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The Journal of Aesthetic Education, Volume 43, Number 1, Spring 2009,
pp. 30-40 (Article)

Published by University of Illinois Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jae.0.0035>

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Dewey and Taoism: Teleology and Art

CRISPIN SARTWELL

In some ways, the inaugural thought of the Western tradition is Aristotle's, repeated with regard to almost every subject matter he investigated. We could call this thought teleology, technology, or means-ends rationality. Here is the first sentence of the *Nicomachean Ethics*: "Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and pursuit, is thought to aim at some good; and for this reason the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim." This notion reappears in fits and starts throughout the tradition and has a particularly fraught relation to Christianity. But in Adam Smith's economics and in utilitarian ethics, as well as in the economic and political orders they reflect, it reasserts its dominance. And in pragmatism, teleology becomes a theory of all value, and in particular a theory of truth.

The West, however, also suffers from teleology, or from (in the current phases) "excellence" or a "purpose-driven life." And it is possible for a planet to suffer from our enthusiasm for its technological transformation. Within the Western tradition, the Eastern tradition is read as a cure for teleology, as a place where ends are annihilated into being, or into immediacy, in which one lets go of purpose and finds peace. This essay explores that imaginary construction of teleology's Asian other. But even Aristotle, and even the pragmatists, felt an urgency to collapse ends into means, to find meaning in the process as well as the products of living. They found it, I propose, in perhaps the zone where West meets the West's East—in the concept of art, particularly as set out in Dewey's great work of aesthetics, *Art as Experience*.

I

Let's begin by asking some basic questions about human action, truth, art, and the relation of means and ends:

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- (1) Is all, or for that matter any, human action comprehensible within a teleological structure? That is, is each, or any, human action undertaken for the sake of some goal or purpose? For example, should we consider Aristotle's practical syllogism a reasonable global account?
- (2) Considering beliefs as actions, are beliefs held, or propositions entertained, for the sake of some goal, and can the truth or falsity of some belief be understood in terms of its relation to that goal?
- (3) Considering art as an arena of human action, are the arts to be understood or evaluated in terms of means and ends?

Let me first just baldly state my position on these questions:

- (1a) It is not the case that all human action is oriented toward goals, and no human action is fully comprehended by a specification of its purpose.
- (2a) Whether a belief effectively conduces to some goal never has anything to do with the truth of that belief. Beliefs that are extremely or maximally effective in achieving any goal may be false, and beliefs that form a barrier to the achievement of any goal may be true.
- (3a) The relation between means and ends in art is exemplary and forces us to reconstrue that relation globally.

I take it that if you deny (1a) and (2a), or for that matter either one, you cannot be a pragmatist in the classical sense. That is, (1) and (2), converted from questions into assertions, embody a basic statement of pragmatism. Over the years I have often formulated pragmatism in this admittedly rather simplifying way in the moment before I attack it, and I have often been accused of attacking a straw man. To say I could substantiate my claims by chapter and verse is, however, an understatement, and here I provide merely one formulation—Dewey's from *Reconstruction in Philosophy*:

If ideas, meanings, conceptions, notions, theories, systems are instrumental to an active reorganization of the given environment, to a removal of some specific trouble and perplexity, then the test of their validity and value lies in accomplishing this work. If they succeed in their office, they are reliable, valid, good, true. [The omission of "beautiful" seems unaccountable.] If they fail to clear up confusion, to eliminate defects, if they increase confusion, uncertainty and evil when they are acted upon, then they are false. Confirmation, corroboration, verification lie in works, consequences. Handsome is that handsome does. By their fruits shall ye *know* them. That which guides us truly is true—demonstrated capacity for such guidance is precisely what is meant by truth.¹

One way to state the pragmatist position would be in terms of problematic situations—practical confusions, for example, or mathematical quandaries, artistic puzzles—where truth, art, science, cookery, teaching,

and so on would consist of resolutions to these problems. Human action in this account consists of attempted resolutions to a series of problems, and the solution is true where it yields a sort of satisfaction that accompanies such solutions; a place of rest or surcease preparatory to addressing the next problem. Every truth would be, hence, provisional: the problem might arise again in a related way, and the human condition consists in the fact that there are always new problematic situations calling for resolution.

Obviously, there is a variety of cases in which this is more or less a proper phenomenological description. For example, you're trying to decide whether to accept a marriage proposal. You contemplate your long-term happiness in relation to this proposal, deciding whether the marriage is likely to conduce to that end. Then you accept, or not. Someone assigns you a math problem and you solve it, thus helping you get a diploma and, down the line, income. You're trying to figure out how to provide energy to a certain region, so you design, fund, and build a power station. Democrat or Republican? Depends on the future you envision and your understanding of the means to achieve it. You're bewildered and confused, then things become clear and you experience a sensation of peace.

But the basic situation of me the schlumph trying to make it through another day is just not usually like this. I'm exhaustedly staring at the television, let us say. Do I think this will push ahead my purposes? Well, it might occur to me that I stand in need of rest and refreshment in order to return to my problematical situations. Or I might just be staring. As I allow myself to drift off to sleep, I'm letting go of the problematical situations, and I'm no more sleeping so I can solve problems than I am solving problems so I can sleep. Or perhaps I am letting myself drift off to sleep because my sleepiness itself represents a problematical situation that I resolve by sleeping. If you think this is how people think or act, you're laboring under a theory, and sleep is of course a letting go of thinking and acting. In that sense it is an end, or at least a surcease from problematical situations. In fact, that is usually the only real resolution to our problems: allowing our consciousness to disintegrate around them, or learning the slow hard important lesson of apathy and cynicism—making yourself cease caring. Or, slightly more optimistically, giving up and yielding to the problem, living within it, playing around with it, or reveling in it, or something. Indeed, since our basic problematical situation is massively unresolvable, and since human history is a slow descent into incomprehensible evil and chaos, cynicism and play are fundamental.

To take an example, American politics represents a series of situations that are radically problematical. We should get busy resolving questions about warrantless wiretapping or the fact that Hillary Clinton has no position on Iraq. The way to resolve these problems is through the experimental democratic process, in which Dewey placed such faith. All I can do is wish you good luck, and tell you that my own approach is mere verbal abuse,

restricted to my tiny irrelevant circle. I gave up a long time ago, and I suggest that you do likewise. Life without giving up is truly useless and, from an external view, hopeless. If I told Dewey that it is breathtakingly obvious that I can't do shit, I wonder whether he'd regard that as compatible with his pragmatism. No? Then pragmatism is false. You've got to intelligently administer means to ends, intelligently adjust organism to environment, to live a decent human life. And you've got to surrender, to let things be, whether they're groovy, happy, beautiful things or worldwide intractable disasters.

Let's get together in a John Dewey/Jürgen Habermas political public space where we all talk freely and deliberate together, reaching agreement on certain laws of which we are each able to regard ourselves as the author. I'll give you an indication of how I'm going to participate. I'm going to sit on the periphery, abusing the suckers who are yapping and the pathetic, debased rhetoric they use in that yapping. I'm going to snicker at the consensus and its enforcement. Then I'm going to violate any of the laws of which I am myself the author whenever the mood takes me. Then I'm going to gaze with a jaundiced eye at the amazing world we have all created together. Then I'm going to try to forget about it, drink some beer, and watch some football. Keep hope alive.

When I have myself gotten married now and then, I have been well aware that I had no idea what my life would be like afterward: that sort of alteration introduces incomprehensible variables. If one stopped to make a calculation, one would be frozen in inaction. Indeed, the beautiful thing about being overwhelmed by love is that it is indifferent to goals—or that it explicitly introduces chaos. I might say that I knew marriage was a formula for disaster and got married anyway. Should I have gotten married? Answering that question in terms of means and ends—much less making the answer's truth depend on its resolution of problems—is just a sad misunderstanding of human motivation and of truth. Marriage, we might say, is an act of expression, not experiment.

James might be good on love and marriage, and anyone in their right mind would rather be married to James than to Peirce or Dewey. It might be, he'd say, an act of faith, a perverse resolution making its own truth. Again I say good luck to you, but the basic idea is that you're committing yourself to a risk, not a solution. And if it was no solution, if your spouse turned out to be terminally ill or terminally annoying, it would not follow that you made the wrong decision. Indeed, even if you knew this about your fiancé, and knew that marriage would simply exacerbate your problems or make them unresolvable forever, it still would not follow that you shouldn't get married.

Now on the other hand, we could merely assert that sleep, marriage, cynicism, or play were always resolutions to problematical situations—obviously, or else we wouldn't do stuff like that. Here we sink into the merest apriorism. I suggest that if you think about most of your

actions, or for that matter most of your thoughts, you'll see that resolving problematic situations is an occasional activity, from which, thank God, we continually lapse. Indeed, allowing oneself to lapse is, in the pragmatist account itself, itself the goal: one resolves the problematical situation in order to release it and gain release from it, to experience the perhaps ecstatic moment of letting go. If you're a pragmatist, you'd better keep this lapse short, because the new problematical situation—that is, the human condition itself—beckons. Your goal is release; that is, your goal is a lapsing of goals, of thinking in terms of means and ends. Pragmatism seeks resolutions—albeit local, temporary, provisional. Its goal is the constant disintegration or letting go of goals. The truth is pursued for the sake of holding it and being in a position to let it go. Or, there is no goal. Either the resolution is merely instrumental to the next goal, and is, hence, no resolution, or it is a lapse in which it is itself erased: the goal is a release from the means-ends rationality that supposedly describes human action. Or, means-ends rationality is at its very heart paradoxical, is a problematic situation from which we seek release.

Meliorism just keeps feeding you the next pleasant delusion, but truth is a discipline of nihilism, cynicism, apathy, and despair. Truth is something you face, not something you make or something that satisfies your purposes. Keep trying to keep trying. I'm going to try to laugh derisively, though even that task is getting to be a mite exhausting.

A primary function of Eastern thought for Westerners is that it represents for us a relief from teleology or pragmatism. I don't think we, or at least I, can understand "Eastern philosophy" except as a cure for the teleological illness, a cure that Aristotle and Dewey, entrapped in the strangling coils of goals, had perforce to seek in their own places, in their own philosophical crafts. For example, Eastern philosophy might be provided as a cure for the nightmares and even the pleasures of technology, which is always conceived as the means to some end. (Though this is a mere conception: technology presents means that can be intrinsically absorbing and always acts in excess to, and often in opposition to, its goal; the technologies are always also arts.) I say we need rest, surcease, from the practical syllogism, from the rational contractor of Hobbes or Smith, from the diplomas and policy successes, and all the flimsy ends—that is, disasters—that we might achieve or that we have achieved. Hillary will give us all health care and have the Iraqi army stand up as we stand down. The only rational response to this is a joke, or drowsiness, or unconsciousness, or . . . nirvana. If you don't see that now, then wait until Hillary—I admit this is extraordinarily unlikely—accomplishes these goals; then go to sleep as the world continues to tumble down around you. Or, apply yourself to solving these solutions, etc., until the antidepressants finally kick in.

The *Bhagavad-Gita*, for instance, is devoted in my interpretation to the "art" of war: Krishna tells Arjuna that he should fight because he is a fighter;

fighting is his craft. What you end up doing by fighting will be wrong; the outcome once you start is in doubt (*you're* in doubt, though the outcome is determined already; or in other words your action is useless, purposeless, except as action); even if you achieve by means of fighting the goals for which you fight—which is not possible—the result is liable to be misery. So stop focusing out there on the realization of your purposes, and let go into the fighting you must do right now. Your goal is to be who you are in this moment; that is, the goal is the means is your identity. OK now? Shut up and kill, son.

The first truth of the Buddha is that life is suffering. Good luck with the meliorism; write me when you're dead.

Taoism, in my reading, approaches this matter from every possible angle all the time. There is a reason for the Western obsession with the *Tao Te Ching*, and there is a reason that the hundreds of translations of it into Western languages take on the shape and emphasis they possess. The cardinal message of the *Tao Te Ching* as we, and I, read it, is that we should not seize control and transform but rather accept and affirm. The West's *Tao Te Ching* is the antiteleological, antipragmatist, antitechnological scripture. We present it to one another as the cure for . . . ourselves. Here are some passages, in my translation:²

29

Do you intend to seize the world
and make it better?
I hope you will not succeed,
and I don't think you will.
The world is sacred.
It cannot be improved.
If you try to transform it
you will only damage it.
If you try to control it
you will only lose it.
Just let it happen, and yourself within it.

32

The emptiness at the heart of real power
renders it impossible or pointless to resist.
Reside in this central stillness

and all things begin to shape themselves
 and come to exist with ease in your experience.
 The sky unites with the earth in a gentle rain.
 People find unity without constraint.
 Names dissolve and namelessness with them,
 until each thing is precisely itself;
 each thing stands as itself in your awareness,
 names itself, depicts itself, contains itself.

37

The Tao does nothing
 and leaves nothing undone.
 When a ruler inhabits it,
 the people come to be themselves.
 They forget even to try
 not to try.
 In being,
 everything saves itself.

38

Reality does not represent itself as real:
 that is its reality.
 Reality abandons itself into reality:
 that is its presence.
 It cannot judge this to be high or that to be low:
 that is its exaltation.
 It has no purpose:
 that is its fulfillment.
 It is without compassion:
 that is its mercy.
 The man of rectitude tries to make things turn out right,
 and when that fails he rolls up his sleeves and redoubles his efforts. . . .
 Can you remain in the center and allow things to be?
 Either way you always return.

One message of the text as I need to read it is political, and here it responds to the Western ideal of the state as the form and agent of human transformation, a vision shared by Hobbes, Hegel, Marx, Dewey, and Rawls, for example. The state for these thinkers is the (fantastic) agent of collective teleology, the only thing capable of transforming our lives among one another in accordance with our goals, the technology of the social.

The *Chuang Tzu* is a very funny and deeply cynical text as well as a work of art. When officials approach the sage to offer him the rule of the realm, he says he'd rather just chill:

Once, when Chuang Tzu was fishing in the P'u River, the King of Chu sent two officials to go and announce to him: "I would like to trouble you with the administration of my realm." Chuang Tzu held on to the fishing pole and, without turning his head, said, "I have heard that there is a sacred tortoise in Ch'u that has been dead for three thousand years. The king keeps it wrapped in cloth and boxed, and stores it in the ancestral temple. Now would this tortoise rather be dead and have its bones left behind and honored? Or would it rather be alive and dragging its tail in the mud?"

It would rather be alive and dragging its tail in the mud," said the two officials.

Chuang Tzu said, "Go away! I'll drag my tail in the mud!"³

Well, exactly. Anyway, once you rule the realm, you'll still be sitting there with your butt in the mud, only now you will be doing so while being deeply impressive to yourself and others: your impotence, ignorance, and incompetence will now spread across the globe like a poisonous gas. Kuo Hsiang, in his great commentary on the *Chuang Tzu* (again in my translation), makes such fundamental remarks as the following: "Everything happens precisely as it happens"; "Each thing has its spontaneity, and in the spontaneity of each thing what it is emerges necessarily. Follow things and come into accord with them. Keep silent"; "Try to do whatever happens."

Nietzsche regarded the Eastern religions as nihilistic, and he was right in at least a quasi-Nietzschean sense: rather than inventing values and imposing them on the world, the Eastern religions in the eyes of a Westerner counsel surrender, yielding, letting go. They recommend the collapse of ends and values by a total immersion in means. But they are the opposite of nihilism, also in a quasi-Nietzschean sense. They do not replace the world with something else; they offer you again the real choice—immersion or extinction—or the nonchoice—immersion and extinction. They refuse your fantasies: of a god, of a realization of human purposes, of a transformation of the human condition. In brief, they constitute life as an art, as Dewey and Aristotle also finally had to do: as labor and craft in which purpose becomes chaotic, by which we participate as makers of the chaos in the chaotic world. And at the end of effort always extinction beckons: the realization of our purposes, our peace, mere surcease. Kuo Hsiang says, "some people try incredibly hard to

be great artists. But great artists become artists without even knowing how. Some people try hard to be wise. But wise people become wise without trying. We can't even become fools or dogs by trying."

Art, we might say, or craft (I regard the two terms as synonymous) is one place where the account of human action and thought in terms of means and ends or problematical situations and their resolutions is challenged fundamentally. Indeed, I think of *Art as Experience* as both a culmination and a refutation of pragmatism, a place where it comes face-to-face with the reality that many of our most typical and richest experiences cannot be understood in this way, or that we need to break down the distinction, or that the distinction, as Dewey might put it, is insufficiently rich as framed.

We can indeed consider art in terms of means and ends: the means are, perhaps, mixing and applying paint; the end is the finished work. Or perhaps the end is fame or wealth or love or communication. Or maybe it's something more internal to the work: resolving human figures into triangles, or achieving true sky blue or something. However, I think on reflection no real artist or craftsman would be satisfied to have resolutions to such problems merely pop up before him like metal ducks at a shooting gallery; the goal, if you'll pardon my putting it like this, is not the goal. The crafter wants to solve problems by means of her craft: with these specific materials and by means of a particular set of skills. At an absolute minimum, in art the end cannot be detached from the means; or, the goal is to reach the goal by the particular means being employed. That is what art is: an arena in which one tries to achieve goals by certain means, or in which the goal can only be specified with regard to the means, or in which there is no good distinction between means and ends. Most artists would rather not achieve a goal than to achieve it but not by means of her art. But that formulation is misleading: the problem cannot be addressed except by means of her art; there is no problem without the process. A painter cannot solve problems of painting by switching to using Photoshop or something, or by buying someone else's work.

Another way to put this is that the basic commitment is to the process, not to its end, if any. Painters address problems with paint by absorption in painting, and they not only want money and love, or triangular compositions, but to paint, to play around skillfully with a certain kind of stuff. Indeed, the goals are more or less mere excuses to keep painting.

I'm a practitioner of magic with playing cards, and I have spent much of the last four years wasting my time with this art. It is—really, seriously—a waste of time. I might want to entertain people, but to be honest most people do not regard watching card tricks as the acme of entertainment. I might want to impress people with my skill, to bowl them over and earn their adoration. Most people can't bring themselves to watch long enough to have the full realization of my wonderfulness dawn upon them. The basic

goals, rather, are internal to the activity: I would like to be able to perform an invisible pass, or master the Erdnase bottom palm. And to be absolutely honest, cards are merely addicting; I want an excuse to shuffle all day. I'd feel useless if I did this completely aimlessly, so I generate goals as an excuse for living in the means. Surely you understand what I'm saying if, for example, you play a musical instrument. In the temporal arts—dance or drama, for example—if nowhere else, it is evident that means and ends cannot be ordered temporally, or do not provide a reasonable vocabulary for decision and action over time.

If you're getting the feeling that, all in all, this means/ends thing is complex or confusing, that means and ends are constantly oscillating or disintegrating or coalescing and detaching, you're on the right track. And what is lovely about *Art as Experience* is that you can see that Dewey really understands this pretty well, that for Dewey, in a work of art the means and ends are unified.

There are two kinds of means. One is external to what is accomplished; the other kind is taken up into the consequences produced and remains immanent in them. There are ends which are merely welcome cessations and there are ends that are fulfillments of what went before. The toil of a laborer is too often only the antecedent to the wage he receives, as consumption of gasoline is merely a means to transportation. The means cease to act when the "end" is reached; one would be glad, as a rule, to get the result without having to employ the means. . . . But the moment we say "media" we refer to means that are incorporated into the outcome. . . . Colors *are* the painting; tones are the music. . . . The difference between external and intrinsic operations runs through all the affairs of life. One student studies to pass an examination, to get promotion. To another, the means, the activity of learning, is completely one with the results of it. . . . Means and ends coalesce. If we run over in mind a number of such cases, we quickly see that all cases in which means and ends are external to one another are non-esthetic. This externality may even be regarded as a definition of the non-esthetic.⁴

This is strikingly reminiscent of Aristotle's definition of happiness, which is also an attempt to resolve the incredibly oppressive implications of his teleological orientation: happiness is virtuous activity over the course of a life. The only decent characterization of the *telos* of human life is that it consists of the means of its own realization: a life of virtue or moderation. And the only way to help realize the *telos* of the *polis* is to participate as a citizen in the realization of that *telos*. That is, the purpose of human life or human political organization is the *techne* of art or craft, of human life and political organization. Aristotle, in other words, moves through teleology well beyond teleology.

You might say that this is itself the deepest resolution to any problematical situation: to live within and as the problem. Or you might say that with

regard (at least) to such activities, the vocabulary of problematic situation and resolution is inadequate or has already collapsed. That's why I say that Dewey's aesthetics is the culmination of pragmatism and its end; that's how Dewey resolved his problematic situation, where at its culminating intellectual moment West met East: by coming to regard means as ends, by joining them in an indissoluble whole, by lapsing from the problems we face into craft, or by understanding that the process is both the problem and its resolution, or that there is no problem—only work and play, which are the same.

NOTES

1. John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (1920; New York: Mentor, 1950), 128.
2. Translation can be found at <http://crispinsartwell.com/forestpath.htm>.
3. *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), 188.
4. John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Putnam, 1934), 197-98.