Pragmatism as Post-Postmodernism

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PART FOUR

CLASSICAL PRAGMATISM
Abraham Kaplan once suggested that Dewey’s “magic number” was two. Unlike nihilists, whose magic number is zero, and also unlike monists, trinitarians, squares (whose magic number is four), pluralists (whose magic number is more than four), and radical pluralists (whose magic number is infinity), Kaplan thought that Dewey was particularly interested in the number two.¹ In support of his thesis he recalled the titles of Dewey’s books, from *The School and Society* and *The Child and the Curriculum* to *Experience and Nature* and finally to *Knowing and the Known* (LW 10.xi–xii).

In making this observation, however, Kaplan hedged a bit. Perhaps it would be better, he added, to say that Dewey had two magic numbers; that he looked for twos to turn them into ones. “Dewey resolves dualisms,” Kaplan wrote, “not by refusing to countenance the distinctions being drawn by dualists, but by reinterpreting differences thought to be substantive and intrinsic as being instead functional and contextual. It is a technique of cross-cutting, superimposing new distinctions perpendicular to the old ones” (LW 10.xii).
But even if Dewey often dealt with dualities by “crosscutting,” as Kaplan suggested, that was only one of his many strategies. Sometimes he simply united two ideas, as in his discussion of democracy in the 1932 Ethics, for example (LW 7.349). And in his discussion of the moral self, also in Ethics, he rejects egoism and altruism (along with any combination of them), then reconstructs them as “secondary phases of a more normal and complete interest: regard for the welfare and integrity of the social groups of which we form a part” (LW 7.298–99). This strategy—reconstructing the poles of an unstable dyad as phases of a new unity or whole—was one of Dewey’s favorites.

Considered in terms of Dewey’s de-hypostatized and functionalized essences, the wholes that succeed unstable dyads may be said to be the pivot point of his thought. Since his notion of essences is dynamic, such new wholes tend to break down into new dualities. Considered in terms of method, however, Dewey’s thought regularly returns to threes, which tend to be more robust and enduring than his ones. As Michael Eldridge has suggested, Dewey is probably best described as a dynamic pluralist with a triadic procedure.²

Some of these cases seem inspired by Hegel’s dialectic. Others recall the categories of C. S. Peirce—especially as they are related to Peirce’s method of fixing belief. By understanding Dewey’s magic number, the structure and content of his work become a bit clearer, as do his debts to his predecessors. The three examples I have chosen are taken from Dewey’s discussions of the arts, ethics, and inquiry.

**The Arts**

In chapter 9 of the 1925 Experience and Nature (LW 1.273), Dewey discusses three cases in which an art-object functions as “merely” fine. By “fine,” Dewey meant the object is final because it is not part of the give-and-take of a world in which aesthetic experiences also function as the means of enrichment. These three cases involve art-objects whose sole or dominant feature is 1) self-expression (as apotheosis of some quality of the artist’s experience), 2) experimentation with new
techniques and tools (as reaction against some existing technique), and 3) emblematic of ownership or part of commercialized industry (as a failed attempt at mediation between the art-object and external, prosaic interests).

It is possible to see in this account a highly generalized application of Peirce’s categories. Some careful reader of Peirce might object that the first case, artistic self-expression, is already too well defined to count as a case of Firstness, or quality, since it obviously involves Secondness in the sense of reaction to and among artistic materials and Thirdness in the sense of some form of mediation, that is, in the sense in which any completed art form points beyond itself in some way (see volume 1, section 530 [1.530] of Peirce’s collected papers). But Peirce’s language in 1.306, 1.307, and 1.310 seems to allow for this type of generalization. He speaks of Firstness, for example, as what it is “regardless of anything else.” And Dewey’s claim about cases in which a work of art does not transcend self-expression is precisely the claim that the dominant quality of such art is that it is narrow and uninformed: that it does not take anything beyond the artist himself or herself into account and is therefore highly attenuated.

So first there is the self-absorbed artist whose preoccupation with self-expression renders his or her work isolated, autistic, and solipsistic, which is to say, more or less just as it is regardless of anything else. Second, there is the reactionary artist whose preoccupation with the rejection of accepted practice takes up all the space that a more relevant and vital content might have otherwise occupied. And third, there is the rule- or formula-driven artist whose work reflects the mediation of political, religious, or commercial concerns in ways that displace concern for the expression of his or her materials.

On a more positive note, Dewey thought that wherever means and ends come together in the arts there is also a triad at work. “Any activity that is productive of objects whose perception is an immediate good,” he wrote, “and whose operation is a continual source of enjoyable perception of other events exhibits fineness of art” (LW 1.274). There is a conjunction of three characteristics or dominant qualities of a truly fine art-object in this statement. First, the object
must afford perception of an immediate good—immediate in the sense that it requires nothing else for its enjoyment. Second, the object must be operative, as opposed to static—it must react to and eventually displace commonplace ways of experiencing. And third, the object must be meaningful in the sense that it points beyond itself and increases the enjoyment of other objects and events—it must mediate in the sense that it relates its appreciator to some third thing, carrying him or her beyond the art-object itself (but not allowing the third thing to dominate or define the art-object itself). Here again we have a highly generalized application of Peirce’s three categories.

In yet another triad in the same chapter, Dewey contrasts his own view of art to what he regards as the extremes of romanticism and classicism. In a typical move, Dewey carefully culls what is best from both extremes, discards the rest, and then treats the salvaged elements as phases of something else. What is good in romanticism is that it excites a sense of possibilities. Romanticism turns bad when it goes too far, honoring possibilities beyond their “effective attainment in any experience.” The objects of romanticism are not so much expressions as arousals of “a predetermined type of appreciation” (LW 1.282). As for classicism, what is good in it is that it emphasizes objective achievement. Classicism turns bad when it goes too far, treating achievements as if they were eternal. The objects of classicism are not so much expressions as rehearsals of fixed and finished forms.

Dewey turns an impasse to his advantage in the next stage of this typical strategy, by treating the spontaneity and possibility of romanticism and the satisfying achievement of classicism as phases in the process of making art, which involves the construction and the appreciation of the art-object. Reminiscent of the flights and perches of birds, to recall James’s pregnant metaphor, these phases of aesthetic production are also identified as the phases of all productive inquiry.

Even in the cases of flight and perch, excitement and consummation, possibility and actuality (each pair, obviously, a dyad), Dewey retains his commitment to triads by emphasizing the dynamic qualities of the context in which they occur. Aesthetic production, as other types of inquiry, is never finished. For each perch brings a previous
flight to a close at the same time that it anticipates the next flight. Excitement is the termination and disruption of a previous consummation, as well as the condition that generates a subsequent one. And possibility, if it is to be intelligible, must be referred to some prior actuality, even though under the pressure of events possibility also tends to become condensed into something that is newly actual at the same time that it is also generally applicable to further cases.

This, then, is the pattern of production in the arts. As Dewey puts it, “In complete art, appreciation follows the object and moves with it to its completion. . . . Art free from subjection to any ‘ism’ has movement, creation, as well as order, finality” (LW 1.282). More generally, this is also the pattern of organic behavior (of which inquiry is but a special type) that runs through the writings of the Pragmatists from Peirce to Dewey.

Ethics

In Dewey’s essay “Three Independent Factors in Morals” (1930) we get another highly generalized application of Peirce’s categories. Generally speaking, ethicists have tended to emphasize one of three broad approaches to the subject at the expense of the other two. Those who have been interested in the choice between competing goods have focused on the role of desire and purpose in choice, primarily as it relates to an individual. Those who have been interested in competing rights and obligations have tended to focus on the authority of laws, especially as they come into play when the good of one individual or group comes into conflict with the good of another. And those who have been interested in competing virtues have tended to focus on how goods and rights function within a broader context, namely approbation in terms of the received tradition of a particular community.

As Dewey notes, however, goods compete with other goods, rights compete with other rights, and virtues compete with other virtues. It is also the case that goods, rights, and virtues usually compete among themselves whenever significant moral problems are encountered.
What may be good from the standpoint of desire may be wrong from the standpoint of legal institutions, and what is right from the standpoint of legal institutions may not be acceptable from the standpoint of a given tradition of civic virtue. Working from the other direction, what is regarded as virtuous by a given community may not be legal, and what is legal often runs counter to the purposes and desires of an individual.

Dewey regarded each of these independent factors in morals as a tool or instrument for an inquiry in which “facts-of-the-case” and “ends-in-view” are reciprocally determined, developed, and tested. He thought such tools can be sharpened or even modified as processes of inquiry themselves require, and that progress in moral behavior and ethical theory alike depends on such improvements.

In making this point Dewey leads his reader beyond the most obvious triad in his essay: the goods of individuals, the rights of one individual or group against another, and the virtues of a community. This flat-footed triad (flat-footed because it comprises independent but intertwined factors) gives way to a dynamic, underlying triad that is present in one form or another in much of his written work: the triad of conflict, deliberation, and resolution. Even though goods, rights, and virtues are important as independent factors in morals, ethical theories that treat one of them as a definitive moral principle are faulty. Such theories lead easily to the conclusions that moral decisions involve choices between good and bad, right and wrong, virtue and vice; that the alternative courses of action are adequately defined from the outset; and that to be good, right, or virtuous just involves an exercise of will.

Dewey argues that such moral theories go wrong at the outset precisely because they ignore the most important phase of moral decision-making. “The essence of the moral situation,” he writes, “is an internal and intrinsic conflict; the necessity for judgment and for choice comes from the fact that one has to manage forces with no common denominator” (LW 5.280). Since goods, rights, and virtues have different origins, moral decision-making is dynamic and evolutionary. One of Dewey’s dynamic triads is at work in this passage:
internal and intrinsic conflict, a deliberate attempt to manage the various forces, and a judgment made. Dewey’s naturalistic ethics thus employs a process that abstracts from an organic, triadic rhythm: conflict, deliberation, and resolution.

Inquiry

The cases I have so far discussed include some highly generalized applications of Peirce’s categories, as well as a type of synthesis that might be called broadly Hegelian. But in chapter 7 of Experience and Nature (LW 1.198–200) Dewey relates three triads in a manner that has more obvious connections to Peirce’s semiotic.

In this chapter Dewey discusses the evolutionary passage from the psycho-physical activities of complex nonhuman animals to the mental activities of human beings. The primary triad consists of feeling or sensibility, sense or meaning, and significance. A second triad consists of three ways in which complex nonhuman animals have “feelings which vary abundantly in quality, corresponding to distinctive directions and phases.” Feelings are sensations; they are qualitative, and thus recall Peirce’s Firsts. But what are the “directions and phases” that Dewey thinks furnish the basis for categorizing such sensations? The second triad categorizes the activities of the animal in terms of initiation, mediation (struggle to adjust), and completion (either fulfillment or frustration). The activities under discussion are neither random nor ad hoc. As Dewey puts it, they are “bound up in distinctive connections with environmental affairs” (LW 1.198).

So this is an account in which complex nonhuman animals are involved in action that leads to some sort of completion (on analysis, a Third). Looking backward from the completion (the Third) to the action (the Second), we as sign-users can see that there are sensations (Firsts) of three types: those associated with the initiation of the action (a First), those associated with mediation of the action underway (a Second), and those associated with the outcome of the action (a Third).
Dewey’s point is that it is not until these three distinct qualities of feeling or sensation are discriminated by sign-users that they become more than mere sensations. When they are discriminated, however, they begin to make sense. “Sense is distinct from feeling [or sensation],” Dewey tells us, because “it has a recognized reference; it is the qualitative characteristic of something, not just a submerged unidentified quality or tone” (LW 1.200).

So there is a third triad at work in this material, namely sensation, sense, and significance as they pertain to the mental life of human beings (as sign-users). It is only as sensations make sense that objectification can take place. What was an undifferentiated sequence of events in which certain organic activities merely took place becomes differentiated as, say, hunger and food. Although non-sign-using animals must eat, for example, food is not for them an object per se. Objectification of the qualities of sensation, in which the organism differentiates this from that, leads directly to the notion that what has been objectified can stand in some way to someone, a situation that recalls Peirce’s Thirds.

If sense (a Second) is different from sensation (a First), then, it is also different from signification (a Third). Signification, Dewey tells us, “involves use of a quality as a sign or index of something else, as when the red of a light signifies danger, and the need of bringing a moving locomotive to a stop. The sense of a thing, on the other hand, is an immediate and immanent meaning; it is meaning which is itself felt or directly had. When we are baffled by perplexing conditions, and finally hit upon a clew, and everything falls into place, the whole thing suddenly, as we say, ‘makes sense.’ In such a situation, the clew has signification in virtue of being an indication, a guide to interpretation. But the meaning of the whole situation as apprehended is sense” (LW.1.200).

Dewey is here demonstrating the “Janus-faced” function of sense. As mediating element in inquiry, a Second, it points in two directions. It points back to what was previously a “submerged unidentified quality or tone,” or First, differentiating and sharpening what
was only inchoate, making the raw material of sensation into an intermediate stock part, available for further use. But it also points forward in that it can be used as a clue in a process of signification, or the standing of something to someone in some respect (a Third).

In the final chapter of *Experience and Nature*, Dewey wrote that “Conscience in morals, taste in fine arts and conviction in beliefs pass insensibly into critical judgments; the latter pass also into a more and more generalized form of criticism called philosophy” (LW 1.300). In this exquisitely wrought passage we encounter a succession of three elements that captures Dewey’s notion of philosophy as cultural criticism.

We all operate on a daily basis with what Dewey terms conscience, taste, and conviction. These are the bits and pieces, the traditions and the opinions, that are gleaned from here and there. Sometimes, perhaps even usually, they are adequate to the tasks they are called upon to perform. When more precision is demanded, however, we move imperceptibly from conscience, taste, and conviction into a space where critical judgments must be made. It is at this level that the methods and materials of science and technology, business, agriculture, law, the arts, and so on come together to create a given culture. The progress of a culture moves forward on the tracks of critical judgments made in these fields.

But this is not the end of the matter. Dewey thought that there was one further level at which criticism takes place, namely the level at which the methods and materials of science and technology, business, agriculture, law, the arts, and so on are related to one another and subjected to further criticism with respect to their ability to generate new meanings, which is to say, to generate more refined values.

Although some may be tempted to read these remarks as an attempt to install philosophy as a kind of “grand narrative,” this is not Dewey’s intent. He thought of philosophy as a kind of “liaison officer,” a kind of go-between, helping the various disciplines and professions within a culture communicate more effectively. And although philosophy does not have a subject matter per se, it does have a
unique relationship to inquiry. Logic—the theory of inquiry—is one of its main charges.

To put this in terms of yet another triad, as Dewey did in an early chapter of *Experience and Nature*, “[The] incorporated results of past reflection, welded into the genuine materials of first-hand experience, may become organs of enrichment if they are detected and reflected upon. If they are not detected, they often obfuscate and distort. Clarification and emancipation follow when they are detected and cast out; and one great object of philosophy is to accomplish this task” (LW 1.40).