Book Review

John Dewey, Robert Pirsig, and the Art of Living

Jim W. Garrison


David Granger has written a wonderful book. As I read, I often paused, put it down, and thought. He synthesizes a great deal of work from varied sources, including Stanley Cavell, the British Romantics, Emerson, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Plato, and Aristotle while expositing contemporary pragmatic aesthetics as exemplified by Richard Shusterman, Philip W. Jackson, and Thomas M. Alexander. Granger relies on Alexander’s idea of “the human erōs” as seeking to live a life of expanding meaning and value. This breadth is necessary given the topic—John Dewey and Robert Pirsig’s “Art of Living.”

I have sometimes mentioned to those who have read Pirsig that they already have insight into Dewey. We use technology (e.g., motorcycles) to mediate between immediate consummatory experiences, although there are always moments when the artistic practice (e.g., creating or maintaining the technology or the method of inquiry) is itself an aesthetic experience. I now realize those who have read Dewey also have insight into Pirsig, who is a first-rate philosopher in the etymological sense. Pirsig and Dewey are friends of wisdom.

Granger organizes his book around four questions. The first asks: “What sort of world is it that makes art as experience possible?” He devotes the first two chapters, titled “Dewey’s and Pirsig’s Metaphysics” and “Metaphysics at Work,” to his answer. Granger affirms Dewey’s claim that there “are two sorts of worlds in which esthetic experience would not occur” (Granger, 9). A world of pure flux could never move to a consummation while an entirely finished world forbids further creative action. Dewey’s existential generic traits, especially the relatively precarious and relatively stable, pair with the “static” and “Dynamic” in Pirsig’s “Metaphysics of Quality.” Dewey assails analytic logic-chopping in favor of a textured holism that makes suitable distinctions when needed. In Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance (ZMM), Pirsig complains about the “Church of Reason” whose “mythos” proclaims: “the forms of this world are real but the Quality of this world unreal . . . insane!” (318). Granger explores this metaphysical madness.
Chapters 3, “Dewey’s and Pirsig’s Aesthetics,” and 4, “Pragmatist Aesthetics and Romanticism,” address the question: “What is the general nature of aesthetic experience and how might it serve to nurture the human eros?” Granger explores Pirsig’s and Dewey’s aesthetics by examining their similarities to the British Romantics, especially Wordsworth’s natural supernaturalism. A partial list of the elements of what Dewey calls “an experience” include individualizing quality, dynamic unity (even of opposites), self-sufficiency, immediacy, ineffability, and multiple kinds of continuity. We also find these characteristics in Pirsig’s depiction of “high quality” experience.

Pirsig remarks: “The study of the art of motorcycle maintenance is really a miniature study of the art of rationality itself” (ZMM, 84). Ultimately, concepts, categories, categorical systems, and discursive thought itself are all artistic creations. The “Church of Reason” dogmatically denigrates noncognitive meanings, renders ethical meanings secondary, and elides aesthetic visions of the possible beyond the actual. It dismisses metaphors, metronomes, similes, and such as simply logical errors (e.g., category mistakes). The irony, as Granger shows, is that formal logic itself is an art form.

The third question asks: “How might art as experience contribute to an everyday poetics of living?” Chapters 5, “The Poetics of Cultural Renewal,” and 6, “The Poetics of Personal Renewal,” answer this question by investigating issues of self and society while building on Pirsig’s and Dewey’s efforts to seize aesthetic experience from “the Artworld” and restore it to everyday life, from whence it came and must ultimately return. Relying on the work of Emerson, and Cavell’s exposition of Emersion, chapter 5 shows how to acknowledge the skeptical impulse without allowing it to overwhelm us. We must learn to live not only without ultimate epistemological foundation, but also with the bottomlessness of our own being. This chapter features a wonderful exposition of Coleridge’s “The Ancient Mariner” as an allegory of skepticism. The continual poetic creation of “high quality” moments and meanings leads to continuous cultural renewal, thereby overcoming the paralysis of skepticism while acknowledging its claims. “Heaven above,” finds Pirsig, “fades from meaning when space-age consciousness asks, Where is ‘above’?” (ZMM 168). For every God that dies, we must either create another or, better, recreate ourselves.

Eventually, questions about cultural renewal involve questions of personal renewal. Granger thinks Emerson and Pirsig overemphasize the inner sources of renewal in ways that can cut individuals off from culture, other persons, and even their own body, which are often sources of personal renewal. Self-absorption frequently inhibits self-expression. Granger shows how Dewey balances self with society by seeking to educate truly unique individuals capable of making original contributions to cultural renewal, which, reciprocally, provides resources for individual renewal within the communal circle.

Granger’s last question is: “What kinds of learning environments—formal and informal—help to foster art as experience?” Chapter 7, “Learning and Teach-
ing Art as Experience,” provides useful answers. He worries that discipline-based art education repeats “the Artworld” opinion of art while asserting rigid educational standards of beauty. Granger urges us to avoid what he calls “mimetic instruction,” where the student’s task requires passively copying the form proffered by the instructor and filling it with the instructor’s content. Pirsig objects to the ancient “Church” dogma bequeathed by Socrates that “all things which are to be taught must first be defined” (ZMM 187). Pirsig remarks: “When I say, ‘Quality’ cannot be defined,’ I’m really saying formally ‘I’m stupid about Quality’” (ZMM 185). Dewey and Pirsig agree that the immediate aesthetic experience of Quality lies beyond the limits of language, although we may gesture toward it. Granger expounds on the necessity of students and teachers making meaning together in creative community where the results are not entirely specifiable in advance. My institution is NCATE approved. NCATE demands “rubrics” for everything; the result is consistently low quality educational experiences.

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