DEWEY ON THE EMOTIONS

DONALD J. MORSE

Abstract: This paper explores John Dewey's theory of the emotions and his reasons for developing it. The author considers two competing accounts for why Dewey might have developed his theory: one based on his attempt to clarify rationality and one based on his attempt to make us morally responsive agents to nature. After a close examination of key texts, the author concludes that Dewey's theory is designed to make us morally responsive. Dewey's theory of the emotions serves his purpose of arguing for our re-union with nature, in a manner similar, in fact, to Hegel, with the addition that Dewey makes it our express goal to be concerned for nature in our return to it.

Keywords: pragmatism; Dewey; Hegel; embodiment; emotion.

An old saying has it that one should beware of sticking one's neck out too far, lest it get chopped off. If ever there was a philosopher with a philosophical position who, on the face of it, ought to heed this advice, it is John Dewey with his position on the emotions. Dewey sticks his neck out here, way out. Or so it seems.

Dewey holds that we do not feel emotions so much as the world does. The world feels fear or anger, according to Dewey, and then impresses it upon us so that we feel it. As he puts it in *Experience and Nature*, it is false to "first endow man in isolation with an instinct of fear and then...imagine him...ejecting that fear into the environment." The truth rather is that "man fears because he exists in a fearful, an awful world. *The world* is precarious and perilous" (Dewey 1988a, 43-44).

But surely Dewey sticks his neck out here. On the face of it this position is, if not absurd, then at least so controversial as to invite rejection out of hand. What sense does it make to say that the world itself is fearful? The world has elements within it that we find fearful, to be sure. But these elements are not fearful in their own right. They are fearful because we find them so; they are fearful for us. Thus we correctly say, not that this tree or rock is afraid, not that some object in the world is afraid, but that *we* are afraid. At best, the world merely supplies the objects in response to which we become afraid. It is not itself full of fear, not itself the seat of the emotions. Individual selves are the seats of the emotions.

This, at any rate, is what I would call the common sense view of the emotions. It is also the view that most philosophers, I suspect, would uphold. It is the established and, so to say, the tried and true account of the emotions in everyday life. In going against it, therefore, Dewey invites great controversy. More, he risks rejection out of hand. He risks sounding simply false, almost romantic, and perhaps even silly.

Whether or not Dewey's position is correct, however, is not my concern in this paper.¹ My concern is rather to ask a more basic and simple question, namely, *why* does Dewey offer his controversial account of the emotions in the first place? What is the significance of saying that the world, not us, is primarily fearful? Why does Dewey stick his neck out for this idea? What is at stake for him here?

Perhaps the most straightforward answer to this question is one that would come from those who would emphasize the central importance of inquiry in Dewey's philosophy. Dewey, as everyone knows, seeks to overcome dualisms.² With his conception of inquiry, in particular, Dewey seeks to overcome a dualistic split in our understanding of knowledge—the split between reason and emotions. By showing how emotions underlie and guide our reasoning, Dewey, one may say, is struggling to give a more accurate and plausible account of reasoning itself.³

Let me pursue this interpretation a little further. According to this view, Dewey's account of the emotions exists primarily in order to straighten out our conception of reasoning, and the main way his account can do this is by making it clear that feelings and thoughts are deeply intertwined. This is so much the case, in fact—reason and emotion are so intertwined on Dewey's view—that one never simply thinks without feeling. It is best, therefore, as Dewey sees it, to call rational inquiry not a mode of thinking about objects or events but rather a “dramatic rehearsal” of events themselves (Dewey 1998b, 132).

Dramatic rehearsal is a fascinating view of reasoning according to which we quite literally feel our way into a conclusion. No cold, indifferent process of thinking leads us by sheer force of reason alone, not on this account. Instead, we are inside a situation that is confounded, we feel this disturbance ourselves and are disturbed, and our reasoning itself is an attempt to *feel our way back* into a non-disturbed situation and a no longer disturbed state of being. Here, our reasoning is a felt reasoning, reasoning motivated by emotions both in its beginning, middle, and end (*ibid.*, 132ff.).

The process begins with a clash of habits, and our subsequent attempt to consider in our imaginations, but not in direct action, how each habit in turn may function to repair itself after the collision. When our usual modes of conduct come into disagreement with one another, we envision the response we should make to the divergence before we make it. What happens is that “each conflicting habit...takes its turn in projecting itself upon the screen of imagination. It unrolls a picture of its future history, of the career it would have if it were

¹ For a defense of the Deweyan view, see (Johnson 2008), Chapters 3 and 4 and, within these, especially p. 67 and pp. 71-78. Johnson stresses that the world, and not only the individual, possesses the emotions (e.g., p. 67). But see p. 56, where Johnson also says that “emotions are...responses to various types of stimuli that typically have positive or negative value *for us*” (emphasis added). There seems to be a subtle difference between this aspect of Johnson's view and Dewey's view that *the world* is fearful, or that in its fearfulness it has this negative value in itself. As I will argue in this paper, Dewey wanted to make emotions about responding to the world's value, not only to our own value.

² For a standard account of this view of Dewey, see (E. Flower and M.G. Murphey 1977, 811-813).

³ For a masterful account of reasoning understood in this way, both in Dewey's work and beyond, and which goes beyond including emotions in reasoning to discussing feelings and other bodily elements as well, see (Johnson 2008, 94-110).

given head" (*ibid.*, 133). Each habit makes a case for itself as the habit we ought to give heed to; it presents a rehearsal of what would happen in real life if we followed it (*ibid.*, 133).

But this rehearsal is "dramatic" precisely because it is, from first to last, suffused with emotions for us. We are not indifferent to what is being rehearsed. On the contrary, each rehearsal of what to do elicits an emotional response in us somehow. "In thought as well as in overt action, the objects experienced in following out a course of action attract, repel, satisfy, annoy, promote and retard. Thus deliberation proceeds" (*ibid.*, 134). We are drawn, emotionally, to certain potential responses over and above others. "To every shade of imagined circumstance there is a vibrating response" (*ibid.*, 135).

Now a rational response to a conflict of habits, as Dewey sees it, is not one that is somehow purged of emotion, and made purely on a logical basis. It is, rather, an emotional preference for that course of action that promises to actually resolve the original conflict such as it is. It is that response to the conflict in which "the object thought of...stimulates by unifying, harmonizing different competing tendencies" (*ibid.*, 135). It is a response we are compelled to accept because *we feel* that it will function to work out the difficulty in our habits. "Reasonableness is in fact a quality of an effective relationship among desires rather than a thing opposed to desire" (*ibid.*, 135). It is the organized arrangement of our affective states, an arrangement charged with its own unique quality of acceptance and affirmation.

An irrational response, by contrast, is one that grips us in so uncontrolled and intense a fashion as to allow more readily for an "arbitrary" response to the situation (*ibid.*, 135). It is one that "stimulates" us to want to select a response that is not likely to be of any real assistance to the matter at hand, or that continues the conflict (*ibid.*, 135). In such cases what occurs is that the stimulation is pursued for its own sake, not for its eventual function in overcoming the conflict. The object of thought reaches such "a pitch of intensity" that it "overrides all competitors and secures for itself the sole right of way... It allows no room for alternatives; it absorbs us, enraptures us, carries us away, sweeps us off our feet by its own attractive force. Then choice is arbitrary, unreasonable" (*ibid.*, 135). We are talking here about being stimulated pure and simple, as opposed to being stimulated by a specific feeling for organization.

In both cases emotional response is the key. We feel our way into the kind of intellectual response we make to a problem. An irrational response is one where the object of thought motivates us by causing just any old feeling in us, and this feeling gains the upper hand and compels us to act, therefore, in just any old way. A rational response is one where the object of thought motivates us by promising to organize the situation. In each type of response, the object of thought deliberated about motivates, and it is this motivation that compels us, in one way or another, to draw certain conclusions about the object of thought we are entertaining and to select it as the object of thought for us to assent to and to pursue.

In giving this account of the matter, then, Dewey has clearly broken with any attempts to define reason as separate from emotion. He has, in fact, shown their intimate connection, for he has shown that reason is, in essence, a kind of emotion, a thoughtful emotion. Emotion, in turn, is something in the world, as we saw, not something just inside our heads, and so reason itself in effect is a kind of thoughtful response *to the world*. When we reason we feel our way into a situation in which we are implicated; we sense its nuances and needs through our

shattered habits; we appraise its qualities. And on the basis of this grasp of the situation as a whole we draw our conclusions concerning what to think and how to act.

It now becomes clear, I hope, why, according to our current interpretation at least, Dewey must say that emotions are in the world. It is so that he can make us, with our rational capacity, share an affinity with the world—share in the movements of its disruption and reconciliation. When we reason, especially when we reason well, we feel a situation's disruptions as they actually occur, and we respond to them in their actuality, thereby thinking in response to the actual world itself. Reason in this way is put into the world, and its thinking is made into a legitimate grasp of the world's needs themselves.

The point of making such strong claims, then, as that the world itself is fearful, is to supply a correct account of reason, one that includes feeling and, more importantly, a feelingly grasp of the world. But though this account of Dewey's position is certainly pertinent to the issue at hand, consider that what is simultaneously gained from it, beyond a new account of reason, is the idea that through our emotions, especially thoughtful ones, we grasp the world, we feel *its* processes, which after all we are inside. What this means, I would like to suggest, is that what Dewey ultimately aims to do with his theory of the emotions is to advance the idea of *our concern for the world*, something like an "outlook" that is "ecological," which Thomas M. Alexander has attempted to articulate in working through Dewey's philosophy, although I will here develop its role specifically with reference to Dewey's view of the emotions.⁴

By a concern for the world, I mean a condition of maintaining a certain movement that is deemed right and proper. I mean a condition of maintaining what Dewey calls, at the close of *Experience and Nature*, "the moving unbalanced balance of things" (Dewey 1988a, 314). To possess a concern for the world is to seek to maintain, not order, nor disorder, but the transition itself from one to the next. It is to affirm life, in specific situations in which we are alive, by maintaining in those situations a certain movement, and being concerned for this movement in situations. My claim is that by insisting upon our emotional grasp of the world through intelligence, Dewey is insisting upon our concern for the world—for maintaining its processes through our actions.

To see that this is the case, consider the following crucial theme in *Experience and Nature*—the theme of "the self" as "a pilgrim" (*ibid.*, 30). The theme occurs for the first time in chapter one, towards the end, where Dewey is identifying the main virtues of adopting the empirical method—the method that takes each event as a real, objective feature of the world just as it occurs, including the event of experiencing an emotion. Dewey says there that the opposite approach, the approach of privileging rational aspects of experience over physical ones, ends up by setting up a strong division between the experiencing self and nature. The result is that "the self becomes not merely a pilgrim but an unnaturalized and unnaturalizable

⁴ See (Alexander 1999, 164). Alexander briefly mentions the feelings on p. 163 and the emotions on p.167. In this work, in which Alexander shows for Dewey that we always act in the world, even in art and aesthetics (these are "ecological" in that sense), he has not discovered and advanced the key insight that we have a concern for the world itself. But see Alexander's attempt to draw upon and go beyond Dewey in developing "ecological wisdom" in (Alexander 2003, 132-133). See also pp. 148-149. Here Alexander sums up his account and mentions our need, on p. 149, to "care" for the world and to "manage" it.

alien in the world" (*ibid.*, 30). Where only rational experience is considered real, the rational self gets cut off from the world, which as nature is now seen as wholly other than it, and finds that it doesn't belong to the world and never can. The self becomes a tortured and foreign being whose ultimate satisfaction is forever out of reach.

This theme of the pilgrim occurs throughout the book, in fact. We find it again, for example, at the beginning of chapter seven, where Dewey says that one crucial way that the mind is thought to relate to the body is that the mind is seen as a spiritual force capable of grasping the eternal forms, which alone are real and which, when it participates in them, itself becomes eternal. "Under such circumstances," says Dewey, "a spirit which believes that it was created in the image of a divine eternal spirit, in whose everlastingness it properly shares, finds itself an alien and pilgrim in a strange and fallen world" (*ibid.*, 191).

The solution, of course, to this separation of experience from nature is to put experience back into nature. As Dewey puts it, we must "acknowledge that all modes of experiencing are ways in which some genuine traits of nature come to manifest realization" (*ibid.*, 30-31). We must refuse to see only rational experience as real, and instead regard aesthetic, ethical, and emotional experience also as authentically real. This means, then, that the tensions and disturbances we feel daily and throughout life cannot be discounted; they are real—that is, undeniably what they present themselves to be in our experience. They are really our care or concern as they seem to be. In Dewey's words, because what we feel is real, "our constant and unescapable [sic] concern [really is, as it seems to be,] with prosperity and adversity, success and failure, achievement and frustration, good and bad" (*ibid.*, 33).

More importantly, however, if our emotional concern for things like achievement and frustration really is in nature, it is not only real but also objective, a genuine feature of nature. When a problem presents itself, for example, it is not simply a problem within our own minds but rather a problem that *we are within*. So, too, with any satisfaction we achieve in solving the problem. "Satisfaction is not subjective, private or personal: it is conditioned by objective partialities and defections and made real by objective situations and completions" (*ibid.*, 59). A feeling of satisfaction is not simply a feeling; it is an objective process *of* satisfaction that we are quite literally within.

Our concern, then, for the disturbances and satisfactions that we feel is a concern, not simply for our own skin, so to speak, but for an objective situation of which we are a part. It is a concern for nature. We are always *about* nature in some fashion or other. The only question is how. Are we about nature rationally or irrationally? Is our care for nature, the nature of which we are a part, an intelligent care or a care gripped by a random emotional intensity in one direction or other? Is it one in which we practice dramatic rehearsal with respect to nature well or poorly?

When we see ourselves as pilgrims we practice our concern for nature poorly. Our relation to nature is then one of denial that we are a part of nature, which means an abdication of responsibility to nature. We turn away from the nature of which we are a part and do not attend to it. We look away. But we *are* within nature. Thus Dewey can say, towards the end of *Experience and Nature*, and almost as its entire, culminating point, that "fidelity to the nature of which we belong, as parts however weak, demands that we cherish our desires and ideals till we have converted them into intelligence, revised them in terms of the ways and means which nature makes possible" (*ibid.*, 314).

What Dewey is saying here is that it is not hubris to respond to nature intelligently, as the pilgrim might believe. It is rather our duty to respond to nature in this way. We are parts of nature and belong to it. Here we find our place. “Fidelity to...nature” (*ibid.*, 314) itself, as Dewey’s puts it, is what demands that we take our felt needs seriously and act with intelligence with respect to them, which means that manifesting a concern for our own needs is, in a way, to manifest a concern for nature. We might almost say that for Dewey nature *wants* us to manifest our concern for nature in nature itself through an intelligent attending to our own felt needs, and indeed at one point in *Experience and Nature* Dewey comes very close to saying just this: chiding the pilgrim for his belief in man’s separation from nature, Dewey insists that “the situation is not indifferent to man, because it forms man as a desiring, striving, thinking, feeling creature” (*ibid.*, 67). There is a definite Hegelian moment here that must be noted—“the homecoming of spirit” is what Dewey is speaking about, that is, the idea that “spirit” is able to find itself even in external nature.⁵ Dewey claims that our human efforts and values are not forever separated from nature, but rather “are a drama enacted by these forces and conditions” in nature itself (Dewey 1988a, 67). “The situation...forms man,” forms his feelings and thoughts and also, therefore, it forms his needs and drives to respond to situations (*ibid.*, 67). The situation, in other words, forms man in order to respond to itself in a certain way. It has formed a feeling creature, a creature that has a care for situations, and therefore it has formed a care for itself through its care for man.

But this does not mean, and cannot mean for Dewey, that nature simply justifies man’s pursuit of his own private needs. On the contrary, and as we have seen, these needs of man’s (and their satisfactions) are objective; and we are searching for workable ideals, values shaped by intelligence, values that *can* be manifest in nature. And so, in effect, through man, nature responds to its own needs. This seems to be Dewey’s point. Through acting as man, as a creature in nature and not a pilgrim, we act in accordance with nature: we respond to *its* needs and are faithful to it; we feel in accordance with it and in response to it, and the only interesting question that remains is whether we feel and act in accordance with it or not. Do we attend to nature in a haphazard, indifferent way, or do we attend to it in a more mindful and attuned way? Do we in any sense seek to improve it based on its own possibilities or do we, on the contrary, force it against itself and its own needs and interests and thereby denigrate its continued unfolding either within ourselves or our surroundings? (Dewey 1988a, 314).

To denigrate nature, it seems, would be to attempt to act beyond its possibilities. It chiefly happens in two ways: in our experience either the stable is privileged at the expense of the hazardous, or the hazardous is privileged at the expense of the stable. Either balance is accorded supremacy, or unbalance is. Either we yearn for a perfect world at all costs, for example, clinging too tightly to our ideals, or we forsake all ideals and jump headlong into the world without thinking about what will result. An intelligent response, however, is one where we work toward a union of stable and hazardous, balance and unbalance. It

⁵ See Lukács’ claim that the phrase, “the homecoming of spirit,” aptly describes Hegel’s philosophy in “the *Phenomenology*,” in (Lukács 2004, 124). Alexander uncovers the theme of the world as our home in (Alexander 2003, 149). He mentions Dewey’s relation to Hegelianism, but from a different angle, in (Alexander 1999, 164).

is one where we embrace the “unbalanced balance of things,” (*ibid.*, 314) one where we acknowledge that “the union of the hazardous and the stable, of the incomplete and recurrent, is the condition of all experienced satisfaction as truly as of our predicaments and problems” (*ibid.*, 57). To be intelligent is to affirm life itself and its processes, to accept life’s conditions for existence, including its unbalanced states, and to work with, rather than against, the ever-recurring rhythms⁶ of unbalanced and balanced, to attend to life’s fallings and risings, to be true to life as it is, and thereby to realize in the heart of the world an effective concern for the world itself.

We can now see, I hope, why else Dewey might have been so willing to stick his neck out with his conception of the emotions. He is not only trying to give a correct account of reason, one that includes the emotions. He is also trying to advance a concern for the world, or in other words a belief that our feelings are feelings both *of* and *for* the world, manifestations of the world’s concern for itself which, in us, arises as a concern for the world. Dewey is trying to get us to see that the problems we genuinely and legitimately feel are always problems of nature, and that the responses we make to our problems, therefore, ought also to be responses to nature.

What this means, ultimately, and surprisingly, is that Dewey is something of a green thinker. His account of the emotions makes clear that for him we are responsive to nature, at least when we are intelligent, we have a need and an interest in nature, and what is more—we *feel* this need and interest. We feel the rhythms that occur in nature, and we are driven on from within by our own needs to maintain these rhythms in our lives, seeking balance and, where we feel it is needed unbalance, in order to promote life and nature itself, whose champions we feel ourselves to be, as Peirce said about “a man’s logical method” (Peirce 1955, 21-22). Dewey is green. Dewey has a concern for the environment. Dewey sees the highest vocation of man as being the affirmation of nature itself and its movements. And it is to advance this vocation that Dewey has risked his account of the emotions.⁷

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⁶ See (Alexander 1999, 167) for an account of “the rhythm of life” at work in Dewey’s aesthetic thinking.

⁷ A previous version of this paper, called “Dewey’s Account of the Emotions—And Why It Matters,” was presented at the meeting of the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy in Portland, Maine, USA, 2002.

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Department of Philosophy
Webster University
St. Louis, MO 63119
USA
E-mail: dmorse@webster.edu