

BOOK REVIEW

JOHN DEWEY AND THE ARTFUL LIFE:
PRAGMATISM, AESTHETICS, AND MORALITY

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Scott Stroud, *John Dewey and the Artful Life: Pragmatism, Aesthetics, and Morality*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011. 229 + x pp. ISBN 978-0-271-05007-2. \$31.95 (pbk).

The overriding question Stroud confronts in *John Dewey and the Artful Life* is how to render more of life's experiences, including the ensuing benefits, as aesthetic or artful as possible. The answer to this question is challenging and complex. The claim most aesthetic theories make is that an object, activity, or experience is artful if and only if it has intrinsic value. Although what constitutes intrinsic value is widely contested, having value in and of itself is a necessary and sufficient condition for an object to be art or an experience aesthetic. This value gives art and aesthetic experience their unique quality and separates them from everyday objects, activities and experiences with only instrumental value; that is, value for the sake of something else. Such a view of art and aesthetic experience has long dominated not only our cultural narrative and practices, but our individual thoughts and behaviors as well.

As Dewey has shown repeatedly (e.g., in *Experience and Nature*, *The Quest for Certainty*, *Art as Experience*), this view of art and aesthetic experience is grounded in a distorted understanding of experience. This view is pervaded with intellectually fallacious dualisms, especially the belief that items of reflection are the constituents of primary experience. In contrast, for Dewey, the constituents of primary experience are noncognitive or pre-reflective, consisting of deep-seated habits (as acquired predispositions to manners or modes of response) of which we are minimally aware, at best. The fallacy of dualism and its consequent separation in experience fractures the unity of individual and collective experience and, in turn, the unity of self and community.

John Dewey and the Artful Life consists of eight chapters. In the first chapter, Stroud establishes the overall context for his project and introduces the reader to its basic structure in broad outline. The second chapter introduces the problem of the value of aesthetic experience using contemporary scholarship in art theory, and sets the stage for Stroud's subsequent Deweyan analysis of experience. In the third chapter, Stroud presents a Deweyan account of aesthetic experience he refers to as "experiential" as an alternative to traditional "causal" theories. The fourth chapter

uses Dewey's notion of "progressive adjustment" to argue that moral value and cultivation integrally involves attention to the present situation as both the spirit and method through which conduct is made morally worthy. Here Stroud emphasizes the importance of a first person focus on the individual and the orientation of one's attentiveness to situations and relationships.

In the fifth chapter, Stroud illustrates the rich communicative value of art by placing its communicative aspect in the context of a particular audience. As such, it implies the notion of intention; that is, humans communicate purposely to achieve certain results, transform others, and so on. The sixth chapter examines how Stroud's view of orientation fits into Dewey's meliorism (as improvement of experience). This occurs by shaping one's immediate and reflective attention in ways that render human experience more enjoyable and conducive to growth by making one's activities more unified, alive, and absorptive. For Stroud, the type of orientation to be cultivated should guide one's adaptive engagement with the present situation, with all its resources and obstacles, in such a way that the activities, desires, and goals makes one's experience more unified. In the seventh chapter, Stroud shows how growth and the aesthetic represent a unified, consummatory, and absorptive engagement of a live creature with its present situation. What are vitally important to Stroud's account are the mental habits/orientations that can be meliorated to increase one's chances of and opportunities for growth. In terms of the subjective quality of experience, orientations are what make the difference between activity/conduct being artful or being fragmented drudgery. The eighth and final chapter lays out a number of possible criticisms of the arguments of previous chapters and Stroud's responses.

Although Dewey often pointed to the connection between aesthetic experience and morality, Stroud observes that he never articulated a full account of the connection. Stroud seeks to connect art and aesthetic experience to moral value by showing how art can be understood as a path toward moral cultivation, gaining and refining those values that are normatively beneficial to living the best life possible. Using Dewey's reconstruction of knowledge, morals, and aesthetic experience, Stroud shows how art can be integrated into the practical, goal-driven activities associated with everyday living, particularly those that improve what we do, how we do it, and who we are. Stroud characterizes his account of aesthetic experience as "experiential" and provides a critical analysis of how it differs from traditional, and generally accepted, "causal" theories. He also contrasts Dewey's "operational meliorism," which stresses habit reconstruction, with his own account of orientational meliorism, which emphasizes that the way to improve the quality of one's experience is through the adjustment of one's orientation toward the world, self, others, and actions (see especially pages 138–43 and 159–65).

One idea central to Stroud's account is that both morality and aesthetic experience involve progressive adjustment of the individual in light of some concrete

situation. The adjustment process requires absorptive attention in order to alter or improve one's orientation; that is, those deep-seated habits that generate the quality of one's present and future experience. Aesthetic experience, then, is found in one's attention to and absorption in the richness of the present situation, whether contemplating art objects or participating in a theater production of a play by Bertolt Brecht. Another problematic dualism in traditional aesthetic theory is the internal/external dichotomy of art, which assumes that a fairly concretized and determinable boundary exists between art objects and other objects and states of affairs. Stroud abandons the internal/external dualism and argues for a shift in focus to how attitudes condition artistic experience. Connecting aesthetic experience to one's immediate and reflective subjective orientations (attitudes), for Stroud, is what makes the immediacy and qualitative uniqueness of aesthetic experience so valuable and striking. In this regard, Stroud cites a recent study of workers' happiness that found hospital cleaners who saw their jobs as an integral part of the hospital's mission to heal people also reported greater levels of happiness and satisfaction than those who saw their jobs as merely cleaning up undesirable messes.¹

Stroud uses Dewey's reconstruction of intrinsic value to account for its immediately experienced value and more instrumental and reflective phases as well. He still attends to those causal factors noted by reflection that are simultaneous with its experiential, qualitative aspects. Not only is the felt immediacy of aesthetic experience captured, but also the morally efficacious qualities associated; that is, the resulting unification of means and ends. Stroud's reconstruction of aesthetic experience requires an orientation of complete absorption in the immediate qualities presented. It also demands reflection on the meaning of those qualities as connected to other events, qualities, or states of affairs. This reflective orientation must be rendered habitual in order to connect aesthetic experience with value. This is the way in which reflective activity provides added meaning. It allows for the ordering of values or instating of an end-in-view so as to guide present activity, whether as moral action directed toward others or as thought directed toward the object of aesthetic experience.

Using Dewey's notion of progressive adjustment, Stroud shows that moral valuation and cultivation involve a focusing of personal attention on the present situation. It is the relationship in which one is embedded that forms the "spirit and method" of conduct and makes it morally worthy. Reflective or mediating activities, in some situations, can imbue present activity with more meaning and, to some extent, modify one's capacities (e.g., internal dispositions, impulses, inclinations). The implication for moral cultivation is wide-ranging. It begins with the self-realization that optimal adjustment, in light of the environmental situation, occurs whenever one's capacities are expressed in a sustainable, meaningful, and effective fashion; that is, expressing impulses that are well-adjusted to other impulses and to the situation. So whether the end point of moral cultivation is "goodness" or the

“progressive readjustment of conduct” to the demands of the environment, whatever conduces to this end point has moral value. Moreover, the agent and the act are not inherently separate, but are rather parts of a single activity. Key to Stroud’s view of moral cultivation as “progressive adjustment” is the activity of developing an attitude of attentiveness to one’s present situation. This is necessary because (1) the moral situation is fundamentally a present situation, (2) it is a key constituent in upholding one’s relational obligations, (3) the ends and implicated goals of moral activity always occupy a present situation as part of the continuous life of purposive activity, and (4) it is a vital way to cultivate the self toward the goal of progressive adjustment. Further, moral cultivation is not just about self-realization—it improves the community by bringing it closer to its overall realization. Since the activities of each agent affect others, there may be a multiplier effect to self-realization. Stroud observes that since situations continue to change, perhaps an attitude of attention in both the present and future is as final as any moral end becomes for Dewey.

Stroud’s reading of Dewey suggests that a complete aesthetic situation involves a communicative aspect. Expression is coupled with reception so that the artist and the audience attain a rich, full, and unified response. Instead of the intention of the artist, what is most important in the aesthetic situation is the observer’s orientation toward the art object. This means that an art object can be morally cultivating because it is an instantiation of the end point of moral contemplation. At the end point, one’s attention to a concrete situation given in the present (i.e., the art object) is engaged with one’s deliberative, reflective, and imaginative faculties. The fact that experiences of an art object are framed selectively is what draws one’s attention and interest to the object’s details, situations, configurations, meaningful properties, or qualities. As a result of this engagement, one’s attention is rewarded with changed or added meaning in an experience. Stroud’s emphasis on the importance of attention in aesthetic experience shifts the very notion of criticism. Aesthetic critique goes from being merely a subjective description of the critic’s experience (judicial criticism) to the critic’s experience of the object’s qualities, including how these relate to its constitution and effects on auditors. Instead of comparative methods for qualitatively measuring the object, criticism involves an analysis of the constituent parts of an art object and a synthesis of those parts into a unified whole. Hence, criticism is not about telling someone what an important work of art is or the impression had, but about expanding and deepening the critic’s experiences (as well as those of the critic’s audience) by providing a possible orientation that helpfully orders and improves future experiences.

Art and morality require engagement in anticipatory activity. Stroud uses Dewey’s theory of deliberative activity, with particular emphasis on the process of dramatic rehearsal, to develop an understanding of moral value as it relates to art objects. Dramatic rehearsal is an imaginative way to reflect on what one ought to do without doing it first. It also entails placing attention on something that one may

have previously overlooked. Imagination plays a vital role in dramatic rehearsal because it opens up the possibility of improved meaning, which, in turn, leads to more adaptive or flexible responses to future situations (i.e., Deweyan growth). Through their evocative and communicative power, art objects focus the observers' attention on their embedded values. These objects can also change or strengthen those values by making present experience more reflective and certain. The experience of art objects, for Stroud, can be morally cultivating because of the unique integration of means and ends in these sensuous objects. This integration occurs in deliberation and its associated process of dramatic rehearsal. The power derived from art objects is their intentional nature; that is, their ability to frame and focus our attention and hone our ability to progressively adjust and grow as agents. In terms of moral cultivation, then, we should foster those habits that experience has shown to be efficacious—for instance, habits of sensitivity, generosity, imagination, and impartiality.

According to Stroud, both aesthetic and nonaesthetic experience depend on the subjective variable of orientation. Aesthetic value is intrinsic value, or the immediate attention paid to one's doing or undergoing, as opposed to instrumental value, or the worth of a means to an end. The value of Stroud's account of orientational meliorism is that it offers strategies to improve the quality of one's lived experiences. Although one's orientations can be altered as a result of the activities of others (e.g., through education), Stroud emphasizes those alterations that are the result of an individual taking initiative. Instantiating such an orientation involves the constant practice of being attentive to the present activity and its materials, altering the ways of education to better equip individuals to enjoy their work activities, and through change that is (1) self-initiated and (2) directed by conscious effort. In the end, living an artful life requires us to recognize that the self and the world we are creating through our actions constitute a work of art worth attending to with energy, care, and devotion.

John Dewey and the Artful Life is not only a solid and valuable addition to Dewey scholarship in general, but it is a particularly welcome addition to the growing scholarship on Dewey's view of human well-being. Stroud's arguments are well developed, extensively documented, and placed within the context of contemporary theories of art and aesthetic experience. Although there are a number of contributions this philosophically sharp and complex work makes to the existing Dewey scholarship, perhaps its most valuable contribution lies in Stroud's notion of orientational meliorism. One minor structural complaint, however, is Stroud's use of the concluding chapter to address a number of possible criticisms and his responses to them. Most readers will likely find the placement inconvenient and wish that these points were addressed in the preceding text.

In conclusion, Stroud's book will find a readership not only among philosophers of art and art educators, but also among a general audience of practitioners.

Educators interested in art and aesthetics, for example, will likely find his discussion of the importance of attentiveness and orientation intellectually stimulating. Similarly, readers interested in the relationship between education and moral cultivation will probably value his discussion of orientational meliorism. Finally, rhetoric and communications scholars should appreciate Stroud's argument for the aesthetics of everyday communication. All in all, the book is a first-rate contribution to the literature on Dewey's theory of art, art education, and his philosophy of art.

NOTES

1 Amy Wrzesniewski, and Jane Dutton, "Crafting a Job: Revisioning Employees as Active Crafters of Their Work," *Academy of Management Review* 26 (2001): 179–201.

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