

# **John Dewey's *Experience and Nature***

## **A Reader's Guide for the Centennial**

By Matthew J. Brown and Andrii Leonov

Editorial Assistance by Danica Jenck and Pamela Cheak



SOUTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY  
**CENTER FOR  
DEWEY STUDIES**

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Carbondale, IL  
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## Introduction

As 2025 marks the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of John Dewey's *Experience and Nature*, the Center for Dewey Studies at Southern Illinois University Carbondale has developed this reader's guide to support engagement with the book. The purpose of this guide is to provide chapter-by-chapter resources for individuals and reading groups who want to read *Experience and Nature* for the first time, as well as for those who are already familiar with the book and wish to revisit it in order to gain a deeper understanding of it.

Dewey is one of the most well-known philosophers, educators, and public intellectuals in American history, and recognition of his significance is on the rise. Dewey's *Experience and Nature* provides the definitive statement of Dewey's "empirical naturalism" (or "naturalistic humanism"), a metaphysical approach that recommends learning from the sciences without falling into reductionism or scientism. Dewey's *Experience and Nature* attempts to overcome the tradition of philosophical theories that set humans against nature, society, and, ultimately, themselves. The work explores philosophical methods, the metaphysics of nature, and the philosophy of mind; it also situates Dewey's theories of knowledge, meaning, art, and value within a naturalist-humanist metaphysics. Though long an object of study among Dewey scholars, the book's significance for contemporary thought in a variety of fields remains underappreciated. *Experience and Nature* has much to offer contemporary discussions in philosophy, history, literary and aesthetic theory, psychology, and anthropology.

This guide is divided into 13 weeks, most of which are focused on single chapters of *Experience and Nature*. For each week, we recommend additional readings that provide further insight into the focal reading; a brief discussion of the background of and a summary of the chapter; a list of major concepts introduced in the chapter, which you might attempt to define; and a list of questions for discussion for groups or individual reflection, as a prompt to deeper engagement.

In this guide, references to Dewey's work are to the comprehensive critical edition, *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882-1953*, edited by Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969-1991, 2008; electronic edition published Charlottesville, Virginia, USA: IntelLex Corporation, 2003). The *Collected Works* are published in three series: *The Early Works* (EW), *The Middle Works* (MW), and *The Later Works* (LW). Citations reference these series designations, followed by volume and page number. "(LW 1: 14)," for example, refers to *The Later Works*, volume 1, page 14. We recommend using the edition of *Experience and Nature* found in *The Later Works of John Dewey* volume 1.

# Table of Contents

Introduction .....	1
Table of Contents .....	2
Background: The Spirit of Dewey’s Philosophy .....	3
Week 1: Dewey’s Earlier Work on Metaphysics .....	4
Week 2: Experience and Philosophic Method (1925) .....	6
Week 3: Experience and Philosophic Method (1929) .....	8
Week 4: Existence as Precarious and as Stable (Chapter 2).....	10
Week 5: Nature, Ends and Histories (Chapter 3) .....	12
Week 6: Nature, Means and Knowledge (Chapter 4).....	14
Week 7: Nature, Communication and Meaning (Chapter 5) .....	16
Week 8: Nature, Mind and the Subject (Chapter 6).....	18
Week 9: Nature, Life and Body-Mind (Chapter 7) .....	20
Week 10: Existence, Ideas and Consciousness (Chapter 8) .....	22
Week 11: Experience, Nature and Art (Chapter 9).....	24
Week 12: Existence, Value and Criticism (Chapter 10) .....	26
Week 13: Culture and Nature: The Unfinished 3rd Edition Introduction .....	28

# Background: The Spirit of Dewey's Philosophy

## Main Readings

- John Dewey. 1909. "The Influence of Darwinism on Philosophy" (MW 4)
- John Dewey. 1925. "The Development of American Pragmatism" (LW 2)
- John Dewey. 1930. "From Absolutism to Experimentalism" (LW 5)

## Recommended Readings

- David Hildebrand. 2024. "John Dewey." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2024 Edition), edited by Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/dewey/>
- Richard Field. n.d. "John Dewey (1859—1952)." *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. <https://iep.utm.edu/john-dewey/>

## Background and Summary

These readings help to introduce readers to the general spirit of Dewey's philosophy. Those with no background in Dewey's body of work or the tradition of philosophical pragmatism may want to spend some time with this background prior to jumping into *Experience and Nature*. The texts in the main readings section present Dewey's own take on his philosophy, his influences, and his own intellectual autobiography. The recommended readings are encyclopedia that serve as a general overview of Dewey's philosophy. Most reading groups will probably want to leave this as background material, but some may want to schedule a "Week Zero" to discuss these texts.

## Questions for Discussion

1. What is philosophical pragmatism and how is it different from the use of "pragmatism" in common parlance?
2. How is American pragmatism in general related to Darwinism and other currents of nineteenth century thought?
3. How does Dewey's philosophy differ from other versions of American pragmatism? How does it relate to the aforementioned currents in nineteenth century thought?

# Week 1: Dewey's Earlier Work on Metaphysics

## Main Readings

- John Dewey. 1882. "The Metaphysical Assumptions of Materialism" (EW 1)
- John Dewey. 1905. "The Postulate of Immediate Empiricism" (MW 3)
- John Dewey. 1915. "The Subject-Matter of Metaphysical Inquiry" (MW 8)

## Recommended Readings

- Paul Benjamin Cherlin. 2023. "Prefigurations of Dewey's Metaphysics: 1903–1916." *John Dewey's Metaphysical Theory*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.

## Background and Summary

This week's readings are dedicated to earlier works by Dewey on topics and themes related to *Experience and Nature*. These articles from three different periods of Dewey's career touch on metaphysical themes that he revisited in *Experience and Nature*, though often using different terminology, making different background assumptions, and pursuing somewhat different arguments. One can see precursors of some of the ideas and strategies from the later work in these earlier articles, and they provide a helpful background to *Experience and Nature*.

### "The Metaphysical Assumptions of Materialism" (1882)

This is Dewey's first published article, written prior to starting his graduate program at Johns Hopkins. The paper comes from what is sometimes referred to as his "Kantian" phase, and it is largely under the influence of his undergraduate teacher, H.A.P. Torrey. The argument is highly schematic and, arguably, somewhat juvenile.

While clever at points, it hardly achieves the nuance and insight of Dewey's mature writings. It does, however, display some very interesting features that will continue to define Dewey's work. First, the insistence on the entanglement of metaphysical-ontological questions with epistemological-methodological considerations remains a feature of Dewey's thought throughout his career and is widely regarded as a key feature of philosophical pragmatism. Second, Dewey's insistence that we not ignore the position of the *knower* is a precursor to his later insistence on experience, as well as his view that we should deny the experienced qualities of things through philosophical argument. On the other hand, Dewey's flirtation with commitments to substantialism about the mind and the transcendental Ego are not retained in his later thought.

## “The Postulate of Immediate Empiricism” (1905)

This essay is widely regarded as one of Dewey’s most significant, and it is also one of the least well-understood works of his middle period. In this essay, we see Dewey’s distinctive anti-dualistic thinking, as he tries to thread a middle way between realism and idealism. He does so by postulating an early precursor of the “empirical-denotative method” of *Experience and Nature*, the titular “postulate of immediate empiricism.” The postulate is that anything and everything *is* what it is experienced *as*. Everything experienced in some way exists, and the experience of the thing is direct. There is no mere appearance set against reality. He clarifies that this means that the nature of the experienced thing depends on the context of the experience, including the experiencer, which suggests some form of relativism. He also distinguishes between what things are *experienced as*, what they are *known as*, and what they *truly* are.

## “The Subject-Matter of Metaphysical Inquiry” (1915)

This essay lays out a program for metaphysical inquiry that very closely relates to the program carried out by *Experience and Nature*. The essay returns in some ways to the themes of the 1882 “Metaphysical Assumptions” essay, responding to an article comparing mechanism and vitalism in the philosophy of biology. Dewey contrasts the aims of metaphysics with the aims of science, where the former is held to be legitimately concerned with the “ultimate traits” found in every sort of inquiry or experience. This legitimate aim for metaphysics is distinguished from the traditional conception of metaphysics as the search for “ultimate origins” and “ultimate causes.”

## Major Concepts

- Pragmatism
- Instrumentalism
- Immediate Empiricism
- Naturalism
- Materialism
- Metaphysics
- Subject-Matter
- Inquiry

## Questions for Discussion

1. What is Dewey’s “immediate empiricism” and how is it related to James’s “radical empiricism”?
2. What does Dewey mean when he says “Things are what they are experienced as”?
3. How does the search for the “ultimate traits” differ from the search for “ultimate origins” and “ultimate causes” such that the former escapes Dewey’s criticisms of the latter?

## Week 2: Experience and Philosophic Method (1925)

### Main Reading

- “Experience and Philosophic Method” – 1<sup>st</sup> (1925) edition version of Chapter 1, found as Appendix 2 of *The Later Works of John Dewey* (LW 1: 366-393)

### Recommended Readings

- Thomas Alexander. 2004. “Dewey’s Denotative-Empirical Method: A Thread Through the Labyrinth.” *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 18(3): 248–56.
- S. Morris Eames. 2003. “Experience and Philosophical Method in John Dewey.” In *Experience and Value. Essays on John Dewey and Pragmatic Naturalism*, Elizabeth R. Eames and Richard W. Field, eds. SIU Press, pp. 14-28.

### Background and Summary

This week’s reading is the first edition of chapter 1 from *Experience and Nature* that was published in 1925, which was completely reworked for the second edition in 1929 (the main difference between the two editions of the book is the replacement of this chapter and a new preface). Although this version quickly became seen by Dewey himself as inadequate, some Dewey scholars see some merit of the original version over the revisions. Reading the first version of the first chapter before proceeding to the 1929 version can thus help better orient us to Dewey’s project in *Experience and Nature*.

In the 1925 version of chapter 1, Dewey describes the notion of “experience” as an *empirical method* in contrast with the conceptions of experience found in introspective psychology and traditional philosophy. He describes two “avenues of approach” within the empirical method, one that begins from “experience in gross,” the other that starts with the “refined selective products” of science, though each approach works back towards the other. One can’t also help but notice that Dewey’s account of the empirical method he proposes to use in the book has some resemblance to the tradition of *phenomenology* (a European philosophical tradition also focused on experience), though here cast in explicitly naturalistic terms.

In this chapter, Dewey discusses what he famously calls “*the philosophic fallacy*,” which will become one of the main themes in the book. Dewey



also makes a reference here to what he calls “the moral fallacy,” and it is unclear whether these two “fallacies” are separate or one and the same.

## Major Concepts

- Experience
- Empirical method
- Denotative method
- Weasel word
- Double-barreled
- *The philosophic fallacy*
- The moral fallacy

## Questions for Discussion

1. Why does Dewey call “experience” a “weasel word”?
2. What is the *empirical method* that Dewey recommends, and how does it provide insight into the metaphysical theory of nature or the world?
3. What does Dewey mean by “denotation” and “denotative method”?
4. What is the appropriate role for *choice* in philosophical method?
5. What is “*the philosophic fallacy*?” Is “the moral fallacy” another description for the same problem or a separate issue?

# Week 3: Experience and Philosophic Method (1929)

## Main Readings

- John Dewey, “Preface to the Second Edition” (LW 1: 4-10)
- John Dewey, “Experience and Philosophic Method”– 2<sup>nd</sup> (1929) edition version of Chapter 1 (LW 1: 11-42)

## Recommended Readings

- David Hildebrand. 2011. “Could Experience be More than a Method? Dewey’s Practical Starting Point.” In *Pragmatist Epistemologies*, Roberto Frega & Roberto Brigati, eds. Lanham: Lexington Books.
- S. Morris Eames. 2003. “Primary Experience in the Philosophy of John Dewey.” In *Experience and Value. Essays on John Dewey and Pragmatic Naturalism*, Elizabeth R. Eames and Richard W. Field, eds. SIU Press, pp. 29-38.
- Andrii Leonov. 2022. “Dewey’s Denotative Method: A Critical Approach.” *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy* 14(1).

## Background and Summary

In the newly added Preface, Dewey lays out the general structure of the book as well as the short description of each of its chapters. Dewey emphasizes empirical methodology as an important starting point of philosophical investigation and its essential connection to scientific practice, the centrality of *stability* and *precariousness* as generic traits of existence, instrumentalism, philosophy of mind and language, a naturalistic theory of value, and the idea of continuity.

The completely revised chapter 1 has the same aims as its predecessor: to introduce the book and explain the method it will follow, the empirical method or method of experience; however, it pursues these aims in very different ways than the original version. In the Preface, Dewey tells us that the earlier version of chapter 1 was confused as well as overly technical rather than introductory.

Dewey begins by naming the philosophy to be presented in the book alternatively “empirical naturalism,” “naturalistic empiricism,” and “naturalistic humanism.” He tells us that the aim of this work is, “To discover ... general features of experienced things and to interpret their significance for a philosophic theory of the universe,” a project that he likens to science but on a

“liberal scale,” that is, a broader project than the technical work of the special sciences.

Unlike the 1925 version, here one can find an explicit distinction between the two types of experience: “primary experience,” the experience of practical engagement with things that are simply had, used, or enjoyed; and “secondary or reflective experience,” the experience of reflectively thinking, knowing, or theorizing about things. Dewey thinks that science is successful because, unlike philosophy, it has successfully employed an *empirical method* which starts with problems found in primary experience, proceeds to the *theoretical* level, and then always *goes back* to that very practical realm where it started from. But philosophy tends not to return to the everyday or practical matters that furnish its material in the first place, and thus it is always stuck in the nets of a dry and unproductive “intellectualism.” Dewey offers the empirical or denotative method as a way of reforming philosophy modeled on the success of science.

## Major Concepts

- Continuity
- Empirical naturalism / naturalistic empiricism / naturalistic humanism
- Primary experience
- Secondary experience
- Appearance
- Reality
- Intellectualism
- Selective emphasis

## Questions for Discussion

1. How does Dewey see the relationship between *experience* and *existence*, and how does he connect this with familiar ideas of *appearance* and *reality* or *subjectivity* and *objectivity*?
2. How does Dewey draw the distinction between *primary experience* and *secondary experience*? Is it a strict dichotomy? Is it a valid and useful distinction?
3. What does Dewey mean by “denotative method” and is there any difference between Dewey’s presentation of it in chapter 1 (1925) and chapter 1 (1929)?
4. What are the other main differences between the first edition (1925) and the second edition (1929) of chapter 1 from *Experience and Nature*? Which version do you find clearer? Which version presents a more compelling philosophical program?

## Week 4: Existence as Precarious and as Stable (Chapter 2)

### Main reading

- John Dewey, “Existence as Precarious and Stable” (LW 1: 43-69)

### Recommended readings

- Richard Bernstein. 1961. “John Dewey’s Metaphysics of Experience.” *The Journal of Philosophy* 58(1): 5-14.
- Shaun O'Dwyer. 2004. “The Metaphysics of Existence Rehabilitated.” *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 40(4): 711-730.
- Paul Benjamin Cherlin. 2023. “Generic Traits of Existence.” *John Dewey's Metaphysical Theory*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.

### Background and Summary

This chapter’s title is very similar to the first of three lectures that Dewey gave in 1922 as the inaugural *Paul Carus Lectures*, sponsored by the Foundation dedicated to philosopher and publisher Paul Carus (1852-1919). That lecture was titled, “Existence as Stable and Precarious.” While the content of the lectures is unknown, it is reasonable to assume significant overlap.

As Dewey says in Preface, this chapter explains the starting point of the book, which is the mixture of perilous and settled that characterize our experienced world. He finds evidence for these very general features of experience in myth and religion, in diverse schools of philosophy from ancient times to his contemporaries, and in ethics, art, and science. These are not just subjective features of our experience; Dewey argues that these elements of our experience disclose or are best explained by their being features of nature itself. Existence as such is described as a mixture of stable and precarious—existential features that gives rise to both philosophy and metaphysics. Here he restates the aim of the book as search for “the generic traits of existence,” and stability and precariousness form then the first two such traits, or the first dyad-structured trait, precariousness-stability.

## Major concepts

- Generic traits of existence
- Precarious
- Stable
- Event
- Necessity
- Philosophy (as a technical term)
- Metaphysics
- Wisdom

## Questions for discussion

1. Why does Dewey begin the chapter with a discussion of *culture*?
2. What does Dewey mean by “precarious” and “stable”? How do precariousness and stability relate to one another? Is any existence completely precarious or stable?
3. What aspects of experience disclose the existence of precariousness? What aspects of experience disclose the existence of stability?
4. What is the difference Dewey draws between philosophy and metaphysics? What role do these two pursuits play in *Experience and Nature*?
5. Do you see the method that Dewey describes in chapter 1 being applied here? What insight can you draw about the method from the way it is applied (or not) in this chapter?

## Week 5: Nature, Ends and Histories (Chapter 3)

### Main reading

- John Dewey, “Nature, Ends and Histories” (LW 1: 70-100)

### Recommended readings

- Leonard J. Waks. 1999. “The Means-Ends Continuum and the Reconciliation of Science and Art in the Later Works of John Dewey.” *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, 35(3): 595-611.
- Todd M. Lekan. 1998. “Ideals, Practical Reason, and Pessimism: Dewey's Reconstruction of Means and Ends.” *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, 34(1): 113-147.
- Aldo Visalberghi. 1953. “Remarks on Dewey's Conception of Ends and Means.” *The Journal of Philosophy*, 50(25): 737-753.

### Background and Summary

This chapter is likely based on the second of Dewey's *Carus Lectures*, originally titled, “Existence, Ends, and Appreciation.” Dewey begins by emphasizing the significance of “direct enjoyment” in human experience and the rich diversity of human activities that reflect this enjoyment. He points out that philosophers have rarely attended to these enjoyments, and when they have—as with the utilitarians—how inadequate their theorizing of this aspect of experience has been. This aspect of our experience discloses the quality of *finality* in existence.

As the previous chapter emphasizes the generic traits of precarious-stable in existence, this chapter presents the traits of the *qualitative*, immediacy or finality (ends), and historicity or temporality (histories). If one understands the generic traits as dyadic, the main trait for this chapter might be described as temporality-finality or temporality-immediacy. Dewey argues here that mistakes or one-sidedness concerning these generic traits is the root of many key philosophical problems, including the mind-body problem and various other traditional philosophical problems in metaphysics and epistemology.

## Major concepts

- Qualitative
- Immediacy
- Finality
- Natural event
- Natural ends
- Ends-in-view
- Histories
- Affairs
- Temporal quality
- Temporal order

## Questions for discussion

1. If direct enjoyment is the feature of experience that discloses finality or immediacy, what feature of experience discloses historicity or temporality?
2. What is “epistemological problem” for Dewey, and how were the Greeks saved from it?
3. What is the origin of Aristotle’s four causes according to Dewey?
4. What part of ancient metaphysics does Dewey want to reaffirm? Which aspect does he argue was rightly rejected by modern science?
5. What is the difference between “natural ends” and “ends-in-view?”

## Week 6: Nature, Means and Knowledge (Chapter 4)

### Main reading

- John Dewey, “Nature, Means and Knowledge” (LW 1: 101-132)

### Recommended readings

- Larry Hickman. 2001. “John Dewey as a Philosopher of Technology.” In *Philosophical Tools for Technological Culture: Putting Pragmatism to Work*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, pp. 25-41.
- Celine Henne. 2023. “John Dewey: Was the Inventor of Instrumentalism Himself an Instrumentalist?” *HOPOS: The Journal of the International Society for the History of Philosophy of Science* 13(1): 120-150.
- Andrii Leonov. 2020. “Instrumentalist Logic of Scientific Discovery: Reflections on Dewey’s Method and Its Metaphysical Foundations.” *Actual Problems of Mind* 21: 2-23.

### Background and Summary

This chapter is likely based on the third and last of the *Carus Lectures*, originally titled, “Existence, Means and Knowledge.” The discussion here closely connected with the previous chapter, which provided a naturalistic account of *ends* in relation to the trait of finality or immediacy; this chapter focuses on the nature of *means* in relation to the account of temporality from the prior chapter. Thus, Dewey begins with a discussion of *tools* and *technology*, the “useful arts.”

Dewey traces the ambivalent role that the useful arts played in ancient Greek philosophy, and how this led to metaphysical dualism between means and ends and a denigration of the former. This was matched by an epistemological dualism of practical knowledge and theoretical knowledge, which existed similarly in a hierarchical relation. Dewey argues that contemporary thought, in the wake of modern science, has eschewed this ancient metaphysics, but retained its epistemology uncritically, generating a host of insoluble problems (or pseudo-problems) and irresolvable disputes. This genealogical discussion is important in clarifying Dewey’s naturalistic and “instrumentalist” understanding of knowledge and scientific method. Dewey recommends that we revise our theory of knowledge by looking not only at the results of science but at the nature of contemporary scientific method, where theoretical and practical knowledge are unified.



## Major concepts

- Technology
- Tool
- Instrumentalism
- Instrumentality
- Means-ends
- Knowledge
- Objects

## Questions for discussion

1. How accurate is Dewey's account of ancient Greek thought in this chapter? How does it serve to justify Dewey's instrumentalism?
2. What is the function of mind and knowledge in nature? How does this inform Dewey's understanding of modern science?
3. What is Dewey's account of *truth* in this chapter? How does it relate to his accounts of mind and knowledge?
4. What is the meaning of "instrumentalism" as presented in this chapter? How does Dewey situate instrumentalism with respect to realism and idealism?
5. On Dewey's view, is what he refers to in the chapter as the "mathematico-mechanical" nature of the world a discovery of modern science?
6. How does the denial of "temporal quality" to reality generate various dualisms and rival epistemological doctrines?

## Week 7: Nature, Communication and Meaning (Chapter 5)

### Main reading

- John Dewey, “Nature, Communication and Meaning” (LW 1: 133-161)

### Recommended readings

- Joseph Dillabough. 2024. “John Dewey's Objective Semiotics: Existence, Significance, and Intelligence.” *The Pluralist*, 19(2): 1-22.
- Roberta Dreon. 2014. “Dewey on Language: Elements for a Non-Dualistic Approach.” *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy* 6(2).

### Background and Summary

This chapter articulates Dewey’s *philosophy of language and communication*. The chapter is crucial to the “experience or language” debate between, on the one hand, the defenders of so-called “classical pragmatism,” who emphasize the importance of experience and downplay the role of language and, on the other hand, the “neopragmatists,” who reject the concept of experience as such and instead focus on language. This chapter problematizes Dewey’s role as philosopher-of-experience in this debate, as it suggests that language is far more important for Dewey than it is generally thought to be.

According to Dewey, the human mind and human culture emerge due to language and communication. For Dewey, human thought is essentially social, and the social nature of mind would be impossible without language. Moreover, since meanings do not come into existence without language, experience as meaningful becomes possible only *through* language. Thus, from Dewey’s perspective, language is one of the most important features of experience.

From Dewey’s point of view, it is communication that makes us humans *thinking* creatures and what essentially distinguishes us from nonhuman animals. This is the key to his account of the emergent *continuity* of human mind with nature; what begins as the mere signaling acts of animals becomes communication proper through the development of language, which in turn becomes thought. Thinking, for Dewey, is thus just another form of discourse, similar in nature to public discourse.

## Major concepts

- Communication
- Language
- Meaning
- Sign
- Significance
- Signaling acts
- Essence

## Questions for discussion

1. How similar is Dewey's philosophy of language to contemporary ideas in philosophy of language and linguistics?
2. In what sense does Dewey hold that meaning is "objective and universal"? Why?
3. How does Dewey mark the distinction between *signaling acts* of nonhuman animals and *communication* proper among language-using humans?
4. Is it true that nonhuman animals do not use language or think?
5. Why does Dewey refer to language as "the tool of tools"? Is this a perspicuous description of language?
6. How does Dewey explain so-called "inner experience" and "individuality" within his account of the role of public language and sociality in the emergence of mind and thinking?

## Week 8: Nature, Mind and the Subject (Chapter 6)

### Main reading

- John Dewey, "Nature, Mind and the Subject" (LW 1: 163-191)

### Recommended readings

- Mark Johnson. 2010. "Cognitive Science and Dewey's Theory of Mind, Thought, and Language." In *The Cambridge Companion to Dewey*, edited by Molly Cochran. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 123-44.
- Raymond D. Boisvert. 1982. "Dewey, Subjective Idealism, and Metaphysics." *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 18(3): 232-243.

### Background and Summary

This chapter explores human individuality, personality, selfhood, subjectivity, and mind as emergent functions of complex biological and social interactions. Dewey begins by attacking the dualism between the mind and body as well as philosophical *subjectivism* from a *historical, sociological, and genealogical* point of view. He traces these philosophical problems through the history of Western philosophy, finding that certain mistakes have their origins in the philosophy of the ancient Greeks while, at the same time, pointing out that some of their positive insights were mistakenly rejected by modern philosophers. Because the mind is social and depends on language, Dewey argues specifically for the importance of the concepts of *experience* and *mind* that he finds in ancient Greek philosophy. Thus, there is a sense of "experience" that is distinct from and prior to "my experience" and likewise "mind" versus "my mind."

It is interesting that, in this chapter, Dewey applies the "tool of tools" metaphor previously applied to language to the notion of the "self." Dewey attempts to pragmatically reconstruct the modern subjectivist interpretation of the self as "inner" and as essentially opposed to nature as "outer." This is one of the expressions of the dualism between nature and experience which precludes close interaction between them, which Dewey sees as a fundamental mistake. Thus, Dewey's goal is again to reconnect experience and nature because thoughts and feelings are themselves natural events in the first place. Thus, our individuality, subjectivity, or self is not metaphysically given, transcendental, atemporal, absolute, disconnected from nature; it is to be seen as essentially historic, cultural, as well as an intermediate and instrumental function of the human organism in its attempt to cope with the brute forces and

challenges of nature. Individuality or selfhood is something that is *made* and *achieved*, not given and fixed.

## Major concepts

- Mind
- Subject
- Subjectivity
- Self
- Personality
- Individual
- Individuality
- Natural events

## Questions for discussion

1. What does Dewey mean when he is referring to “individual minds” and not just to “individual with minds”?
2. Why does Dewey suggest that it is better to say at the start “It is thought” and “It is experienced” rather than “I think” or “I experience”? Is this justified? Does Dewey’s “house metaphor” work?
3. Under what conditions does Dewey hold it appropriate to say, “I think, believe, desire” instead of “It is thought, believed, desired”?
4. What positive roles are left for subjectivity and the “inner life” in this chapter?
5. How does Dewey portray the difference between ancient and modern views of individualism and selfhood? What does he retain from each, and what does he reject?

## Week 9: Nature, Life and Body-Mind (Chapter 7)

### Main reading

- John Dewey, "Nature, Life and Body-Mind" (LW 1: 192-226)

### Recommended readings

- Richard Shusterman. 2008. "Redeeming Somatic Reflection: John Dewey's Philosophy of Body-Mind." In *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 180-216.
- Paul Cherlin. 2015. "John Dewey's Emergent Naturalism: Conditions and Transfigurations." *Contemporary Pragmatism* 12(2): 199-215.
- Mark L. Johnson and Jay Schulkin. 2023. "The Naturalized Metaphysics of Emerging Mind." In *Mind in Nature: John Dewey, Cognitive Science, and a Naturalistic Philosophy for Living*. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press.

### Background and Summary

This chapter, together with chapter 8, can be seen as Dewey's account of his *philosophy of mind*, his analysis of and solution to the *mind-body problem*, which he calls the "the 'emergent' theory of mind." Dewey distinguishes between three ontological levels or plateaus: *physical*, *psycho-physical*, and *mental*. The first level, *physical*, consists of simpler natural events that are amenable to descriptions in terms of mathematics and mechanisms. The concept of *psycho-physical* signifies the level of organisms and life-activity (i.e., the biological), phenomena described in terms of need, demand, and satisfaction. *Mind* or *mental* denotes the level of communication and thinking mediated by language. Dewey provides an account of how each level emerges from the prior as events interact with increasing complexity. Dewey also articulates the key concepts of *sense* and *signification*, which are crucial to Dewey's account of the emergence of mind and meaning from anoetic (non-cognitive or prior to thought), biological *feeling*.

## Major concepts

- The mind-body problem
- Emergent theory of mind
- Physical
- Psycho-physical
- Mental
- Body-mind
- Sense
- Signification
- Sentiency

## Questions for discussion

1. Why does Dewey think the mind-body problem is a result of “denial of quality in general to natural events” (LW 1: 194)?
2. What exactly is Dewey’s emergent theory of mind and how is it related to the contemporary emergentist views? What does it tell us about the relation of mind to matter?
3. Why does Dewey use the metaphor of “plateaus” to describe the three levels of matter, life, and mind?
4. Why does Dewey deny that the mind is identical to the brain?
5. What exactly is the relationship between the concepts of “sense” and “signification”?
6. Why does Dewey use the concept of “psycho-physical” instead of simply referring to the “biological?”
7. How does Dewey’s philosophy of mind compare with contemporary views in the field?

# Week 10: Existence, Ideas and Consciousness (Chapter 8)

## Main reading

- John Dewey, “Existence, Ideas and Consciousness” (LW 1: 227-266)

## Recommended readings

- Paul Cherlin. 2024. “Experience and Emergence.” In *John Dewey’s Metaphysical Theory*. Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 81-104.
- Scott Johnston. 2010. “Dewey’s ‘Naturalized Hegelianism’ in Operation: Experimental Inquiry as Self-Consciousness.” *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, 46(3): 453-476.
- Barry D. Smith. 1985. “John Dewey’s Theory of Consciousness.” *Educational Theory* 35: 267-72.

## Background and Summary

This chapter is a continuation of Dewey’s philosophy of mind. The focus here is on *consciousness*. Dewey recognizes two different meanings commonly associated with “consciousness.” The first time of consciousness Dewey mentions is anoetic, non-cognitive, and sensory; this type of consciousness is referred to in contemporary discussions as “phenomenal consciousness.” Dewey indicates that this type of consciousness is not his main focus in the chapter.

For Dewey, the main sense of “consciousness” is that of consciousness as *awareness* or *perception* of meanings. Meanings, when they become the focus of consciousness are referred to by Dewey as “ideas.” Thus, Dewey’s preferred sense of consciousness is *noetic*, which, in its conjunction with language, presents itself as cognitive perception or awareness of meanings, grounded in immediate qualities or feelings, or, in other words, consciousness amounts to *having* an idea.

While *mind* presents itself as the general contextual system of embodied meanings, consciousness is the function of the mind that recognizes, discriminates, redirects, and transforms those meanings in response to doubts or problematic situations. Consciousness is thus, for Dewey, closely connected to *inquiry*. Dewey contrasts this view with the “spectator” or “search-light” view of consciousness.



## Major concepts

- Consciousness
- Awareness
- Perception
- Idea
- Inquiry

## Questions for discussion

1. How is it, for Dewey, that we can have “feeling qualities” of which we are not aware?
2. What is the relationship between mind and consciousness? Meanings and ideas?
3. How does Dewey’s view on consciousness and awareness relate to the contemporary debates on these issues?
4. What does this chapter add to Dewey’s answer to the *mind-body problem*?
5. How does Dewey’s idea of “consciousness” as presented in his *Experience and Nature* relate to William James’s concept of “stream of consciousness” as presented in his *Principles of Psychology*?
6. Why does Dewey spend so much time discussing theories of *knowledge* in a chapter on the nature of *consciousness*?
7. After the three chapters that formed the *Carus Lectures*, Dewey went on to develop four chapters on his closely connected accounts of communication, language, mind, and consciousness. Why did he take this direction?

## Week 11: Experience, Nature and Art (Chapter 9)

### Main reading

- John Dewey, “Experience, Nature and Art” (LW 1: 267-295).

### Recommended readings

- Tom Leddy, Kalle Puolakka. 2021. “Dewey’s Aesthetics.” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/dewey-aesthetics/>
- Thomas M. Alexander. 1987. *John Dewey’s Theory of Art, Experience, and Nature: The Horizon of Feeling*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- John Dewey. 1934. *Art as Experience*. (LW 10)

### Background and Summary

*Experience and Nature* is a work of metaphysics that starts with philosophic method, spends three chapters discussing the “generic traits of existence,” followed by four chapters providing a naturalistic account of communication, language, mind, and consciousness. It may seem odd, then, that Dewey’s next chapter focuses on art. But just as Dewey has previously traced the rupture in philosophy between experience and nature to the false separation between theory and practice, here he argues that this rupture is of a piece with the dichotomizing of art and science.

First, Dewey is critical of the division of arts into the fine arts and the useful arts, since he thinks that this division exists as a reflection and a result of problematic social divisions; this recalls the discussions of means and ends and theoretical and practical knowledge from chapter 4. Thus, all art is essentially practical and the sharp distinction between the two types of fine and useful art (as that between means and ends or theory and practice) is meaningless because they are just two *modes of practice* with different but interconnected focus. Secondly, science is not separate from art because science is essentially *emergent* from art and a “handmaiden” that ultimately works in service of art.

As we have already seen, for Dewey, science is also essentially instrumental or practical. Dewey thinks that once one correctly understands the meaning and the role of art in human culture, the traditional divisions between practice and theory, art and science, means and ends, useful art and fine art, and the heavily entrenched dualisms between experience and nature, thought and feeling, mind and matter, etc., will be overcome. Art is not anything added to nature but is an emergent or eventual function of it, on the one hand, and, as

such, is the means of nature's intelligent control (including that of science), on the other. Experience, as a form of art, makes us continuous with nature.

## Major concepts

- Art
- Esthetic
- Fine arts
- Useful arts
- Science

## Questions for discussion

1. How does Dewey distinguish the *artistic* from the *esthetic*?
2. Dewey uses the discussion of art as the occasion for a strong polemic concerning the common usage of the term “useful,” which he inverts by telling us what is usually called “useful” is really detrimental to human life and wellbeing. What does Dewey think the legitimate application of “useful” is?
3. How does Dewey's account of what is truly “useful” in this chapter potentially transform our understanding of philosophical *pragmatism* or *instrumentalism*?
4. Does Dewey's pragmatic reconstruction of the meaning of the notion of “art” indeed eliminate the distinction between theory and practice?
5. How does thinking of knowledge or science as a “work of art” reframe our understanding of both?

## Week 12: Existence, Value and Criticism (Chapter 10)

### Main reading

- John Dewey, “Existence, Value and Criticism” (LW 1, 296-327)

### Recommended readings

- Raymond D. Boisvert. 1998. “Dewey's Metaphysics: Ground-Map of the Prototypically Real.” In *Reading Dewey: Interpretations for a Postmodern Generation*, edited by Larry Hickman. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, pp. 149-165.
- James W. Garrison. 2005. “Dewey on Metaphysics, Meaning Making, and Maps.” *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 41(4): 818-844.
- Scott R. Stroud. 2011. “John Dewey and the Question of Artful Criticism.” *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 44(1): 27-51.

### Background and Summary

In this final chapter of *Experience and Nature*, Dewey returns to the general discussion of the nature and method of philosophy and metaphysics that he began in the first two chapters. He tells us that philosophy is “inherently criticism,” on the one hand, and that it is “criticism of criticisms,” on the other. *Criticism*, for Dewey, is inquiry concerning values, that is, the discrimination and appraisal of values. Values are initially simply enjoyed or appreciated immediately or pre-reflectively. Because values are scarce and compete with each other, they require discernment and judgment, criticism.

Dewey discusses three types of values that are of particular concern to philosophy: morals, esthetic appreciation, and beliefs or belief-values. The immediate appreciation associated with each is conscience, taste, and conviction. The form of criticism in each case is moral judgment, esthetic or art criticism, and scientific inquiry. And we can infer that the parts of philosophy that reflect on these forms of criticism are ethics, esthetics, and what Dewey in his other works usually refers to as “logic,” but which we might think of instead as philosophy of science or epistemology.

*Metaphysics*, as an inquiry into the generic traits of natural existence, is understood as the “ground-map” for criticism, and thus, for philosophy itself. The value of metaphysics to philosophy, and of philosophy to first-order criticism is *instrumental*: it is about providing intelligent tools for criticism.

## Major concepts

- Value
- Criticism
- Philosophy (as criticism)
- Ground-map of the province of criticism
- Conscience
- Taste
- Conviction
- Morals
- Esthetic values
- Belief-values

## Questions for discussion

1. How does the metaphor of the “ground-map of the province of criticism” help clarify the project of *Experience and Nature*?
2. Why does Dewey say we need a *theory of criticism*, not a *theory of value*?
3. How can beliefs be considered a type of *value*? Is Dewey right to reject the usual distinction between beliefs (as factual or descriptive) and values?
4. What is the relation between philosophy, art, and science from Dewey’s point of view?
5. Is Dewey here committed to a certain kind of *realism* about values, insofar as he connects values with natural events and draws an equivalence between moral and esthetic values and scientific beliefs?

# Week 13: Culture and Nature: The Unfinished 3rd Edition Introduction

## Main Reading

- The Unfinished 3rd Edition Introduction, Appendix 1 (LW 1: 330-365).

## Recommended readings

- John Peter Anton. 2011. "Dewey's Unfinished Cultural Project." In *Dewey's Enduring Impact*, edited by John R. Shook and Paul Kurtz. Amherst: Prometheus Books, pp. 149-57.
- Larry Hickman. 1996. "Nature as Culture: John Dewey's Pragmatic Naturalism," In *Environmental Pragmatism*, edited by Andrew Light & Eric Katz. Routledge, pp. 50-72.

## Background and Summary

Throughout most of his long philosophical career, Dewey struggled to convey the meaning of his notion of "experience." The revision to his account of experience as a philosophical method, from the early "Postulate of Immediate Empiricism" (1905), through the two different versions of chapter 1, "Experience and Philosophic Method," continued to generate misunderstandings that frustrated Dewey. In 1948, shortly after Dewey finished his extensive *Introduction* to the reissue of his 1920 *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, Beacon Press offered Dewey to reissue *Experience and Nature* with a new introduction as well. During the period of 1948 through 1950, Dewey worked feverishly on a new Introduction to *Experience and Nature* with the hope of conveying the meaning of his central notion of "experience" to the readers. Regularly sharing drafts with Joseph Ratner, Dewey worked and reworked this material.

In 1951, Dewey put aside his fragmentary attempts and a new introduction and started a new draft of six pages, which started with a perplexing statement that has often vexed later Dewey scholars: "Were I to write (or rewrite) *Experience and Nature* today, I would entitle the book *Culture and Nature* and the treatment of specific subject-matters would be correspondingly modified."

## Major concepts

- Culture
- Human
- Natural
- Common sense versus science

## Questions for discussion

1. Dewey describes the “standing problem of Western philosophy” in broader terms than just *experience* and *nature*. How does he describe this problem, and how does he trace its development?
2. What do the remarks about science in the unfinished introduction reveal about Dewey’s understanding of the relation of science, philosophy, and metaphysics?
3. Why did Dewey think that “culture” is better a notion to express his philosophy as it is postulated in *Experience and Nature* than the original notion of “experience”? Was this a wise idea for revising the book?
4. What does substituting “experience” with “culture” do to Dewey’s *denotative method* as the main empirical methodology postulated in *Experience and Nature*?
5. Does substituting “experience” with “culture” transform philosophy as a discipline into some kind of anthropology? Why or why not?



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