But we move too quickly if we ignore the subtlety of Dewey's claim and its underlying realism. Of course his philosophy of action is coextensive with a theoretical framework that is reformist in orientation. But progress is a socio-scientific possibility not an ontological fact. This allows Dewey to say of modernity, "for the first time in history mankind is in command of the possibility of progress" (MW 10: P, 237). Yet he retains, without contradiction or subterfuge, the cautionary note at the heart of his philosophy—namely, that a thorough-going experimentalism "is not an insurance device nor a mechanical antiseptic . . . it inspires the mind with courage and vitality to create new ideals and values in the face of the perplexities of a new world" (LW 1: EN, 4; cf. MW 14: HNC, 163).²⁸ In his view, if action allows the self to control and understand the world, to disclose the possibility within life and potentiality of one's life, then action can equally make clear and deepen the contingent dimension of human projects.

In this account, there is a priority of action to the creation of character for Dewey. As he says in *Human Nature and Conduct*, character is formed through and constituted by habituation: "For it makes us see that character is the name given to the working interaction of habits . . ." (MW 14: HNC, 31). Indeed, he argues that upon honest reflection, we realize that "habit has this power [that is, disposes us to act in certain ways] because it is so intimately a part of ourselves. It has a hold upon us because we are the habit" (MW 14: HNC, 21). When someone says of another, 'I know his character,' what is known is the way in which a configuration of habits disposes him to act. Or, when we say of a person that 'she is not acting like herself,' we are able to utter and make sense of this claim because of our capacity to connect dynamic actions across a temporal landscape to say something consistently about who she understands herself to be, and the ways in which she can be expected to act in light of certain situations. What this means for

Dewey is that the assessment of an individual's character is intelligible through action (MW 14: HNC, 31; cf. LW 1: EN, 213).

There is interdependency then between action and character in that the former helps constitute the latter, which in turn allows individuals to transform the world they engage. “[S]ince habits,” writes Dewey, “involve the support of environing conditions, a society or some specific group of fellow-men, is always accessory before and after the fact. Some activity proceeds from a man; then it sets up reactions in the surroundings” (MW 14: HNC, 16). For this reason Dewey says in his *Ethics* (1932) that “there is no such thing as a fixed, ready-made, finished self. Every living self causes acts and is itself caused in return by what it does” (LW 7: E, 306). We cannot tell a story about the identity of agents and ourselves without reference to the context in which individuals find themselves.²⁹ Our identity comes into view in relation to a past that we do not make and a future that we do not completely control. This simply means that the social world forms a temporal-spatial horizon; it embodies funded experiences that extend around the self both in time and space. The social world exists before and after the fact in the sense implied by intersubjectivity through which institutional structures, linguistic and visual symbols and their meaning-content emerge.

We must be careful here. To say that these two, action and character, are interdependent must not be taken to mean, for Dewey, that they are completely equal. “Personality,” he writes, “selfhood, subjectivity are eventual functions that emerge with complexly organized interactions.” “Subjectivity,” Dewey says more precisely, is thus “a novel reconstruction of a pre-existing order” (LW 1: EN, 162; cf. 168, 170–71, 187–88). His point is that character, that which differentiates individuals, is emergent during breaks in what is otherwise the continuous connection between self and its context. These reflections are critically important largely because they explain his belief that the world of practical action has a normative dimension that both regulates and liberates. Practical action regulates in the sense captured by the habitual dimension of identity, which, although flexible, nonetheless narrows and steadies the self—a self about which claims can be made, fulfillment of commitments can be demanded, and to which obligations can be owed and settled.

Precisely because action is revelatory it implies a condition of possibilities that may attend specific situations. Following William James, Dewey notes that experience is “a double-barreled word . . . in that it recognizes in its primary integrity no division between act and material, subject and object but contains them both in an unanalyzed totality” (LW 1: EN, 18).³⁰ But what does this claim mean? On the one hand, it means that for Dewey we are not fundamentally creatures of thought. This does not mean that reflection has never taken place, but rather that habits sediment after having been formed through a process of reason-

ing in context. They *appear* pre-reflective, as simply part of the narratives in which we are implicated and to which we adhere by virtue of the choices we continually make. To say, on the other hand, that experience is an unanalyzed totality means that there are distinct moments of reflection in which action emerges in relationship to the temporal horizon that makes the experience of agents purposive, meaningful and an object of knowledge. The self is poised in an immediate way in the needful *present* between a *past* that provides resources (i.e., sedimented habits) discordant with the present, and a *future* in which the present event may be settled. The self takes cognitive control to determine and propose some possibilities, while interpreting and avoiding others within the very temporal field that indicates the problem in the first instance.

There is a fundamental point here rarely acknowledged about Dewey's philosophy. His account of action should be read as also making a phenomenological claim that our cognitive capacities do not inherently grasp the complex and elusive dimensions of the experiences they engage. In a critically important passage in *Experience and Nature*, one which has parallels elsewhere in his work, Dewey describes the elusive character of the natural and social world: "The visible is set in the invisible; and in the end what is unseen decides what happens in the seen; the tangible rests precariously upon the untouched and ungrasped" (LW 1: EN, 44; cf. MW 14: HNC, 145; LW 4: QC, 6). One crucial claim of that entire work is that uncertainty saturates the natural and social world and so frames the relative security we enjoy.

The point here is that the troubling experiences to which human action responds are potentially resistant to mastery. Of course, this is a crucial insight that has considerable value for understanding not only political and ethical life, but also scientific activity. Indeed, many have exploited this insight, from Aristotle to Machiavelli to Hannah Arendt, in thinking about political action. But for Dewey it does more, the substance of which goes to the very heart of our self-understanding. It indicates an appropriate psychology of expectation when one acts. Hence, he says that the position of the practical actor is that of the meliorist: "[T]he belief that the specific conditions which exist at one moment, be they comparatively bad or comparatively good, in any event may be bettered" (MW 12: RIP, 181–82). The auxiliary verb "may" in this formulation denotes caution. We cannot be certain of the effects of our proposals, hypotheses, and norms of conduct until they have played themselves out. "For in acting, we put the world in peril and no one can wholly predict what will emerge in its place" (LW 1: EN, 172). Unpredictability is at once a presupposition for action that settles needs, demands, and problems, but equally places us in a position where we court adverse consequences.

Here we come to yet another claim rarely noticed about Dewey's outlook. If the term "adverse consequences" is to do justice to what

Dewey means, it must denote the multi-faceted composition of the natural world (including the agent) that may undermine action. To identify the agent as a potential embodiment of contingency follows from Dewey's claim that our character is expressed via decision-making. The self potentially becomes an obstacle to the settlement of the issue to the extent that "a desirable trait of character does not always produce desirable results" (MW 14: HNC, 36). We are reminded of those unfortunate souls in Greek tragedy; they never realize the extent to which they become the source of their own demise or that of the people they most cherish. This is not usually because of their vices, but more tragically the way in which commitment to specific virtues obscures other factors of consideration. Hence Dewey's remark: "[E]ven when proper allowances are made [regarding the complex relationship between character and consequences], we are forcing the pace when we assume that there is or ever can be an exact equation of disposition and outcome" (LW 14: HNC, 36).³¹ For this reason Dewey describes living as a gamble: "We survey conditions, make the wisest choice we can; we act, and we must trust the rest to fate, fortune or providence" (LW 4: QC, 6).

If certainty cannot be had, Dewey's aim is to structure inquiry such that the judgments of action that we reach are the products of a bit more than luck. But this means that inquiry is unintelligible (and will often be unsuccessful) unless it proceeds via sensitivity to particulars. This works on two levels. First, there is the character of the agent—the experiences and habits that feed into and comprise his character. Second, there is the complexity and salience of the situation of concern. Inquiry works best as Dewey describes it when there is a dialectical relationship between these two levels. The well functioning of inquiry is not merely a matter of proceduralism, but must, as I indicate in III, also include appreciation for just those features of a situation that ought to engage a person for us to say they have made an informed decision.

III

In the introduction I referred to Dewey's notion of inquiry as a *process*. Given the discussion in I and II, this means that inquiry's use and subsequent significance is functionally assessed in the flow and reconstruction of problematic experiences. Although there is a larger context in which inquiry derives its significance, that context should not be viewed as cordon-off from future reflection. But context must also be viewed as a resource that feeds directly into inquiry's proper functioning.

By way of hermeneutic imposition, let us return to Aristotle for a moment to focus the analysis. When Aristotle refers to *phronèsis* as an intellectual virtue, he indicates that it is a "reasoned and true state of capacity to act with regard to human goods," and when so exercised it "issues commands, since its end is what ought to be done or not to be

done.”³² What Aristotle means by this statement is captured by the relationship between *phronèsis* and the moral virtues. The virtue of generosity, for example, means that, when applied, it will be for the correct reason in the right context. But exactly how are individuals to know what the right context is if not because they have cultivated a level of sensitivity to particular situations over time that helps render the use of generosity intelligible? Sensitivity is a compact word in this instance; it means that one has assessed the situation that suggests the need for generosity, one has ruled out the particular need for another virtue as a settlement of the issue, and one has made a judgment that generosity fits the need. Individuals build up a store-house of cases that allow them to deal with other situations that are similar in structure, although not identical in substance. Aristotle confirms this point by making deliberation a feature of *phronèsis*: “Deliberation is concerned with things that happen in a certain way *for the most part*, but in which the event is obscure, and with things in which it is indeterminate.”³³

As already noted, I read Dewey as expanding the reach of *phronèsis* via Darwin. Another way to capture my point is to say that *phronèsis*, for Aristotle, is to the moral virtues, what inquiry, for Dewey, is to human action *in toto*. The claim is not, as indicated in §I, that *phronèsis* and inquiry are the same, but rather, if the latter is to function properly, it must, as I understand, include the content of what we mean when we refer to the former. Inquiry, then, is a process exercised relative to a particular context and embodied in actions, the substance of which exists at the crossroads between various factors and reasons and the way the agent determines them.

If we turn to Dewey's formal structure of inquiry, we can see the two levels mentioned earlier at work. He provides a precise statement of this in his *How We Think* (1910):

- (i) a felt difficulty; (ii) its location and definition; (iii) suggestion of possible solution; (iv) development by reasoning of the bearings of the suggestion; (v) further observation and experiment leading to its acceptance or rejection; that is, the conclusion of belief or disbelief. (MW 6: HWTa, 236; cf. MW 8: LJP, 15–23; LW 12: L, chaps 1, 6)

The felt difficulty means that the situation exerts pressure that demands a response. The continuity within experience is fractured, opening up the necessity for reflection so as to achieve restoration. But here the fracture indicates the exhaustion of existing habits, so that the nature of the problem requires creative valuation. What is needed is a judgment of action, something to be done in which the problem acts as a guiding marker in moving us through the other stages of our reflection.

The feeling of the difficulty requires us to localize and define the problem. As such, the issue itself may require several propositional formula-

tions, before the clarity of the problem comes into view. We will often need to take counsel with others or consult our funded experiences, for example. So there may be a subclass of propositions that are constitutively connected to articulating the precise problem to be addressed. “Their subject-matter,” writes Dewey, “implies that the proposition is itself a factor in the completion of the situation, carrying it forward to its conclusion” (MW 8: LJP, 16; cf. LW 12: L, 123–27).

Obviously this is an intermediate stage—an attempt to clarify the situation so as to move onto other aspects that will settle the problem. But even at this juncture, Dewey’s language indicates that there are *better* or *worse* descriptions of the problem if we are to potentially arrive at a solution. “Better” or “worse” indicates that unless the situation is descriptively impenetrable, it must contain elements that refer to a multitude of other—different—situations that indicate in abbreviated form how this situation should look whether we are responsive to those elements or not. Inquiry thus works, in Dewey’s view, as a culling mechanism that registers content from the intersubjectively formed social world that extends beyond the epistemic authority of the isolated self. Our ability to make reference to comparable features of the social world allows us to formulate *objective* claims about better or worse.

Responsibility for describing the situation—crystallizing its contours or distorting them altogether—lies with the agent. That one takes counsel with others, as Dewey often emphasizes in his understanding of the cooperative character of inquiry, is based on the belief that others may very well see the matter differently because their particular experiences shape their perceptual abilities in ways unlike our own (LW 1: EN, 135).³⁴ This is particularly so, he insists, in moral and political matters, but is no less apparent in empirical science. For in all cases what is needed is a sense of “sympathy which carries thought out beyond the self and which extends its scope . . . it is sympathy which saves considerations of consequences from degenerating into mere calculation, by rendering vivid the interests of others [or other factors] and urging us to give them weight” (LW 7: E, 270).³⁵ The kind of collaboration suggested by intersubjectivity is a normative claim that there are instances in which persons can incur blame for relying insufficiently or too heavily upon themselves when assessing complex terrain in which a judgment of action is necessary.

What Dewey is drawing our attention to is the explicability of action that makes dialogical mediation central. To say some actions as opposed to others proceed from inquiry is to evaluate their reasons as appropriate because of the context in which they function. The agent is prepared to justify why *that* action is done rather than some other, which, is simply to say, action is explicable in terms of its reasons that make it an object of assessment. We understand ourselves to be offering cause or basis from a background of potential reasons that embody attentiveness to

just those various considerations one could offer given the situation of concern. Situations require a judgment of action because our current streams of habits encounter unanticipated obstacles, leaving us in a state of doubt. When a hypothesis or norm is advanced as a response to a problem situation, we usually justify our choice to other individuals by reference to competing alternatives that for one reason or another fail to sufficiently take into account important considerations which would otherwise make them the best projected options. Practical actions, then, have a linguistic counterpart—that is, they are responses to “why-questions” in a practice of giving and accepting reasons.³⁶ Hence, Dewey refers to inquiry as a deliberative process in which explanation, defense, and revision takes place: “[D]eliberation . . . regards the end-in-view . . . as tentative and permits, nay encourages the coming into view of consequences which will transform it and create new purpose and plan” (MW 14: HNC, 149). As he says elsewhere: “When communication occurs, all natural events are subject to reconsideration and revision whether it be public discourse or that preliminary discourse termed thinking” (LW 1: EN, 132).

Yet, what determines whether the problem is clearly described is something other than the formal process of inquiry, and is rather bound up with the shape of one's receptivity from upbringing. This much Dewey suggests: “Habit does not preclude the use of thought, but it determines the channels within which it operates. Thinking is secreted in the interstices of habits” (LW 2: PP, 335). Habits open the self to receive considerations that inform inquiry's functioning, and those habits shape our understanding of those considerations. When we say a person is diligent, focused, attentive to others, cold, unimaginative, dramatic, careless, we are delineating character traits that will direct and condition both incoming data and information and outgoing responses and proposals (Cf. LW 7: E, 256–58). We are reminded of situations in which individuals exclude or fail to take into consideration factors that might otherwise clarify the issue of concern. Our utterances often take the form of: ‘Did you consider X?’ or ‘Did you look at Y?’ In some cases, these utterances will simply bring to light information that guides inquiry; they are not claims about a person's character. But in other cases these questions are asked because we know the agent to be just the sort of person who would not consider such factors. Or, we know that because of various features of a person's character—traits such as the ones listed above—they simply cannot see the way in which those considerations ought to engage them given the problem.

These two previous statements advance different claims. The first suggest that one's character is of such a nature that given the situation they simply ignore factors that any other competent inquirer in the situation would usually consider. The second claim suggests that the considerations simply do not engage the person, independent of a desire

and willingness to ignore them. But neither claim means for Dewey that transformation within the self's outlook is closed off, for if we recall the self is relatively stable, not fixed.

To say that others can recognize and assess the content that feeds into inquiry simply identifies individuals as sharing modes of perception, senses of significance, parallel cases, interests and desires—in short, forms of life. This allows us to identify not only better or worse characterizations of the problem situation, but more significantly, to indicate that there is a *best achievable state* of the agent regarding sensitivity to just those reasons and factors that help define the situation from the outset.³⁷ What to do is based on our understanding of the situation, and this requires as Dewey understands the matter a proper appreciation for those features which are constitutive of the present moment, but which can only be received based on the character of the self. Construal of the situation will always be something more than proceduralism, even as these independent dictates guide inquiry to fruitful destination points.

Phases (iii) and (iv), suggestion of possible solution and reasoning from that suggestion, are critically important because they imply the launching into the unknown. Dewey often refers to these stages as involving the “art of inference:”

Every act of human life, not springing from instinct or mechanical habit, contains it; most habits are dependent upon some amount of it for their formation, as they are dependent upon it for their readaptation to novel circumstances. From the humblest act of daily life to the most intricate calculations of science . . . things are used as signs, indicates, or evidence from which one proceeds to something else not yet directly given. (MW 8: LJP, 16)

Here, inference is not functioning in the way that we would usually find articulated by statisticians; it does not merely refer to induction and deduction, but what Charles S. Peirce calls abduction—that is, “studying facts and devising a theory to explain them. Its only justification is that if we are ever to understand things at all, it must be in that way.”³⁸ As Norwood Hanson explains of Peirce's point, although it applies to Dewey's account as well: “Deduction proves that something *must* be; Induction shows that something *actually is* operative; Abduction merely suggest that something *may be*.”³⁹ That inference is an art for Dewey (as well as Peirce) means, among other things, that there is a level of imprecision in our attentiveness to the relationship between information so gathered and the hypothesis inferred and proposed. “A keen eye and a quick ear,” he remarks, “are not in themselves guarantees of correct knowledge . . . but they are conditions without which knowledge cannot arise” (LW 7: E, 268). So inference here must be under-

stood broadly to denote a kind of receptivity to important elements of an intricate situation. We move back and forth between information and tentative judgments, at first only imaginatively envisioning the proposed consequences and then ultimately following their course in the domain of experience. But in this back and forth we are reasoning and making tentative appraisals, taking hold of some set of factors that allow us to move to some other set, while ruling out others, all of which suggest that inference is a messy affair.

The fact that this is not explicable in clear rule-governing language should not undermine its importance. For Dewey, we make inferences within the horizon of the problem, not external to it, so that the judgments made, as already indicated, implicate us in the resolution or irresolution of the situation. For this reason our conjectures, suggestions, or beliefs potentially carry an attached risk that is located at two different levels. The first level is the relationship between agent and context. Here the self constitutes a fundamental datum in arriving at a solution. The second level is the relationship between proposal and context. Here the self confronts a potential disjunction between proposals (i.e. the ends of inquiry) and what the world will allow. Thus Dewey says: “[T]hrough inference men are capable of a kind of success and exposed to a kind of failure not otherwise possible” (MW 8: LJP, 71).⁴⁰

On a related note, Dewey's account of inference sheds some light on the creativity of inquiry. Consider, for a moment, the section heading and subheading Dewey uses in Chapter 6, “Examples of Inference and Testing” to the revised version of the *How We Think* (1933): “II. Inference to the Unknown” and “Inference Involves a Leap” (LW 8: HWTb, 190–91). The titles mean to signal the elusive context in which inquiry proceeds. The terms “unknown” or “leap” in those subtitles are not meant to suggest that we infer blindly largely because the problem guides the structure of the inquiry. “[I]nference,” he says, “takes absent things as being in certain real continuum with present things, so that our attitude toward the latter is bound up with our reaction to the former as parts of the same situation” (MW 8: LJP, 71).

In the context of his work on aesthetics, Dewey uses the term “imagination” instead of inference. For him, the solution to be reached in light of a given context will often occur through a transmutation and extension of experience. The imagination reconstructs and broadens experience, thus giving a more complete representation of ends than are suggested by the problematic environment in which we find ourselves. The reconstruction is not merely on discreet happenings—the present situation—but more dramatically, the funded nature of the present so that the end-product of the imagination has a career both in the present situation and what precedes it.⁴¹ This is what allows us to defend against claims that our proposals or hypotheses are mere illusions, unrealistic or inattentive to evidence. Indeed, for Dewey, novel possibilities

become “conscious, a matter of perception, only when meanings enter [them] that are derived from prior experiences. Imagination is the only gateway through which these meanings find their way into [the] present” (LW 10: AE, 270–76, at 276).

The confirmation of phases (iii) and (iv) rests with stage (v), that of further observation and testing, to which Dewey places particular emphasis. “*What is important is that every inference be a tested inference; or that we discriminate between beliefs that rest upon tested evidenced and those that do not, and be accordingly on our guard as to the kind and degree of assent or belief that is justified*” (LW 8: HWTb, 192 [original emphasis]). We are thus warranted in asserting a belief, the accuracy of a proposed plan, or the appropriateness of this or that virtue if it settles the experience that stimulated the inquiry. We should note that in certain cases we will have suspended other beliefs that are ancillary to the hypothesis tested. That is to say, there will be an array of factors that we will need to take for granted but which contextualize the problem and proposed hypothesis under consideration. In this case, acceptance of a hypothesis means that it settles the problem, coheres with other settled and suspended beliefs, and can potentially withstand new experiences and argument if they arise. This last point merely carries through Dewey’s initial commitment to experience as the beginning and terminal point for inquiry, where terminal denotes a potentially different temporal moment than the one in which the hypothesis originally settled the matter.

We can now address a potential criticism that threatens to undermine the argument that Dewey transforms and thus moves beyond Aristotle. The suggestion is that Aristotle specifically wants to distinguish between cases in which one employs inquiry for the acquisition of some skill to achieve some given end for example, and a situation in which the end itself is determined in the process of deliberation. If these two are collapsed, we then risk obscuring the non-codifiable nature of *phronèsis*. If applied to human action, it implies that in living forward the purpose of human existence must be as fixed as the goal of acquiring and using a skill. Here the distinction between *phronèsis* and *technè* returns, but which points once more to the subtlety of Dewey’s understanding of inquiry.

There is an interesting line of argument presented by Julia Annas in her *expansion* of Aristotle’s thought for identifying the logical structure that underwrites skill with virtue that Dewey anticipates in his formal account of inquiry.⁴² As Annas writes, “to consider our *telos* as a fixed point to guide our thoughts about the virtues is to get matters wrong way round. It is not the object of the skill but the structure and unification of the skilled reasoning that is the crucial point of analogy for ethical reasoning.”⁴³ This much Dewey suggests:

If thinking is the art by which knowledge is practiced, then the materials with which thinking deals may be supposed, *by analogy with the other arts*, to take on in consequence special shapes. The man who is making a boat will give wood a form which it did not have, in order that it may serve the purposes to which it is to be put. Thinking may then be supposed to give its material the form which will make it amenable to its purposes—attaining knowledge . . . (MW 8: LJP, 65–66 [emphasis added])

There is a clear sense in which the skill can easily be taught and appropriated, but which in no way seems to depend on the practical intelligence of the maker. But this wrongly imports, argue Dewey and Annas, the determinate end back into the intellectual structure that is necessary to achieve the end and subsequently bring it to fruition again. If an instrument made to sail the boat-maker safely from one shore to another looked very much like what we call a boat, but seemed to sink immediately upon entering the water, we would scratch our heads in bewilderment. For Dewey, this is because we wrongly believe that the construction of objects such as boats require “mere repetition or literal loyalty” to a model, and thus obscure the extent to which the individual must “take account of” or “reckon with” factors that are not mere repetition, such as assessing, for example, “the grain and strength of the wood” (MW 8: LJP, 67). This formulation immediately prompts us to ask: ‘How much should we take account of?’ or ‘To what degree must we reckon with various factors?’ If I understand Dewey correctly, the answer to this question will often take the form: ‘You have to see for yourself.’ Here we can make us of and slightly amend Annas’ language in favor of Dewey: “As with any skill, we can give rules to help the learner, but obviously there is no foolproof recipe or guarantee of success. And so with [the practice of inquiry]—success is not mechanical; there are many incalculable failures of temperament or intellect that may thwart the right decision.” Understanding this point, keeps us from being tempted to see in Dewey the “ideal of a purely mechanical decision-making procedure, one which would do the work for us and leave no role to individual deliberation.”⁴⁴

We can draw two main points from the considerations above. First, the emergence of inquiry need not imply a substantive character to the end as the example of boat-making suggest. It need only claim that the assessment of the end implies that its career begin and terminate in experience, the result of which often means that the agent is doing much more than merely following a formal decision-making procedure. Second, this does not rule out those cases in which the means used to settle some problem impacts, transforms, and define what determinate judgment we make.⁴⁵ Recall that the character of the agent and response from the environment impacts considerations and factors

at various stages of the overall inquiry, so that a subclass of outcomes will often reflexively impact the original intentions and outlook of the agent. Indeed, Dewey says as much, invoking the image of our moral lives: “The more completely the notion of the model is formed outside and irrespective of the specific conditions which the situation of action presents, the less intelligent is the act.” Such individuals will seem insensitive, as lacking sympathy and being dogmatic. Their judgments will seem uninformed. In such cases, Dewey says, “[t]he man who is not accessible to such change in the case of moral situations has ceased to be a moral agent and become a reacting machine” (MW 8: LJP, 38–39). His claim is obviously wide enough to account for reflection about what is to count *as* the end. But this requires a much richer narrative about the communities involved, their ethical and political commitments, and willingness to subject their decisions to scrutiny and revision. I say in brief, that for Dewey this last point immediately signals that whatever our ends are they are subject to epistemic constraints, which contain normative implications that can potentially transform how we navigate through our political and ethical landscapes.

Conclusion

The point of this essay was to sketch another way to read Dewey’s account of inquiry and its proper functioning. As shown, inquiry is not merely a formal procedure, but a disposition whose functioning aims to be responsive to just those considerations that a particular situation demands. This sensitivity, as we have observed, forms a crucial feature of human action *in toto*. As such, Dewey’s conception of inquiry is contextually sensitive, imaginatively rich, and discursively open so that the ends of inquiry are subject to assessment and revision. This humbles the agent—a fact that is not usually associated with Dewey’s philosophy. But I would urge that we work very hard to resist reading his conception of inquiry in any other way and we can do this if his philosophy of action from which it proceeds is kept in the foreground. Only then can the task of genuinely appreciating his political and ethical philosophy begin, with the hopes that it will help us plot a *safer* course though the human condition.

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NOTES

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encouragement. An earlier version of this essay was presented at the political theory workshop at Yale University in 2005.

2. See James E. Block, *Nation of Agents* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2002), chap. 13.

3. Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), chap. 3, at 101–102; John Patrick Diggins, *The Promise of Pragmatism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), chaps. 5–7, especially at 299–305; Patrick J. Deneen, *Democratic Faith* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), chaps. 1–2, 6.

4. See in this regard, James Campbell, *Understand John Dewey: Nature and Cooperative Intelligence* (Chicago: Open Court, 1995), pt. 2; Larry A. Hickman, *John Dewey's Pragmatic Technology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992); Michael Eldridge, *Transforming Experience: John Dewey's Cultural Instrumentalism* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1998), chap. 2; Robert Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991); Matthew Festenstein, *Pragmatism and Political Theory: From Dewey to Rorty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); William R. Caspary, *Dewey on Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000); John R. Shook, *Dewey's Empirical Theory of Knowledge and Reality* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2000).

5. In saying that Dewey's reformism is chastened, I do not intend to undercut its radical character with respect to reconstructing political and social conditions. My point is to emphasize that for Dewey reform is a socio-historical possibility, but does not inhere in the nature of things.

6. The exception in this regard includes: Richard Bernstein, *Praxis and Action* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), chap. III; cf. Thomas Alexander, "John Dewey and the Roots of Democratic Imagination," in *Recovering Pragmatism's Voice: The Classical Tradition, Rorty, and the Philosophy of Communication*, eds. Lenore Langsdorf and Andrew R. Smith (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 131–54; Hans Joas, *The Creativity of Action*, trans. Jeremy Gaines and Paul Keast (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), chap. 2.

7. For another thinker that reads Dewey as transforming Aristotelian insights although with different aims in mind see, Hickman, *John Dewey's Pragmatic Technology*.

8. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. W. D. Ross in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), VI.3, 1139b15–35. For helpful works on which I partly rely see, Joseph Dunne, *Back to the Rough Ground: 'Phronesis' and 'Techne' in Modern Philosophy and in Aristotle* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), pt. 2; Julia Annas, *The Morality of Happiness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 73–91; J. L. Ackrill, "Aristotle on Action," in *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 93–101; Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, "The Place of Contemplation in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*," in *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, 377–395; Martha Nussbaum, *Fragility of Goodness*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), chap. 10; cf. 373–378; John McDowell, *Mind, Value, and Reality* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), pt. I. I use the word "partly" because there are revisionist aspects to some of these readings of Aristotle that I have not endorsed in the context of my reading.

9. All quotes from Dewey are taken from his Collected Works and are cited intertextually unless otherwise noted. The notation is as follows: (volume number: text, page number). I abbreviate the volume notation as follows: EW = *The Early Works, 1882–1898*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, IL: University of Southern Illinois Press, 1969–1972); MW = *The Middle Works, 1899–1924*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, IL: University of Southern Illinois Press, 1976–1983); LW = *The Later Works, 1925–1953*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, IL: University of Southern Illinois Press, 1984–1991). I abbreviate texts as follows: RC = “The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology,” LJP = “The Logic of Judgments of Practice,” IDP = “The Influence of Darwinism on Philosophy,” HWTa = *How We Think*, P = “Progress,” DE = *Democracy and Education*, NRP = “The Need for Recovery of Philosophy,” RIP = *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, HNC = *Human Nature and Conduct*, EN = *Experience and Nature*, PP = *Publics and Its Problems*, QC = *The Quest for Certainty*, E = *Ethics*, HWTb = *How We Think*, AE = *Art as Experience*, L = *Logic: A Theory of Inquiry*.

10. Raymond D. Boisvert, *Dewey’s Metaphysics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1988), chap. 2; Campbell, *Understanding John Dewey*, chap. 2; Shook, *Dewey’s Empirical*, 199–202.

11. Aristotle, *Ethics*, VI, X.7–9.

12. *Ibid.*, VI.3, 1139a–VI.5.

13. *Ibid.*, I.3.

14. *Ibid.*, VI.7, 1141a20–b9; cf. X.7–9.

15. Only rarely do we attribute wisdom to judgment-specific actions that do not have fruitful results and this is usually in cases where the realization of the judgment’s content is beyond our control. Here Dewey uses the example of the surgeon, so that we “would not say that the act of a surgeon is necessarily to be condemned because an operation results in the death of a patient . . . morally his act was beneficent, although unsuccessful from causes which he could not control” (LW 7: E, 173–74). Notwithstanding, Dewey’s point nonetheless rejects Aristotle’s contention that: “In the variable are included both things made and things done; making and acting are different (for their nature we treat even the discussions outside our school as reliable); so that the *reasoned state of capacity to act is different from the reasoned state of capacity to make*” (Aristotle, *Ethics*, VI.3, 1140a [emphasis added]).

16. Robert B. Brandom, “The Pragmatist Enlightenment (and its Problematic Semantics),” *European Journal of Philosophy* 12.1 (2004): 2; Ralph Ketcham, *The Idea of Democracy in the Modern Era* (Lawrence, KA: University of Kansas Press, 2004), chaps. 4–6. I recognize that the origins of this experimental approach precede Darwin. For Dewey, however, experimentalism in the context of Darwin’s biological paradigm solidifies an important way of understanding inquiry.

17. Cf. Aristotle’s contrary remark, *Ethics*, VI.5, 1140a30.

18. For a helpful essay that equally emphasize this point see, Caspary, “‘One and the Same’: John Dewey’s Thesis of Unity of Method of Ethics and Science,” *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 39.3 (2003): 445–68.

19. In emphasizing the importance of Darwin, I believe my account is consistent with John Shook’s insistence on the priority of Hegel to Dewey’s philosophy, since I am not trying to explain “the transformation of his absolute idealism into instrumentalist empiricism” or answer the question, “when did Dewey stop being an idealist and become a pragmatist?” (Shook, *Dewey’s Empirical Theory*, chaps. 1

and 5, at 202 and 210). The settlement of this issue is found in a remark of John Herman Randall: "John Dewey is a cardinal illustration of the fact that Darwin seemed to bring biological, that is, 'scientific' support to an essential Hegelian 'mode of thinking.' Darwin forced Dewey to reconstruct many of the Hegelian ideas, to be sure: he compelled a basic pluralizing of Hegel, and a putting of his thought upon an experimental basis" (Randall, "The Changing Impact of Darwin on Philosophy," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 22.4 [1961], 450). Even here, it should be noted that despite the movement of Spirit in Hegel, he does not have an understanding of the naturalistic mechanics of evolution.

20. Aristotle, *Ethics*, I.3, 1094b20–23.

21. The uncertainty implied by "if" is very important. Dewey is clear that after abandoning Hegelian idealism, his interest in harmonizing the disparate features of social life remained, but it had to proceed on "empirical grounds" (see "Biography of John Dewey," ed. Jane M. Dewey, in *The Philosophy of John Dewey*, ed. Paul A. Schilpp [Evanston, IL: Northwestern University, 1939], 18). Dewey uses the term "empirical grounds" to indicate the experimental core of his thinking, the result of which makes clear that while reconciliation may be stipulated as a formal goal of political and moral conflict the possibility of achieving it is uncertain. This point seems to escape what is an otherwise excellent book on pragmatism. See Eric MacGilvray, *Reconstructing Public Reason* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), chap. 5, at 135–36.

22. MacGilvray, *Reconstructing Public Reason*, 109; cf. James Bohman, "Realizing Deliberative Democracy as a Mode of Inquiry: Pragmatism, Social Facts, and Normative Theory," *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 18.1 (2004): 23–43.

23. West, *American*, 226.

24. Raymond D. Boisvert, "The Nemesis of Necessity: Tragedy's Challenge to Deweyan Pragmatism," in *Dewey Reconfigured: Essays on Deweyan Pragmatism*, eds. Casey Haskins and David I. Seiple (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 158; cf. Deneen, *Democratic Faith*, 75–77.

25. That Boisvert would say this of Dewey in the first instance is very strange, since he writes elsewhere: "Unlike the philosophers he criticizes, Dewey does not begin with a prior commitment to achieving absolute certainty. Human knowing is provisional, incomplete, and probabilistic. We rarely act with the absolute security that our choices are the absolutely appropriate ones" (Boisvert, *John Dewey: Rethinking Our Time* [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998], 16; cf. 25). And in the essay of his to which I referred he often speaks of Dewey incorporating "elements central to the tragic," but he then concludes that "[w]hereas the tragedian realizes that mind will always be in some ways blind to the multifarious working of necessity, Dewey's reformist faith leads him to lean in the opposite direction. For him mind can come to dominate necessity" (Boisvert, "Nemesis of Necessity," 163). That mind can come to dominate necessity does not mean it will. This claim seems to me completely consistent with acknowledging the fact that we are blind to the multifarious workings of necessity, which may intervene to our disadvantage. But perhaps I am getting ahead of myself.

26. West, *American*, 100–02; cf. Boisvert, "The Nemesis of Necessity," 151–68.

27. Diggins, *Promise of Pragmatism*, 304; cf. Block, *A Nation of Agents*, chap. 13; Deneen, *Democratic Faith*, 75–77, 174–78.

28. In his recent book, *Democratic Faith*, Patrick Deneen seems to argue that because Dewey does not accept original sin or something like this account then we

should not take seriously his commitment to uncertainty and doubt. Thus he writes: “Herein lies the paradox: Dewey, and those like Dewey who embrace ‘doubt’ as the fundamental ‘antifoundation’ of modern politics, ultimately rest that doubt on a deeper foundation of faith in the capacity of humanity to fundamentally master its environment . . . The embrace of ‘doubt,’ the rejection of ‘certainty,’ rests on a curious absence of doubt about human abilities and the potential for politics to resolve all challenges” (Deneen, *Democratic Faith*, 185). To begin, the relationship between human abilities and politics is mistaken precisely because Dewey thought conflict was usually the stimulus to politics (see Caspary, *Dewey on Democracy*, chaps. 1 and 5). Politics, for him, is a constant and never-ending process of managing and negotiating our common arrangements through specific problems. For our purposes, what we should focus on is the alternative position to the one described here by Deneen. If we reject the position that we can potentially mitigate the impact of contingency given what we know of our history, then are we to accept the claim that we are so fundamentally depraved that managing and negotiating our world is denied to us? But I am unclear, as Dewey would be, on what basis we should accept this latter position, and why accepting the former position precludes us from being humble regarding our interventions in the world. As Dewey says in *Human Nature and Conduct*: “Humility is more demanded at our moments of triumph than at those of failure. For humility is not caddish self-depreciation. It is the sense of our slight inability even with our best intelligence and effort to command events; a sense of our dependence upon forces that go their way without our wish and plan” (MW 14: HNC, 200).

29. The importance for Dewey of narrative to character and action is quite similar to contemporary thinkers see, Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), chap. 15; Owen Flanagan, *Varieties of Moral Personality* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 148–58.

30. See William James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (New York: Longman, Green and Company, 1912/1922), 10.

31. Indeed, as he says later on: “Men who devote themselves to thinking are likely to be unusually unthinking in some respects, as for example in immediate personal relationships. A man to whom exact scholarship is an absorbing pursuit may be more than ordinarily vague in ordinary matters. Humility and impartiality may be shown in a specialized field, and pettiness and arrogance in dealing with other persons” (MW 14: HNC, 137).

32. Aristotle, *Ethics*, VI.4, 1140b20, VI.10, 1143a8–15.

33. *Ibid.*, III.3, 1112a30–b13 (emphasis added), VI.5, 1140a30–35; cf. Dewey, MW 14: HNC, chaps. 16–17; LW 7: E, 273–74.

34. Although Dewey does not highlight this point consistently, it would be a mistake to think that communicative social interaction is not central to the proper functioning of inquiry. For more on this point see, Steven Fesmire, *John Dewey and Moral Imagination: Pragmatism in Ethics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 81–82.

35. Cf. McDowell, *Mind, Value, and Reality*, 67; Sabina Lovibond, *Ethical Formation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), pt. 1. It is important to note in this regard that although sympathy is used in this context to denote what appears to be solitary reflection, it would be mistaken to conclude on this point. Dewey intends for sympathy to function during dialogical exchanges—that is, it

partly makes us receptive to the other as well as capable of understanding their perspective.

36. I am borrowing some language here, although not inconsistent with Dewey's position (See MW 14: HNC, chap. 14; LW 1: EN, chap. 5). See Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 231–37; cf. Brandom, *Making it Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), xiv, 245–55.

37. This reading both borrows from and puts Dewey in proximity to McDowell and Lovibond, especially when the latter writes: "Such evaluative distinctions suggest the further thought that there is such a thing as a *best possible* condition of the individual deliberator with respect to the appreciation of objective reasons . . ." (Lovibond, *Ethical Formation*, 8; cf. LW 7: E, 270–71). But both she and McDowell are unwilling to extend this beyond the ethical domain, remaining within the horizon of an antiquated Aristotelianism.

38. Cited in Norwood Russell Hanson, *Patterns of Discovery: An Inquiry into the Conceptual Foundations of Science* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1958), 85.

39. *Ibid.*, original emphasis.

40. Cf. Joas, *Creativity of Action*, 133.

41. Cf. *ibid.*, 126–44. For other works that emphasize the importance of imagination and aesthetic elements to Dewey's account of inquiry, see Alexander, *John Dewey's Theory of Art, Experience and Nature: The Horizons of Feeling* (Albany: State University of New York, 1987), chap. 5, "Dewey and the Metaphysical Imagination," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 28.2 (1992): 203–15; Fesmire, *John Dewey and Moral Imagination*, chap. 4.

42. I say expansion because Annas is clear that she goes beyond Aristotle at this juncture of her argument. See Annas, *Morality of Happiness*, 67–73.

43. *Ibid.*, 71.

44. *Ibid.*, 71–72.

45. For more on the means-ends relationship in Dewey see, Eldridge, *Transforming Experience*, chap. 4.