Dewey's Metaphysics

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Dewey's Reconstruction of Traditional Metaphysics

1. INTRODUCTION

The last two chapters have provided the necessary foundations for a proper understanding of the place of forms in Dewey's philosophy. By stressing his polemics against traditional views, Chapter 4 allowed us to recognize what direction the Deweyan analysis would not take. Chapter 5 then began outlining the positive alternative to the traditional doctrine which Dewey was attempting to work out. The present chapter continues that effort, expanding the analysis of two topics already touched upon and introducing some further dimensions of Dewey's philosophy. The two areas which will receive more extended treatment are the close association of forms and ends, and the particular manner in which form, though not possessed of a Platonic kind of separate existence, may still be distinguished and discussed independently. The new material falls under the general heading of the relationship between forms and knowledge in Dewey's thought and encompasses three topics: his defense of the thesis that knowledge grasps forms, not matter; the status of forms as possibilities for knowledge; and the pluralistic understanding of forms in his thought.

2. FORMS AND ENDS

The significant part the teleological dimension plays in Dewey's understanding of forms was underscored in the two definitions of form given in Art as Experience. Experience and Nature allows us to probe this dimension more fully and to articulate more accurately the way in which form and end collapse together in a dynamic interpretation of existents. We know from "The Influence of Darwinism on Philosophy" that Dewey saw the affiliation of form and fixed
end as a trait of an outdated and erroneous philosophical attitude.\textsuperscript{2} The Darwinian theory, in allowing a flexibility of ends and the possibility for real novelty, removed the scientific support for the earlier analysis and provided an alternative way to view ends. What evolutionary thought did was to eliminate the justification for fixed ends in nature. It did not reject the recognition that natural processes have endings and culminations. What it did reject was the inflexibility of ends and the impossibility of changes significant enough to result in real novelty.

Although the altered scientific climate might no longer pose a threat to a properly understood recognition of ends, Dewey believed that a serious objection could come from an entirely different field, axiology. Teleological terminology, such as "end," "aim," "goal," "purpose," carries with it a value connotation from which Dewey is anxious to disassociate himself. He argues that a term like "end" should not automatically be interpreted in an honorific or eulogistic sense. There are also theological connotations surrounding such a term, but Dewey is concerned not so much with these as with the axiological: "Barring this [theological] connotation, the word has an almost inexpugnable honorific flavor, so that to assert that nature is characterized by ends, the most conspicuous of which is the life of mind, seems like engaging in an eulogistic, rather than an empirical account of nature" (EN 82). On such a view, one can easily understand the rigidly structured and fixed society of the Greeks. The professional thinkers in this society, utilizing as they do the highest end of nature, the mind, are to be given the highest social status. On the other hand, those individuals whose work involves manual labor are to be viewed as of a lesser worth than the philosophers. I have already noted Dewey's dislike of this sort of a static hierarchy.\textsuperscript{3} In the honorific interpretation of ends, we have what Dewey considers a prime theoretical underpinning for such societal stratifications.

Dewey does not, on this account, reject the importance of recognizing ends altogether. He only seeks to ensure that ends be understood properly and, in contrast to the Greek view, not in an inherently eulogistic manner.

Something much more neutral than any such implication is, however, meant. We constantly talk about things coming or drawing to a close; getting ended, finished, done with, over with. It is a commonplace that no thing lasts forever. . . . We may conceive the
end, the close, as due to fulfillment, perfect attainment, to satiety, or to exhaustion, to dissolution, to something having run down or given out. Being an end may be indifferently an ecstatic culmination, a matter-of-fact consummation, or a deplorable tragedy. Which of these things a closing or terminal object is, has nothing to do with the property of being an end [EN 82–83].

Here Dewey is arguing a position consistent with his description of existents as events. Since events are histories, that is, have beginnings, careers, and endings, the telic dimension cannot be ignored. What Dewey wishes to emphasize is that although endings may be interpreted as praiseworthy, such an identification must not be made automatically. There are various kinds of ends, and philosophers would once again commit the fallacy of selective emphasis if they isolated one of them exclusively.

Dewey is careful to present this kind of analysis because he wishes to avoid the errors of the past. He seeks to appropriate the positive insights of classical thought and to transform them into defensible and acceptable doctrines. Such acceptability is to be defined especially in terms of scientific advances. Dewey's inclination is rarely to engage in wholesale rejection, and the case of teleological considerations certainly bears this out. But what exactly do these considerations have to do with forms?

The decisive step worked out in *Experience and Nature*, with regard to this issue, is the view that in an analysis of events form and end to some degree overlap or coalesce. This position, in some respects, recapitulates a doctrine of Aristotle's. Dewey's approach is not abstract and dialectical. He seeks to examine the actual state of experience and to isolate the factors necessary for an intelligible interpretation of that experience. One of these factors is end or, to use Dewey's own expression, "end-in-view."

To a person building a house, the end-in-view is not just a remote and final goal to be hit upon after a sufficiently great number of coerced motions have been duly performed. The end-in-view is a plan which is *contemporaneously* operative in selecting and arranging materials. The latter, brick, stone, wood and mortar, are means only as the end-in-view is actually incarnate in them, in forming them. Literally, they *are* the end in its present stage of realization. The end-in-view is present at each stage of the process; it is present as the *meaning* of the materials used and acts done;
without its informing presence, the latter are in no sense "means"; they are merely extrinsic causal conditions [EN 280].

The first point to note about this passage is that the example is of an artifact. Though such an approach is typical of Dewey's philosophical endeavor, in this particular citation it is significant because human consciousness is the explicit source of the telic dimension.

The portion of the passage I wish to highlight underscores the importance of the end-in-view for Dewey and its close relationship to form. The selection does not employ the actual term "form" although the words "forming" and "informing" are used. Nonetheless, Dewey's elucidation of end-in-view as a *contemporaneously operative plan* suggests a similar meaning. The contemporaneously operative plan is what will guide the organization of parts into a structured or formed whole. It will, in other words, set the pattern according to which the materials are to be related to one another, relation being the key ingredient in Dewey's understanding of form. If we explore the implications of the identification of form and end, we will find, as I have previously suggested, some affinities between Dewey's position and Aristotle's.

What Dewey means by "plan" is clear in the next few lines. The materials mentioned, wood, bricks, stone, mortar, simply amassed in piles would have no significance outside of being just what they are. They take on a special significance as they become means to a certain end. They have "meaning," as Dewey says, in light of the goal to be reached. This goal is the plan which guides the forming of the materials into a certain shape. The plan is an arrangement of materials which, when undertaken, results in a certain end-state, the completed house. The completed house is, therefore, *both* the end of the activity and the embodiment of the particular plan. The mobilization of energies necessary for the undertaking is guided throughout by this end-in-view. Plan and end-in-view, on this analysis, are inextricably implicated in one another. Since Dewey's analysis of beings stresses their temporality, such a view should come as no surprise. Form is not given ready-made. It results from interactions in time. It is an end-product.

In this respect, Dewey's thought is not nearly so far removed from that of the Greeks, especially Aristotle, as Dewey himself at times indicates. Of course, the qualification with which I began this analysis—that for Dewey ends are neither fixed nor inherently honorific—
suggests the manner in which the Deweyan and Aristotelian positions are distinct. But similarities remain—similarities worth pointing out in a work attempting to show that Dewey is dealing with ontological issues, and dealing with them on the same level as the classical metaphysicians did. To make the comparison more exact, and because I am mainly interested in showing how these two thinkers make similar distinctions concerning the subject of forms and ends, I have selected an example from Aristotle in the field of techne. One of the basic and most famous distinctions in Aristotle’s thought is that between matter and form. Beings or entities are organized, composite wholes, and any attempt at understanding them will have to include both what they are composed of, the matter, and the manner in which it is arranged, the form. “Since we must have the existence of the thing as something given, clearly the question is why the matter is some definite thing; e.g., why are these materials a house? Because that which was the essence of a house is present. And why is this individual thing, or this body having a form, a man? Therefore what we seek is the cause, i.e., the form, by reason of which the matter is some definite thing.” For Dewey, materials apart from a plan have no meaning. They are not yet means to be used toward the completion of a certain goal. For Aristotle, the materials apart from the form are only potentials to be distinguished from their actualization as, for instance, in the very building of a structure. “And so, of the people who go in for defining, those who define a house as stones, bricks, and timbers are speaking of the potential house, for these are the matter...” Both philosophers employ a similar series of distinctions. The materials needed to construct the house are “without meaning” in and of themselves for Dewey; they are simply “potentials” for Aristotle. What gives them meaning for one thinker, or actualizes them for the other, is the plan or form which directs their organization into a completed edifice. For Dewey this plan is the end-in-view, just as for Aristotle form or shape is the end or goal aimed at. In Book Delta of the Metaphysics, this point is explicitly made, and once again the example used is a house. Aristotle is explaining the various senses in which something can be said to come from something else. One of these is “From the compound of matter and shape, as the
parts come from the whole, and the verse from the *Iliad*, and the stones from the house; [in every such case the whole is a compound of matter and shape,] for the shape is the end, and only that which attains an end is complete."  

That Dewey and Aristotle regard forms and ends as overlapping in a significant sense is not surprising from one point of view. Since both stress the energetic dimension of existence, the awareness of a process moving in a certain direction is prominent in each case. For both, the particular organization found in an event (thus far only events within *techne*) cannot be divorced from the end. The alignment of parts and their functions serves the end of producing a particular kind of entity. The parts thus subserve the whole and are arranged in light of it.  

To indicate the kind of situation I have been describing, Dewey chooses the word "design." This is an appropriate term because, although he does not use the exact words, it combines the two factors of form and end.  

It is significant that the word "design" has a double meaning. It signifies purpose and it signifies arrangement, mode of composition. The design of a house is the plan upon which it is constructed to serve the purposes of those who live in it. The design of a painting or novel is the arrangement of its elements by means of which it becomes an expressive unity in direct perception. In both cases, there is an ordered relation of many constituent elements [AE 121]. The term "design" suggests both the plan according to which the finished product is to be constructed and the aim which the activity seeks to fulfill. Thus, the end for which diverse elements are arranged is, in a certain way, the finished product. It stands as the embodiment of a plan or form. The interpenetration of form and end, a position with Aristotelian roots, is thus restated in Dewey. Of course, we know that for Aristotle the above example taken from *techne* is but an extension of what can be articulated about *physis*. The problem is exactly reversed for Dewey. Can what is said in *techne* be applied to *physis*? We saw in the last chapter that there are strong indications that such an extension is indeed justified on the basis of Deweyan texts. The following section seeks to extend and deepen this analysis, with specific reference to the interrelationship of forms and ends.
3. From Techne to Physis in Dewey

For such texts we must turn to Dewey's great work on *physis*, *Experience and Nature*. I shall begin with a passage in which Dewey resumes his attack on the Greek interpretation of form. This both will allow me, by contrast, to emphasize Dewey's own position, and will serve as an introduction to a more generalized interpretation of forms and ends. The context for this quotation is a familiar Deweyan one: the uncritical application of aesthetic traits to the natural world.

Further confirmation of this proposition is found in classic philosophy itself, in its theory that essential forms “make” things what they are, even though not causing them to occur. . . . The essences of Greek-medieval science were in short poetic objects, treated as objects of demonstrative science, used to explain and understand the inner and ultimate constitution of things [EN 289, 290].

Leaving aside the question whether this is an accurate characterization of classical ontology, we can reverse the terms and provide an accurate characterization of Deweyan ontology. Instead of the forms making the things what they are, in Dewey’s view it is what the things are that makes the forms.

As we have seen, Dewey rejects the hypostatized interpretation of forms which would make of them an inner essence which is really “what” a thing is. In spite of this rejection, the what remains a significant part of his analysis. If my interpretation is correct, in elaborating on this “whatness” we can find Dewey’s alternative to the classical doctrine of form. By studying *Experience and Nature* we can, at the same time, recognize that the explanation of form as the end of a history, of a process of changes, is as applicable to the natural world as it is to the artistic.

Entities, as events, are active and dynamic. Nonetheless, this processive dimension is not to be interpreted as haphazard and undirected. In fact, entities exhibit a “characteristic pattern” which, when disturbed, attempts to restore itself.

By need is meant a condition of tensional distribution of energies such that the body is in a condition of uneasy or unstable equilibrium. By demand or effort is meant the fact that this state is manifested in movements which modify environing bodies in ways
which react upon the body, so that its characteristic pattern of active equilibrium is restored. By satisfaction is meant this recovery of equilibrium pattern, consequent upon the changes of environment due to interactions with the active demands of the organism [EN 194].

In this passage, which provides a sound basis for a Deweyan ontology of form, three elements are especially significant. First, beings are active or dynamic. This is the oft-repeated Deweyan theme, suggested by evolutionary theory. In other words, whatever exists is energetic. Second, this activity is not wholly random. It is directed toward a particular end, which is the development of what Dewey calls the “characteristic pattern of active equilibrium.” Third, there is an element of continuity or stability in the entity, what Dewey calls “satisfaction.” The pattern of which he speaks is not a wholly fragile one. Part of the activity of each entity involves the mobilization of energies in the direction of restoring the organization of parts if they are disrupted. Whatever is, then, tends to preserve its self-identity through the possibility of challenges or disturbances.

These latter two considerations apply directly to the description of forms in terms of ends. If each event is historical, and if historical change is interpreted as real and significant, then the form can only be the outcome or end of a process of development. Once an “equilibrium” is reached, it tends to become stabilized, and changes are ordered in a way that secures the stability. In other words, the interactions of organism and environment are conducted in light of an end, the preservation, “satisfaction,” of a certain pattern. Dewey’s expression “characteristic pattern of active equilibrium” is clumsier than the single word “form” but it is successful in emphasizing the dynamic character of events, an important concept in Dewey which the word “form” does not convey. Any doubts that this doctrine of Dewey’s is less than fully ontological—that is, that it applies only to a restricted portion of beings, but not to all—are settled by other texts in *Experience and Nature*, in which Dewey extends his analysis not only to animate beings, but to inanimate ones as well.

We should not be surprised that in selecting examples to illustrate his analysis Dewey would consider the biological realm a primary source. “The interactions of the various constituent parts of a plant take place in such ways as to tend to continue a characteristic-ally organized activity; they tend to utilize conserved consequences
of past activities so as to adapt subsequent changes to the needs of the integral system to which they belong. Organization is a fact, though it is not an original organizing force” (EN 195). This passage is a good summary of a variety of points I have been attempting to make in this study. To begin with, neither activity nor form (organization) is denied. Dewey has developed an analysis in which a doctrine of form need not be allied to a static ontology. Second, the three components of this dynamic interpretation of form, activity, characteristic pattern, and satisfaction, are well exemplified here. Third, although teleology is not explicitly mentioned, this passage reinforces the interpretation presented here of the relation between forms and ends. For Dewey argues that interactions in the plant “tend to continue a characteristically organized activity.” In other words, the end of these interactions of parts is the constitution and preservation of a specific form. Finally, the last sentence is a strong indication that existents are in themselves formed, and that this formation is not due to the activity of percipients.

Yet Dewey does not rest his case on indications from the biological realm alone; he includes the inanimate world as well. The pattern of organization is always involved in activity and interaction with its environment. The environment is needed for sustenance, and the dangers to stability stemming from an altered or changing environment must be met in varying ways if the stability is to persist. This flexibility of reaction is not merely a characteristic of living things. “In this fact, taken by itself, there is nothing which marks off the plant from the physico-chemical activity of inanimate bodies. The latter also are subject to conditions of disturbed inner equilibrium, which lead to activity in relation to surrounding things, and which terminate after a cycle of changes—a terminus termed saturation, corresponding to satisfaction in organic bodies” (EN 195). The important terms in this quotation, “activity,” “equilibrium,” and “saturation,” are offered as equivalents of the terminology used in dealing with organic beings, “activity,” “characteristic pattern,” and “satisfaction.” Dewey is eager to stress the continuity of traits that he finds existing in nature, both organic and inorganic. Selective reaction, or bias in activity with respect to the end of establishing or restoring a relatively stable pattern (the form), is a truly ontological characterization of entities. In fact, if we recall the example that dealt with the end-in-view as a “contemporaneously op-
erative plan” in human construction, we can grasp the way in which the analysis of beings from the threefold perspective of activity, form, and end applies to the artistic, as well as to the organic and inorganic, realms. For Dewey, all events are formed events, and these forms must be interpreted as the results or ends of developmental sequences.

This kind of formulation in more classical terms leads directly to our next field of investigation. The last chapter, together with the early sections in the present one, have established that there are both ample evidence of a reformed, not a rejected, doctrine of forms in Dewey's writings and sufficient textual justification for describing this doctrine as it is found in Dewey. These descriptions show it to be similar in some ways to that of at least one classical thinker, Aristotle. The question now is whether Dewey admits any recognition of the relationship between his doctrine and that set forth in classical philosophy. We know from Chapter 4 that he can be severely critical of Greek thought; nonetheless, there are texts in which he explicitly asserts the ways in which his own position recaptures the achievements of classical philosophy.

4. Dewey’s Reformulation of Classical Insights

In the examination of these texts, four points stand out. The first is Dewey's somewhat surprising assertion that there is a very real sense in which forms can be considered atemporal. The second involves epistemology. Dewey claims that, when properly understood, the Greek teaching that form and not matter is grasped by the intellect can be accepted as an accurate and defensible doctrine. The third point builds on this analysis, and states that the ontological status of forms is that of possibilities. The fourth, in contrast to the previous three investigations, is a divergence from the Aristotelian tradition. Each event for Dewey is to be understood not primarily in terms of one form, as it is in the traditional doctrine of substantial forms, but from the perspective of a plurality of forms.

4.1. Forms as "Eternal"

The clearest statements about the way in which forms can be understood as outside the temporal dimension come from The Quest for
Certainty. Now, it is obvious from what we already know about Dewey's treatment of forms that, as he conceives them, they cannot be atemporal in every sense. Since they are not separate existents, Dewey cannot argue that they are atemporal in a Platonic sense of having always existed in a separate realm. Because they are dependent on the emergence of events, there is a sense in which forms will always be temporally conditioned. The relationship of part to whole (the form) in newly evolved species represents a real novelty that had no anterior existence. Despite these considerations, Dewey is still willing to admit that there is a justifiable manner in which forms can be treated as non-processive.

In the two quotations from Art as Experience which define it, form is identified with the characteristic pattern resulting from the part/whole and means/end relationships. In "The Influence of Darwinism on Philosophy," form is associated with the permanent aspects of reality. By aligning stability with relations, The Quest for Certainty bridges these two discussions. Dewey again stresses that nature is a mixture of the precarious and the stable, and goes on to argue that freedom depends on this blending of change and permanence. In so doing he explicitly states that stability is to be associated with relations: "Freedom is an actuality when the recognition of relations, the stable element, is combined with the uncertain element, in the knowledge which makes foresight possible and secures intentional preparation for probable consequences" (QC 199).

This quotation is another example of the interconnection in Dewey's thought of theoretical investigation and practical considerations. The moral dimension is always present in some sense, but it alternates between foreground and background. But for our purposes the significance of this quotation is Dewey's admission that relations represent the stable factor in existence. This is a stand already implicit in my interpretation, and its admission by Dewey reinforces the kind of analysis I am developing. It also indicates a consistency in his thought which runs at least from the article on Darwin (1909) through The Quest for Certainty (1929) to Art as Experience (1934). The common thread in each of these texts is the recognition that existence is characterized by precariousness and stability and that the stable aspects are what philosophers have called form. Form is the philosophical concept which traditionally
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represents permanence, and Dewey understands form as allied to relations.

Once these kinds of identifications are understood and kept in mind, we will be able to grasp the sense in which forms are atemporal according to Dewey. The crucial element in this elaboration is the understanding of form in terms of relations. For, as Dewey explains, the kernel of truth found in the Greek claim of immutable forms can be located in the constancy of certain relations. Traditionally, as Dewey asserts, forms have been characterized in such terms as "ideality," "universality," and "immutability" (QC 129). His own theory, based on the importance of relations, offers an alternative that incorporates both the advances in science and the insights of classical philosophy. It does this by respecting change while recognizing how permanence is to be understood in a post-Darwinian world of flux and process.

Operations as such, that is, as connective interactions, are uniform. Physically and sensibly, a machine changes through friction, exposure to weather, etc., while products vary in quality. Processes are local and temporal, particular. But the relation of means and consequence which defines an operation remains one and the same in spite of these variations. It is a universal. . . . Each process is individual and not exactly identical with others. But the function for which the machine is designed does not alter with these changes; an operation, being a relation, is not a process [QC 130].

This quotation is both a good summary of some issues that have been raised thus far and a statement by Dewey concerning just how the precarious and the stable are intermixed in existence. To begin with, there is the emphasis on interaction which we can now recognize as a familiar Deweyan theme. Secondly, there is a covert statement asserting the interpenetration of form and end. Dewey uses alternative terminology, but his point is the same. To reconstruct the argument, we must keep in mind once again that form is to be understood in terms of relations. This quotation then introduces a new term, "operation," an expression meaning the relation of means to consequences. This relation is spoken of as describing a function. The quotation thus restates the identification of form and end by associating operation (form) with function (end). Thus even though form is not mentioned the new doctrine does apply to an analysis
that recognizes forms. This novel doctrine concerns Dewey's admission that, although processes are temporal, there is a real sense in which operations are not. Although change and process are pervasive, the function, Dewey argues, "does not alter with these changes."

Dewey also states his position in traditional language, which he qualifies in accordance with his own orientation:

The relation is thus invariant. It is eternal, not in the sense of enduring throughout all time, or being everlasting like an Aristotelian species or a Newtonian substance, but in the sense that an operation as a relation which is grasped in thought is independent of the instances in which it is overtly exemplified, although its meaning is found only in the possibility of these actualizations [QC 130].

Here then is Dewey's manner of explaining the integration of change and permanence. Relations supply the permanent or stable dimension. Stability means invariance through vicissitude. The particular entities in which an operation takes place may alter, wear down, break down, or run successfully. But none of this will have any effect on the relation of means to consequence which is the form. The function remains stable whether it is actually capable of being carried out or not. The human kidneys, for example, operate in such a way that they control the amount of salt in the blood. When they fail to accomplish this properly, discomfort results and help is sought. Help is needed in these cases because the function of the kidneys, although currently inoperative, remains the same. It is only because of this continuity of function that deficiencies, as lapses from a standard, can be identified. Because of considerations like this one, Dewey admits that there is an accurate sense in which forms can be spoken of as "eternal." They are eternal in that they are not affected by individual instantiations and temporal contingencies.

The word "eternal" may appear to be an unusual choice in view of the limited sense in which Dewey means it; nonetheless, it is a significant selection, insofar as it indicates Dewey's willingness to admit that traditional philosophy had grasped something of importance in its analyses. By giving it expression in a manner both justifiable and comprehensible, he seeks to restore that insight.
Dewey is also eager to re-emphasize another insight of classical thought, closely associated with this one: the doctrine that what the intellect grasps in cognition is form not matter.

4.2. Intelligence and Forms

Dewey asserts unambiguously in *Experience and Nature* that his own theory of knowledge recapitulates the Greek position that form rather than matter is seized in cognition. “In this respect, the view presented agrees with classic teaching, according to which perception, apprehension, lays hold of form, not of matter. I believe this view properly understood is inherently sound . . .” (EN 240). Because of our examination of Dewey’s metaphysics we are now in a position to see in just what manner this teaching is to be “properly understood.” When we speak of forms in Dewey, we are speaking of relations. *The Quest for Certainty* stresses the relation of means to consequences, whereas the books on art and nature tend to speak in terms of the relation of part to whole. These relations, as we know, account for whatever element of stability is present within entities.

This means that if Dewey were to argue that knowledge aims at the stable aspects of existence, he would be saying that it seeks out the relations (either of means to consequences or parts to whole)—in other words, the forms. In this way Dewey’s teaching and that of traditional thinkers would agree in precisely the manner Dewey himself suggested. *The Quest for Certainty* provides exactly this sort of assertion:

Nothing is more familiar than the standardized objects of reference designated by common nouns. Their distinction from proper names shows that they are not singular or individual, not existing things. Yet, “the table” is both more familiar and seemingly more substantial than *this* table, the individual. “This” undergoes change all the time. It is interacting with other things and with me, who am not exactly the same person as when I last wrote upon it. “This” is an indefinitely multiple and varied series of “thises.”

But save in extreme cases, these changes are indifferent, negligible, from the standpoint of means for consequences. *The table* is precisely the constancy among the serial “thises” of whatever serves as an instrument for a single end. *Knowledge* is concerned wholly with this constant, this standardized and averaged set of properties and relations . . . [QC 189].
The significance of this passage lies in its explanation of the connection between knowledge and forms. Dewey does not simply state here the relationship but rather builds up to it after introducing once again his teaching that relations account for the stable ("constant") aspects of existence. Epistemological considerations are thus consistent with ontological ones. If, as he says, knowledge is "wholly concerned" with the constant, then there must be constancy in existence. Just how this constancy, this permanence, is woven into the fabric of existence was the topic of the previous section. The atemporality of the relations which constitute forms is reiterated in this quotation by using a concrete example, that of a table.

The table, as opposed to this table, is, as Dewey asserts, not an "existing" thing. It is not, in other words, an event. It is not an event because alterations and changes are "indifferent" and "negligible" to it. The table, as a particular relationship of means to consequences, remains constant in spite of the fact that individual tables, as events, are constantly undergoing changes. This constancy is unaffected, even when the changes include those that lead to disrepair and decay. The relationship of means to consequences, which describes the function, remains the same for a table on which paint is chipping and wood rotting as for a brand new one. The table is a grouping together of various materials in a certain arrangement to serve a particular end. This fact remains constant in spite of the diversity of materials that may be used or the changes that may occur to those materials through time. Dewey has used various expressions to characterize this trait of existence. "Constant" is the one preferred in this quotation, but we have already seen that he also uses "stable" and "eternal."

Once Dewey has established how constancy or stability is a trait of existence, he reveals the importance of this fact for epistemology. A world of mere flux would be a world in which knowledge would be impossible. Knowledge depends on the fact of some stability. Dewey goes so far as to argue that it is wholly concerned with this constancy. Since we know that this constancy involves relations, and that relations define form for Dewey, we can understand how the connection between knowledge and forms is as firmly established in his doctrine as it was for the Platonic—Aristotelian tradition. Thus Dewey develops the ontological foundations for intelligibility in a coherent manner. Knowledge is possible because events are both
stable and precarious. Without the precariousness, problematic situations would not arise; without the stabilities, knowledge would be impossible. It is because events are formed that they are intelligible. Without the relations which constitute stability and define form, intelligibility would not be a trait of existence.

4.3. Forms as Possibilities

Forms are not events. They do not exist as things in the world or as entities in any other realm. Therefore Dewey is careful to stress the connotations of possibility in the term “intelligible.” “Nature is intelligible and understandable. There are operations by means of which it becomes an object of knowledge, and is turned to human purposes, just as rivers provide conditions which may be utilized to promote human activities and to satisfy human need” (QC 168). Dewey’s stress on the suffixes suggesting possibility and on the terms “may” and “becomes” offers decisive evidence of his view that forms have the status of possibilities in the events they characterize. They exist as possibilities in relation to the inquirer whose task it is to seek them out.

We have already seen how Dewey uses the term “intelligence” to indicate that some amount of activity on the part of the inquirer is requisite in coming to knowledge. This work can now be seen as uncovering, as analyzing in the literal sense of shaking loose, the possibilities (forms) inherent in events. “Nature is capable of being understood. But the possibility is realized not by a mind thinking about it from without but by operations conducted from within, operations which give it new relations summed up in production of a new individual object” (QC 172). Experimentation, Dewey is saying, is what allows the comprehensible to become the comprehended. It is important to note the stress once again on relations. Experimentation seeks certain stabilities (the relations) which have hitherto remained unknown. If it is successful, new “objects” are discovered and human knowledge is increased.

The famous physiologist Claude Bernard, for example, reveals the details of experiments undertaken to prove that secretions from the pancreas are responsible for breaking down fatty materials in an organic body. A chance observation during a dissection had suggested this possibility to him. An experiment had then to be con-
ducted to test this hypothesis, or “preconceived idea” as Bernard calls it. Since the pancreatic juices are not directly accessible from outside an organism (unlike urine and saliva, for instance) he had to construct a double experiment. The first was intended simply to extract a suitable sample of the fluid in question, and the second to test this liquid’s effect on fats. After carefully carrying out both these steps, he was able to verify his hypothesis. “In fact pancreatic juice obtained in suitable conditions from dogs, rabbits and other animals, and mixed with oil or melted fat, always instantly emulsified, and later split these fatty bodies into fatty acids, glycerine, etc., etc., by means of a specific ferment.”

I have used this illustration of an actual experimental discovery to emphasize the ingredients in Dewey’s position. He claims that nature is intelligible and that intelligence, involving, as it does, directed operations, is the name given to the faculty that can elicit this intelligibility. Bernard did not come to recognize the function of the pancreas by sitting back and trying to deduce it from first principles. Rather, he engaged in operations that involved direct contact, interaction, and interference with the animal functions that were the subject of his study. Prior to the manipulations of inquiry, this function was operative but unknown. Its status in reference to a knower was that of a possibility. Actualization came about only as the result of intelligently directed operations.

We saw in our discussion of “intelligence” that its defining characteristic is the “capacity to estimate the possibilities of a situation and to act in accordance with [this] estimate.” This exactly describes the procedure followed by Bernard and, Dewey would say, by all individuals who are engaged in the process of inquiry. There is, then, a real sense in which forms have the status of possibilities for Dewey. They are possibilities for knowledge which experimentation can actualize.

4.4. A Pluralistic Theory of Forms

If forms are indeed identified with the relations of means for consequences, and if events, engaged in interactions with humans, reveal the possibilities for a variety of such relations, then Dewey must admit that each event embodies, not one form, but a cluster of them. Such indeed is his position. The Aristotelian tradition of the
Middle Ages began the movement in this direction by drawing a distinction between substantial and accidental forms. This distinction admitted that a plurality of forms must be taken into account, even in the analysis of a single being. However, this plurality is subjected to a rigid bifurcation of which Dewey would not approve. From a Deweyan perspective, the very labels “substantial” and “accidental” indicate but another case of philosophy’s false search for the real, behind or beyond the transactions that actually characterize experience. In spite of this, Dewey agrees that an accurate analysis must admit a plurality of forms for existents. He is even willing to accept some ordering of these, though not in a rigidly hierarchical fashion.

Perhaps the best way to get an accurate understanding of the Deweyan analysis is to compare it to the medieval view as exemplified in Thomas Aquinas. For Aquinas, the substantial form is responsible for the very being of an entity. Every entity is a material formed in a certain way. Without this substantial form, there can be no entity. Accidental form, on the other hand, presupposes an already existing entity, and simply qualifies it in some manner. On this analysis a being can be both determinate and indeterminate: determinate in that it is some definite thing (has a substantial form), but indeterminate in that it is potentially capable of taking on a variety of accidental forms. Aquinas explains it in this way. “But since the material that is joined to a substantial form nonetheless remains in potency to many accidental forms, what can be said to exist as finite in itself can be infinite in a relative way. Wood, for instance, is finite in accordance with its form, but is nonetheless infinite insofar as it is in potency with regard to the fact that it can be shaped or colored in an infinite number of ways.” A particular entity, then, according to this view, must be analyzed in terms of a plurality of forms. An entity presents itself both as something definite and as a capacity for a great number of alterations. This pluralistic approach is qualified by a sharp distinction between the substantial form, responsible for the very being of an entity, and the accidental forms which can accrue only if this other form is present.

Dewey, too, wishes to indicate that a thorough analysis of an event will involve a plurality of forms. However, he does not make the distinction into a kind of form absolutely requisite for existence, and one that must already take existence for granted. His is a much
more egalitarian view of forms. It is a mistake, he argues, to take a meaning for the meaning. “Essence, as has been intimated, is but a pronounced instance of meaning; to be partial, and to assign a meaning to a thing as the meaning is but to evince human subjection to bias” (EN 144). Once again we must return to the doctrine of interaction if we are to understand Dewey properly. As we know, the basic existential situation, as this thinker conceives it, is one of interaction of an organism with its environment. Philosophical issues must therefore be expressed in light of that fact.

Problematic situations arise within a context, and solutions are sought in terms of the possibilities inherent in that context. Because of this, a Deweyan doctrine of forms is bound to be context-dependent and thus to a degree relative. Since forms are defined as means for consequences, all the various means implicit in an event must be treated in an equal fashion. Different problems will occasion the discovery of different forms. None of these is to be judged as inherently superior to the others. They are to be evaluated individually only in their capacity for resolving each particular problematic situation. Wood, to use the example suggested by Aquinas, may take on a variety of forms depending on the context. A piece of wood may become a cane for a hiker with a twisted ankle, fuel for the same person’s campfire, a weapon in case of danger, a unit of construction, or even an artwork in the hands of the right person. In each of these cases, a new possibility has been brought to realization. There is no manner, according to Dewey, in which one can be adjudicated as possessing a higher level of being than the others. Each is to be treated contextually.

Such a position, however, is not altogether unqualified in Dewey’s writings. He does not argue that one kind of form is more real than another. He does admit, though, that certain forms become in practical ways the standardized forms of things. Because certain contexts remain relatively stable, a particular set of possibilities may continually be fastened upon as defining the event in question. In this sense, and in this sense alone, can one form be stressed at the expense of others.

As habits form, action is stereotyped into a fairly constant series of acts having a common end in view; the table serves a single use, in spite of individual variations. A group of properties is set aside, corresponding to the abiding end and single mode of use which
form the object, in distinction from “this” of unique experiences. The object is an abstraction, but unless it is hypostatized it is not a vicious abstraction. It designates selected relations of things which, with respect to their mode of operation, are constant within the limits practically important [QC 190].

Obviously, this analysis is very closely related to the one, dealt with earlier in this chapter, concerning the manner in which forms could be understood as “eternal.” In this case, as in the previous one, Dewey is attempting to salvage the truth of classical insights, without committing himself fully to a prescientific philosophy.

Dewey does not adhere to any doctrine of substantial forms, but he does realize how some forms can come, through reiteration, to be taken for the essential, as opposed to the accidental, characteristics of an event. Viewing a table as serving a particular and recurrent function is certainly a valid and common human response to a series of similar situations. It becomes invalid for Dewey only if it is seen as excluding other forms, or if the context within which this function is focused on is forgotten. In light of this analysis there are certain statements that accurately characterize the Deweyan position as regards the plurality of forms. To begin with, events are formed, but this must not be taken to imply that they have a single form. In fact, events possess a variety of forms. Secondly, none of these forms is to be treated as more real or as possessed of more being than any other. But, thirdly, since some contexts remain fairly stable, certain meanings through repetition may become standardized and may stand, for practical purposes, as embodiments of the object in question.

5. Summary

The present chapter has dealt with two closely related concerns. The first, systematic in character, involved the continued elucidation and further discrimination of Dewey’s teaching on forms. The second, of historical interest, analyzed the manner in which some traditional philosophical insights were preserved in his reconstructed philosophical position.

The following issues were especially prominent in this chapter. (a) It was argued that Dewey’s dynamic view of existence leads him to express the relation of form and end as one of interpenetration,
of coalescence. Form, on this view, is the end of a temporal sequence. (b) Dewey’s analysis is one of truly ontological generality. He always tends to emphasize techne, but he readily admits the viability of applying the same analysis to physis. (c) Dewey asserts that Greek thinkers such as Aristotle were not altogether mistaken when they spoke of forms in atemporal terms. Indeed, he is willing to characterize them as “eternal” as long as this label is properly understood. (d) Dewey also finds acceptable the teaching that form rather than matter is grasped in noetic inquiry. (e) This means that forms must be interpreted as possibilities. (f) Because each event offers a diverse range of functional possibilities, it would be incorrect to assign a single form to a single event. Dewey believes that an event involves not a unique form, but a multiplicity of them.

NOTES

1. See chap. 5, sects. 3.1 and 4.1.
2. See chap. 2, sect. 2.
3. See chap. 2, sect. 2. The same point is made in a somewhat different manner at EN 84: “Such a view may verbally distinguish between something called efficient causation and something else called final causation. But in effect the distinction is only between the causality of the master who contents himself with uttering an order and the efficacy of the servant who actually engages in the physical work of execution. It is only a way of attributing ultimate causality to what is ideal and mental—the directive order of the master—, while emancipating it from the supposed degradation of physical labor in carrying it out, as well as avoiding the difficulties of inserting an immaterial cause within the material realm.”
4. See the discussion of “event” in chap. 5, sect. 3.1.
5. Dewey makes his displeasure over such an analysis quite plain, calling it a “Great Bad.” “Classic metaphysics is a confused union of these two senses of ends, the primarily natural and the secondarily natural, or practical, moral. Each meaning is intelligible, grounded, legitimate in itself. But their mixture is one of the Great Bads of philosophy” (EN 88).
6. See chap. 2, sect. 2.
7. See chap. 5, sects. 3.2 and 4.1.
8. By suggesting this comparison, I signal my agreement with John Herman Randall, Jr., in reference to the important contributions of Dewey. “But Dewey’s enduring contribution is to be found where he extends and broadens the classic tradition, by setting it in the context of the wider experience of modern knowledge” (“John Dewey, 1859–1952,”
in *Dewey and His Critics: Selected Essays from The Journal of Philosophy*, ed. Sidney Morgenbesser [New York: The Journal of Philosophy, Inc., 1977], p. 4; the article from which this citation is taken was originally published in *The Journal of Philosophy*, 50 [1953], 5-13).


12. See chap. 4, sect. 3.4.

13. See above, sect. 2.

14. Dewey understands "possibility" in a very straightforward manner, as that which may result, or be made to result, from a set of factual conditions. At QC 239, he explains "the possible" in this way: "'The actual' consists of given conditions; 'the possible' denotes ends or consequences not now existing but which the actual may through its use bring into existence."

15. See chap. 4, sect. 4.2.


17. See chap. 4, sect. 4.2.

18. Dewey's analysis of this issue is discussed in chap. 4, sect. 3.4.

19. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* (Ottawa: Garden City Press, 1941), 1, 7, 2c. The translation is my own. Other references which explain Aquinas' position include the following: 1, 77, 6c; 1, 44, 2c; and 1, 76, 4c.