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John Dewey's Theory of Emergence: Culture, Mind, Consciousness, and Cognition

Abstract:

Emergentism is an important and yet underexplored component of John Dewey's metaphysical program, and concerns the ways in which existences relate, operate, and grow in coordination with a more inclusive environment. Through an emergent account, Dewey addresses continuities among the generic traits of nature, inanimate substance, biological life, and experiential "fields" such as *mind* and *consciousness*. The notion of a field is especially important for depicting the ways in which existences serially interact in accordance with some particular purpose or set of functions. Apart from an emergent scheme that contextualizes the interactive contexts of experience, phenomena such as "mind" and "consciousness" remain enigmatic occurrences. Moreover, cognition, and with it instances of "knowing," remain susceptible to merely "subjective" characterizations that reinforce a misleading dualism between mind and nature. In addition to its role in addressing naturalistic continuities, Dewey's emergentism suggests a non-reductive philosophical methodology that directly challenges contemporary varieties of realism and materialism.

Keywords:

Dewey, emergentism, experience, metaphysics, naturalism, pragmatism

I. Introduction

This article provides a systematic exploration of John Dewey's concept of *emergence*. For the purposes of the present article, emergence, or emergentism, denotes the capacity in nature to produce novel phenomena that cannot be reduced to what came before. And yet, emergentism involves the idea that these novel developments are continuous with, and hence interactive with, prior developments. An emergent account studies the relation and development of different interactive "fields" of existence. On the most general level, Dewey understood the coincident and co-determinate procedures of being and becoming, and the qualitative and serial continuities among natural events, as relating within an emergent schema.¹ Dewey's most consistent and detailed development of emergentism is in service of depicting the relations among the different contexts and functions of human experience. In what remains of this introductory section, the ideas and terms used in the above encapsulation will be given a more determinate shape.

To begin, it is fruitful to acknowledge, at least in passing, that Dewey's concept of emergence, while developed in an original way throughout his mature works, derives from earlier ideas that include Hegel's logical development of *der Begriff*, and J.S. Mill's observation that certain natural systems are irreducible to their component parts. In classical American philosophies, the idea was further developed through Emerson's expansive and prophetic vision in "Circles," Peirce's theory concerning the formation of natural laws, and Samuel Alexander's conception of mental processes.

A related trope, *evolution*, was philosophical currency before it was specifically associated with a scientific theory concerning genetic mutation. With Roy Wood Sellars in mind,² in 1931 Dewey wrote that

"Evolution" has ceased to be the unwinding of what is already rolled up on the reel of destiny, an unfolding of the leaves of a scroll, and the rendering visible of passages inscribed at the beginning in a secret indelible ink. The introduction of the idea of mutation marks nothing less than a revolution in our entire scheme of interpretation.³

That the traits of the present were not somehow sitting latent in unchanging ideality or in a determinate past, that there can be true novelty in nature, is of profound philosophical significance. However, to compare Deweyan emergentism to evolutionary mutation is largely misleading. Mutation is tied to particular types of organic development. In contrast, emergentism, at least for Dewey's purposes, is much more general in import. It concerns the continuities, developments, and associations that are possible among all natural existences – cultures, ideas, symbols, and the process of inquiry. If "mutation" is tied to the biological, we may fruitfully find the notion of "refinement" to be a more general analogue for metaphysics, or at least one that fits comfortably within Dewey's philosophical nomenclature. I will be using this term, cautioning the reader against associating it with older

1) I previously developed a number of similar ideas concerning Dewey's theory of emergent fields. The present article reflects my current understanding of Dewey's emergentism, and better addresses the significance and details of his theory and how it specifically figures in his notion of experience. See my 2015 article "John Dewey's Emergent Naturalism: Conditions and Transfigurations" for the earlier attempt.

2) See Sellars, *Evolutionary Naturalism*.

3) Dewey, *The Later Works of John Dewey*, Vol. 6, 280–281. For all references to John Dewey's work, I use *The Collected Works of John Dewey 1882–1953*, published as *The Early Works* (EW), *The Middle Works* (MW), and *The Later Works* (LW). In referencing these works, I use a parenthetical citation that includes volume and page number. I forgo the "ibid." convention for recurring references to these works.

metaphysical notions such as “improvement” and “perfecting”; more properly, it is a “sorting out” or purposive transformational movement toward a provisional terminus.

Emergent refinements have what Dewey calls “temporal quality”; they are continuous and cumulative. They are also purposive insofar as they move toward closures and new beginnings. As qualitative, they encompass much more than physical contiguities and causal successions. They include relations of events whose original loci may be distant in space and time, disparate in their purposes and affinities. And yet, these events have been joined together due to some common functional efficacy or purpose. They are, to put it differently, relations that develop in concert due to some commonality and compatibility.

Experience itself must be understood as a *series* of events interacting with other events within a more inclusive environment. Here, it is especially useful to introduce another term: *field*. Within an emergent scheme, a “field” is a dynamic environment comprising relations that are loosely grouped in accordance with a common function.

Interacting events have tighter and looser ties, which qualify them with certain beginnings and endings, and which mark them off from other fields of interaction. Such relatively closed fields come into conjunction at times so as to interact with each other, and a critical alteration is effected.⁴

Dewey’s appeal to emergent “fields” highlights the basic fact that all activities (or events) necessarily have reference to surroundings. To exist means, at base, to be engaged in rhythmic relations that tend toward both individuation and relation. One and the same existential premise is assumed when we talk about generation; things come to be, they *emerge*, through tensional interactions.

If we characterize any particular complex set of events as constituting a “field,” we must be careful to insist that such fields are continuous with other fields, interacting as a more extensive set of relations. Put differently, no field has a perfectly discrete function or existence. To ascribe a “function” to any given field implies that it has a set of applications and usages; any sort of “use” necessarily “reshapes prior material,” expressing “the common fact that anything changes according to the interacting field it enters.”⁵ With this in mind, we should put to rest the idea that fields are containers or stable backdrops; stages upon which events act out their dramatic roles. They are reactive and interactive relations and relatings of events. And yet, distinctions among fields are not ontologically or functionally arbitrary; fields can be treated as somewhat distinct, varying in both scope and function.

When considering these fields, it will be important to keep in mind that fields which are “larger” in scope, that is, the more inclusive or pervasive fields, are structures that are less readily changed (and in general less *knowable* in their fullness). They are, so to speak, slow moving. A field will be receptive to sudden change, fast moving, to the degree to which that field is less inclusive, more focused, and localized. Spatial comparatives, such as “smaller” or “wider,” as well as other spatial metaphors, including “background” and “foreground,” populate Dewey’s discussions of experience. In one instance, Dewey characterizes experience as a “foreground of nature...” that “conducts our thought to the background.”⁶ This “background” in its complex entirety cannot be known; it is the speculative object of theologians and poets alike. But Dewey also makes clear that the ways

4) Dewey (LW:1:208). While the notion of a *field* is indispensable to Dewey’s theories of existence and experience, his explicit references to such fields are sparse, primarily limited to the discussion of “mind” within the seventh chapter of *Experience and Nature*.

5) Dewey (LW:1:217).

6) Dewey (LW:3:76).

in which experience reveals the deep traits of nature is much more than superficial: experience "is no infinitesimally thin layer or foreground of nature, but that it penetrates into it, reaching down into its depths, and in such a way that its grasp is capable of expansion; it tunnels in all directions and in so doing brings to the surface things at first hidden – as miners pile high on the surface of the earth treasures brought from below."⁷

Here, we are left with the problem of understanding and developing just how experience "tunnels" and expands through nature, how "all modes of experiencing are ways in which some genuine traits of nature come to manifest realization."⁸ The first step may be to further classify these different "modes of experiencing" in accordance with an emergent schema that, while given its shape by Dewey, is only provided in unsystematic outline.

II. Nature and the Emergence of Non-Cognitive Experience

"Philosophy," Dewey writes, "has the task of analytic dismemberment and synthetic reconstruction of experience."⁹ Dewey examined our life-world in all its richness and complexity, exploring the diverse functionalities of experience and their bearing upon philosophical practice. However, Dewey's "analytic dismemberment" did little toward systematically cataloguing the differentia among the ultimately continuous layers and contexts of experience.

Why should we, then, bother with such classifications? There is a risk; we should not want to commit the very fallacies that Dewey warned against, namely, a misguided and misleading elevating of the selective determinations of reflection to originary conditions. We also would not want to give the impression of simple and discrete "layers" of experience, as if conducting an archaeological survey. And yet, the risk seems worthwhile insofar as it may serve the following purposes.

First, such classification may provide a more nuanced, and hopefully clearer, way of understanding what Dewey means by "experience" in general, and how various experiential events, such as feeling, having ideas, self-consciousness, and inquiry, figure in a wider theory of natural interactions. Second, such an account of emergence may address continuities between what many see as irreconcilable differences between decidedly "private" and "public" kinds of experiences, and even dispose of the need to speak of "internalism" or "externalism."¹⁰ New doors are opened for discussing epistemological and ethical problems that assume categorical distinctions between change and stability, public and private, inner and outer, antecedent and consequent, premises and conclusions, belief and knowledge, the subject and the object.

An emergent account of experience may begin with the simple question: *if the locus of experience is not in the individual, whence self-consciousness and reflection?* It may be useful to think of nature itself as a comprehensive field. To be sure, "nature" encompasses much more than "experience," and comprehensively designates all varieties of dynamic interactions. In this way, it may seem too broad a phenomenon with which to begin an investigation into the specific fields of experience. However, Dewey's "generic traits of existence" should be understood as the backbone of his entire theory of experiential emergence.

I find it puzzling that there have been so many debates centered upon whether or not Dewey had a metaphysics of existence. One critic writes,

7) Dewey (LW:1:11).

8) Dewey (LW:1:31).

9) Dewey (LW:1:42).

10) These terms specifically relate to debates in the philosophy of language and the philosophy of mind; for the early developments of semantic and psychological externalism, see Putnam, "Meaning and Reference" and Burge, "Individualism and the Mental."

Dewey's philosophy not only contains no metaphysics of existence, but is incompatible with such a metaphysical stance. Put more cautiously: If Dewey did intend to develop a metaphysics of existence, surely he failed in the end. In fact, he never began. There is simply no account of generic traits of existence independent of experience.¹¹

It is correct to claim that Dewey gives no account of generic traits "independent" of experience. Dewey's metaphysical project argues for dynamic continuities between experience and nature – how the patterns and structures of experience *emerge* from and continue their less refined, and more general, natural counterparts. The very notion of an "independent" nature, whatever its specific connotations, seems to suggest a division between experiencing creatures and a cold, valueless "nature." To reify the dualism between subjects and objects, the experiencing subject and an objective nature, is antithetical to Dewey's own program. Dewey insists that "Experience is *of* as well as *in* nature. It is not experience which is experienced, but nature..."¹²

One of the broadest goals of Dewey's metaphysics is to show how generic traits are manifest in particular existences. The connection between generic traits and particular existences remains an enigma only if the role of emergence in Dewey's philosophy is not taken into account. However, if we understand all particular natural existences as "manifesting" generic traits, or transpiring along generic "patterns," or having generic "tendencies," and that these tendencies are the antecedent conditions for both continuity and emergent refinement, the mystery dissolves. Moreover, we no longer have to wonder if Dewey *really* had anything to say about nature as it is "in itself." Experience directly emerges from that which is broader than experience, and Dewey's "empirical method" is a technique that, among other usages, allows us to look to experience in order to discuss the most pervasive features of existence. That is, experience is such that it can reveal the nature of nature, so as long as empirical method is not corrupted by dualistic metaphysical presuppositions.

Dewey's archetypical generic trait is "the precarious and stable." All natural events have elements of stability and precariousness. The other traits, if they are indeed "other," describe features of this generic and fundamental relationship. All events have individuality and relations, identities and outreachings, discreteness and continuity.

Existentially speaking, a human individual is distinctive opacity of bias and preference conjoined with plasticity and permeability of needs and likings. One trait tends to isolation, discreteness; the other trait to connection, continuity. This ambivalent character is rooted in nature, whose events have their own distinctive indifferencies, resistances, arbitrary closures and intolerances, and also their peculiar openness, warm responsiveness, greedy seekings and transforming unions. The conjunction in nature of whimsical contingency and lawful uniformity is the result of these two characters of events. They persist upon the human plane, and as ultimate characters are ineradicable. Boundaries, demarcations, abrupt and expansive over-reaching of boundaries impartially and conjunctively mark every phase of human life.¹³

It is through these "ineradicable" and "ultimate characters" that we best understand the finer details of Dewey's emergent naturalism. All fields share these basic tendencies or patterns, while simultaneously containing specific and novel affairs and functionalities.

11) Stuhr, "Dewey's Reconstruction of Metaphysics," 172.

12) Dewey (LW:1:12).

13) Dewey (LW:1:186).

More specific than “generic traits,” Dewey appeals to what he would come to call the “biological matrix” that underlies and contributes to more refined interactions. There are a number of general conclusions to be drawn here. At base, “living” must be “regarded as a continual rhythm of equilibrium and disequilibrium.”¹⁴ This is perhaps the broadest point that will be made; all things emerge or become refined through a rhythmic exchange between the precarious and stable, need and fulfillment, outreachings and natural termini. Dewey appeals to the generative aspects of these existential rhythms on the cellular level. The same basic dynamic is necessarily at work within even the most refined events, such as the creation of art or the formation of a scientific theory. “Organic acts,” Dewey writes, “are a kind of fore-action of mind; they look as if they were deliberate and consciously intelligent, because, of necessity, intelligent action in utilizing the mechanisms they supply, reproduces their patterns.”¹⁵ This sentiment is repeated elsewhere in longer form:

Apart from relations of cause and effect in nature, conception and invention could not be. Apart from the relation of processes of rhythmic conflict and fulfillment in animal life, experience would be without design and pattern. Apart from organs inherited from animal ancestry, idea and purpose would be without a mechanism of realization. The primeval arts of nature and animal life are so much the material, and, in gross outline, so much the model for the intentional achievements of man, that the theologically minded have imputed conscious intent to the structure of nature-as man, sharing many activities with the ape, is wont to think of the latter as imitating his own performances.¹⁶

Dewey will thus conclude that “All deliberation, all conscious intent, grows out of things once performed organically through the interplay of natural energies.” Human perception, and with it evaluative deliberation, will resemble more basic biological patterns. There are morphological resemblances throughout all processes of growth.

Dewey observes that even inanimate affairs, for example a piece of raw iron, engage with surroundings and exhibit bias and selective reactions. The “reactions” or interactions of the inanimate, however, are not oriented toward preserving and continuing its existence as such; the piece of iron is as indifferent to remaining iron as it is to alloying with carbon to create steel. Living organisms, on the other hand, have bias toward continuity, in the sense that they act to preserve their own existences, and in the sense that they act in concert with other existences. In fact, these two senses of continuity are functionally identical; interaction, according to Dewey, involves a modification of an environment such that conditions become favorable for growth. Thus, within living organic structures the “bias” of the inanimate is given an added discriminatory property: “sensitivity.”¹⁷

Emerging out of these sensitivities are *feelings*. A feeling is a further added property of bias and selection, and is anticipatory or “premonitory” in orientation. Feelings are, thus, more refined and complex, especially insofar as they draw from (or, in a sense, “utilize”) a qualitative environment in their forecasts and warnings. They are fully engaged with a serial set of relations.¹⁸ This is the true mark of a “living” thing, a property that orients the process of having needs and actively seeking fulfillments of those needs. For the living, equilibriums

14) Dewey (LW:12:34).

15) Dewey (LW:1:215).

16) Dewey (LW:10:31).

17) See Dewey (LW:1:195).

18) Dewey provides a number of partial encapsulations of “feelings” in the seventh chapter of *Experience and Nature* (LW:1:191–225). I draw primarily from these remarks in defining the emergent role of feelings.

are reached creatively, not accidentally. Failure to reach equilibrium is also creative, and so the results of failure become a means within future activities.

Feelings are, however, crude and immediate. Feelings are refined into *meanings* through acts of communication (understood broadly to include much more than spoken language).¹⁹

As life is a character of events in a peculiar condition of organization, and “feeling” is a quality of life-forms marked by complexly mobile and discriminating responses, so “mind” is an added property assumed by a feeling creature, when it reaches that organized interaction with other living creatures which is language, communication. Then the qualities of feeling become significant of objective differences in external things and of episodes past and to come. This state of things in which qualitatively different feelings are not just had but are significant of objective differences, is mind. Feelings are no longer just felt. They have and they make *sense*; record and prophesy.²⁰

Because meanings are part and parcel of communication, they have a wider range of possibilities, connections, and purposes than feelings. They are not, however, strictly or even primarily cognitively had or determined.²¹ Meanings are ongoing and operative, often silent in their workings, and can be further guided and formed through more sophisticated modes of communication, through purposive control of the tensional circuit between instrumental and immediate phases of experience.

Dewey proposes that *mind* be understood as a public context, an interpersonal field. “Mind denotes the whole system of meanings as they are embodied in the workings of organic life.” It is also a generative medium, “an agency of novel reconstruction of a preexisting order.”²²

In this, the metaphysical premises of individualism, whether it is the specific individualism of the rationalists, empiricists, or of contemporary life, is brought to trial. In addition to being an interpersonal set of meanings, we might also think of mind as a verb, a “power” of culture and social association. Just as a hand is a precondition for grasping, cultural intercourse is a precondition for *minding*. Just as we might learn to more skillfully walk through the practice of walking, extending a range of possibilities (for example as we emerge out of infancy), communicative practice can “mind” things in new and different ways through the practice of creating new meanings. Mind is an apparatus for grasping, for vision, but its graspings and visions cannot be reduced to a prior organic set of existences any more than the manipulation of a shoelace can be reduced to a hand.

With meanings emerge *sense* and *signification*, two aspects of a single function of experience that have been infused with the properties of substitution and symbolism, so becoming refined capacities of communication. A sense is a meaning that is directly *had*, a set of connections that have been grasped and integrated into intelligent interaction, a stable point of reference that is non-cognitively recognized. Significations, which necessarily work in concert with senses, entail habitual indexical reactions to some established, agreed upon symbol (the appearance of migrating birds means that colder weather is imminent; white smoke from the Sistine Chapel indicates that a new pope has been elected). Even in work that predates Dewey’s mature metaphysics, he insisted that “acquaintance” is a condition of action; acquaintance “always implies a little friend-

19) For Dewey’s most detailed exploration of “meaning” see the fifth chapter of *Experience and Nature* (LW:1).

20) Dewey (LW:1:198).

21) Victor Kestenbaum’s reading of Dewey emphasizes the “transcendent” or “intangible.” His argument involves what he terms “the primacy of meaning” thesis, the idea that meaning, a “transcendent” feature, is more abundant, pervasive, and valuable than “truth.” See Kestenbaum, *The Grace and the Severity of the Ideal*.

22) Dewey (LW:1:169).

liness; a trace of re-knowing, of anticipatory welcome or dread of the trait to follow.”²³ In later work, Dewey would develop the ideas of “sign” and “significance” in a more technical way, relating them to the construction of judgments.²⁴

The subconscious, a further emergent field, is often spoken of as highly individuated, representing our deepest personal experiences, repressions, and desires. A Deweyan model of the subconscious must, conversely, treat it as a kind of threshold between the pervasive and the localized, the social and the individual. The subconscious encompasses much more than that which is consciously experienced and directly known. And yet, it is simultaneously personal: “The subconscious of a civilized adult reflects all the habits he has acquired; that is to say, all the organic modifications he has undergone.”²⁵ The subconscious relates, in a way that mind does not, to modes of experience that are localized, subject to faster change than cultural institutions, but slower to change than consciousness proper.

Dewey describes mind through another spatial metaphor: “the field of mind ... is enormously wider than that of consciousness.”²⁶ In order to further understand the relation between these two fields, it will be useful to carefully consider the following statement:

Mind denotes the whole system of meanings as they are embodied in the workings of organic life; consciousness in a being with language denotes awareness or perception of meanings; it is the perception of actual events, whether past, contemporary or future, in their meanings, the having of actual ideas. The greater part of mind is only implicit in any conscious act or state; the field of mind—of operative meanings—is enormously wider than that of consciousness. Mind is contextual and persistent; consciousness is focal and transitive. Mind is, so to speak, structural, substantial; a constant background and foreground; perceptive consciousness is process, a series of heres and nows. Mind is a constant luminosity; consciousness intermittent, a series of flashes of varying intensities. Consciousness is, as it were, the occasional interception of messages continually transmitted, as a mechanical receiving device selects a few of the vibrations with which the air is filled and renders them audible.²⁷

The immense range of events and their histories comprising the biological, social, and our “system of meanings” are the antecedent conditions for particular “acts” of consciousness. They are also the environment within which consciousness performs its selective functions, its synthetic and analytical organizations, its focused processes that further shape and refine natural events.

Focus is itself possible, and consciousness is *felt*, because each point of focus is offset and influenced by an economy of relations that are not actively perceived (or perceivable). Consciousness can be said to occur in a localized environment. And yet, this environment is not solely or even primarily one that is physical and actual. The points of focus are themselves laden with past meanings and anticipations of possibilities, coordinated through qualitative and serial relations.²⁸ In other words, consciousness is made possible by, and functions in coordina-

23) Dewey (MW:3:108).

24) See Dewey (LW:12:131).

25) Dewey (LW:1:228).

26) Dewey (LW:1:230).

27) Dewey (LW:1:230).

28) See Dewey's article “Qualitative Thought” for his most direct account of *qualities* (LW:5). For my own account of Deweyan *qualities*, and the significant difference between a “series” and a “succession” in Dewey's philosophy, see “The Metaphysical Grounding of

tion with, *immaterial* relations among events and existences. These serially related events – events whose original contexts may be temporally and spatially distant – give direction, refine natural events, and suggest possibilities and their fulfillments. Consciousness, Dewey insists, is not a physical event, but a *vital event*.²⁹ While questions concerning the physical nature and locus of consciousness continue to puzzle researchers in a number of fields, Dewey's approach forewarns against the attempt to locate consciousness in material relations.

While mind, our entire "system of meanings," is the backdrop of consciousness, no single consciousness has the benefit of wholesale inheritance – the results of cultural mediation cannot be given to each individual in their completion. Consciousness is a field that is marked by "a series of heres and nows," but we must acknowledge that

There is always a gap between the here and now of direct interaction and the past interactions whose funded result constitutes the meanings with which we grasp and understand what is now occurring. Because of this gap, all conscious perception involves a risk; it is a venture into the unknown, for as it assimilates the present to the past it also brings about some reconstruction of that past. When past and present fit exactly into one another, when there is only recurrence, complete uniformity, the resulting experience is routine and mechanical; it does not come to consciousness in perception.³⁰

For there to be awareness, there must be tension between the creative impulse and that which is already created, and there is no tension in uniformity. This "gap" allows us to "venture into the unknown." There is imaginative reconstruction between a massive body of established meanings and those that fund the "flashes" and "interceptions of messages" that mark the field of consciousness.³¹

Dewey discusses the emergent product of this tension, terming the result an *idea*: an idea is a "phase of a system of meanings which at a given time is undergoing re-direction, transitive transformation."³² In a different formulation Dewey asserts "The meanings that form mind become consciousness, or ideas, impressions, etc., when something within the meanings or in their application becomes dubious, and the meaning in question needs reconstruction. This principle explains the focal and rapidly shifting traits of the objects of consciousness as such."³³

While ideas are not necessarily cognitive, they are active and interactive focal points; in their instrumental capacities, causes become instrumentalities, effects become consequences with meanings. An idea is not a "report" of past events known through sensory contact (as it might be characterized by classical empiricists). Ideas transfigure organic stimuli into meanings, and responses to those stimuli are instrumental and communicative. Events that are unforeseen and perhaps unwelcome are refined into opportunities for enrichment. In other words, tensions and resistances are harnessed and oriented through meanings and needs.

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29) See Dewey (LW:1:92).

30) Dewey (LW:10:276–277).

31) Dewey remarks that "The purport of past affairs ... is positively and integrally carried in and by the incidents now happening; these incidents are, in the degree of genuine dramatic quality, fulfillment of the meanings constituted by past events; they also give this system of meanings an unexpected turn, and constitute a suspended and still indeterminate meaning, which induces alertness, expectancy. It is this double relationship of continuation, promotion, carrying forward, and of arrest, deviation, need of supplementation, which defines that focalization of meanings which is consciousness, awareness, perception" (LW:1:232).

32) Dewey (LW:1:233).

33) Dewey (LW:1:8).

What of *self*-consciousness? It may be acknowledged that newborn animals, including human beings, quickly become aware that the world does not simply bend to their will. The awareness that the world and *need* are in imperfect coordination, and that an imaginative response is needed to alter environing conditions, is the beginning of self-consciousness. Such a consciousness appears through a conflict with otherness, but this conflict is not the product of cognitive introspection; the infant does not reflectively posit the *not-I* in a simultaneous act of self-realization. Rather, apperception is possible because it is emerging within a tensional structure; self-affirmation is a double-movement between individuated need and a wider environment. In addition, consciousness itself has its own peculiar processes of mediating the immediate: it *acts* as well as undergoes.³⁴ The tension between an established “system of meanings” or *mind* and the more individuated impulses of consciousness point to a discrepancy between these two fields; the discrepancy is the *self*, and ideas are localized instrumentalities that work to reconcile and transform this discrepancy in coordination with a broader environment, both physical and social in its composition and character.

While consciousness, and its localized instantiations that we designate as “self-consciousness,” is a precondition for cognition, it is important to understand the *active use* of resistance – the aforementioned transformation of resistance into opportunity – as the aspect of consciousness that most directly relates to a specifically cognitive enterprise (including the focused endeavor of inquiry). An *idea*, a “phase of a system of meanings which at a given time is undergoing re-direction, transitive transformation,”³⁵ must be understood as a direct emergent condition for *objectification*. There are conscious ideas and cognitive ideas (Dewey does not limit the term to one particular category of experience), but the latter is not of a different kind than the former. Non-cognitive perceptions and ideas are conditions for ones that are cognitive; within reflective experience, they are simply more controlled and refined.

Dewey treats the “indeterminate situation,” which is marked by a pervading feeling of doubt, as a sort of bridge between consciousness and secondary experience. The transitional moment into an indeterminate situation can be discussed in at least two important ways. From one experienced standpoint, consciousness and reflection can be understood as two events within a continuous spectrum of activity, their differences a matter of degree. From a different perspective, the inception of reflection can be understood as an interruption, a rupture in what was an ongoing and unproblematic experiential flow. Both descriptions are, simultaneously, true to direct experience; the former is decidedly “stable” in its pervading character while the latter description is “precarious” in orientation.

Dewey was heavily criticized for proposing that doubt is “in the situation,” as opposed to being a subjective psychic event. H.S. Thayer, one of Dewey's best readers and critics, was concerned that Dewey downplayed the role of personal agency: “It is significant to note that his [Dewey's] major definition of inquiry makes no direct mention of an organism as an agent who instigates the transformation of an indeterminate situation into a determinate and unified one.”³⁶ Thayer uses an example to illustrate his concerns:

We place a child in a maze. The child and the various conditions imposed by the maze make up the situation. The child may wander a bit, his behavior may be observed to be perplexed and confused. At some point he grasps the trouble. He locates the problem and inquiry (in this case the active

34) Dewey critiques the idea that consciousness is, by definition, a passive function. It is not “like the eye running over a field of ready-made objects, or a light which illuminates now this and now that portion of a given field. These analogies ignore the indeterminateness of meaning when there is awareness” (LW:1:233).

35) Dewey (LW:1:233).

36) Thayer, *The Logic of Pragmatism*, 77.

planning of how to get out of the maze) may be said to begin. But let us consider this stage antecedent to inquiry. This is an indeterminate situation. But if it be described as troubled, confused, perplexed, to what constituents of the situation do these terms meaningfully apply? Can we say that the conditions imposed by the maze have these characteristics? Only in one clear sense: we observe that the child exhibits these characteristics and with respect to *his* relation to the maze, *he* is troubled, confused, perplexed, etc.

In Thayer's maze scenario, there is little doubt that there is an experiencing agent involved. But the subject, apart from an environment, would not be perplexed; he would not *be* at all. Whether we describe the environment with the terms of physics or of culture, the doubt is found in exchanges within an inclusive and dynamic environment. When Thayer asks "Can we say that the conditions imposed by the maze have these characteristics?" Dewey must answer in the affirmative. The "agency" is situated, not atomic. While Thayer does recognize that Dewey's ontology centers about the notion of a transaction or exchange, his critique lapses back into an ontology that is foreign to that of Dewey's. Thayer separates agency from its emergent context, from the more inclusive fields within which it operates.³⁷ We must ground the "instrumental" component of Dewey's philosophy in a more general emergent scheme.

III. Conclusion: Emergentism as Method

In his correspondence with Arthur F. Bentley, Dewey writes "[Experience] has the advantage of being inclusive of non-cognitive behavior and giving the ground for linking up the cognitive with the non-cognitive."³⁸ This "ground" comprises an emergent order among biological impulses, feelings, mind, the subconscious, and consciousness. Dewey placed great emphasis on reflective thought, but considered cognition to be only a small part of experience, a process that can only be truly understood within a much larger range of experiential processes or environments. Hence, an understanding of non-cognitive experience is indispensable to an accurate theory of "how we come to know." And ultimately, we should not forget that Dewey valued inquiry (a term that he preferred to "epistemology") because of the ways in which it enriches non-cognitive experience, integrating into the economy of immediate existences that fund the bulk of our living experiences.

Emergentism provides more than a liberating account of growth and connection, experience, and meaning. It suggests a philosophical methodology. Thomas Alexander, the first scholar to call Dewey an "emergent naturalist"³⁹ writes that

Emergentism argues that nature is capable of generating or evolving new modes of order and creating new features which are irreducible to the conditions which produced them. Thus, matter

37) We might consider a similar example where two subjects are placed into the maze. The first subject has never solved the puzzle, and the second subject has solved the puzzle dozens of times. The first subject feels doubt, indeterminacy, and begins to inquire; the second subject feels only the tedium of repetition. If doubt is "in the situation," does it make sense to claim that both subjects are part of the same situation? Not, I think, in the sense that their situations are absolutely identical; the histories and needs that are functionally relevant to the individual agents are part of the conditions of the situation. Yet, the environment is largely shared; the potentialities for doubt, as well as tedium, are found in the maze as much as they are found in the individuals. Moreover, the larger structures of experience are shared: the situation is itself an event in a shared nature that transpires in coordination with culture and "mind."

38) Dewey and Bentley, *A Philosophical Correspondence*, 387.

39) Alexander calls Dewey an "emergent naturalist" in his 1987 monograph *John Dewey's Theory of Art, Experience and Nature*. Alexander develops his own theory of emergence and continuity, or "eco-ontology," inspired by Dewey's metaphysics.

is necessary for life, but life cannot be reduced to physics; life is necessary for consciousness, but consciousness cannot be reduced to neurophysics. It is important to emphasize, for Dewey's Emergentism at least, that (1) the emergent traits are not "supervenient properties" but creative transformations or reconstructions of nature, (2) nature cannot be identified with the object of physics, as in materialistic naturalisms but is the creative environment within which events of all kinds occur, and (3) novelty, individuality, and relation are pervasive features of nature. It is thus a serious mistake to read Dewey as belonging to the mechanistic, reductionistic naturalistic tradition of Democritus, Hobbes, Spencer, or Dennett. Nor is he an epiphenomenalist regarding consciousness as an impotent byproduct like Santayana or Paul Churchland.⁴⁰

When Alexander proposes that "life cannot be reduced to physics..." and "consciousness cannot be reduced to neurophysics," this statement relates to both ontology and methodology; the "patterns" of method must be compatible with the patterns of existence. Emergentism – and this seems absolutely crucial – describes, in a complementary way, an anti-reductive methodology alongside a non-reductive ontology. Consciousness cannot be explained through its physical conditions, and the social import of a war cannot be understood through counting the number of casualties.

Without a parallel between method and metaphysics, we encounter all of that which Dewey catalogues as intellectually and socially damaging: dualisms, absolutisms, and artificial limitations of all varieties. Simplification is tempting, but should at best be a temporary way of characterizing some phenomena for a specific analytical purpose. Reductive accounts continue to populate philosophies, whether they operate under the banner of "materialism," "scientific realism," or what is currently called "naturalism."

Dewey's unique conception of emergentism remains underdeveloped in critical literature. I hope to have given shape to the term itself, and to have provided an overview of the ways in which Dewey's theory of experience can be clarified, and more fully imagined, through an account of emergence.

40) Alexander, "The Art of Life," 19, note 3.

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