Book Review:

Mind in Nature: John Dewey, Cognitive Science, and a Naturalistic Philosophy for Living

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Mark L. Johnson and Jay Schulkin, *Mind in Nature: John Dewey, Cognitive Science, and a Naturalistic Philosophy for Living*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2023, 288 pages.
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Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player, / That struts and frets his hour upon the stage, / And then is heard no more. It is a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing.
(Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Act V, scene v)

Mark Johnson and Jay Schulkin critically engage Dewey's *Experience and Nature* to present a naturalistic philosophy of animals who may indeed strut and fret their hour upon the stage, as Macbeth despaired, but whose lives are more meaningful, purposeful, and value-rich than mere tales "told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." Things and ends beyond ourselves matter. In Johnson and Schulkin's tale, Dewey is the non-idiot on center stage, full of presaging wisdom about the emergent functions of embodied valuing animals. Like Johnson's prolific co-author Schulkin, who died of cancer a week before this engaging book was released, Dewey lived as he counseled, using "thought to its utmost" and throwing his "puny strength" into the "moving unbalanced balance of things" (1925/1929, LW 1:314).

Philosophical naturalism will not fully satisfy what James called the rationalistic temperament. The rationalist conceives something unlovable about a world in which all purposiveness is finally vulnerable to contingency and chance. Yet as Johnson and Schulkin show, a naturalistic philosophy can be humble and inspiring. It can also be explanatory, which is the overriding focus of their book: "The fundamental challenge for naturalistic approaches is to explain the existence and operation of our many human capacities (e.g., life, perception, feeling, consciousness, thought, language, meaning, reason, knowing, aesthetic experience, and morality), without calling down supernatural or transcendent entities, agencies, forces, causes, or values" (33).

It is a common presumption that one's own understanding has been impartially adjusted by *the* all-inclusive plumb-line of reason, direct intuition, or divine authority. As such one's peculiar brand of rectitude occupies an exclusive and irrecusable logical space. Descartes ran with a related image in the *Discourse on Method*, as a metaphor for adjusting his opinions "*au niveau de la raison*," to the level of reason. In both scholarly discourse and popular culture, Descartes' seventeenth-century assumption that we can square our individual judgments to the fixed geometry of God's creation persists today as a latent recurring habit, even where it is openly

rejected. Naturalists like Johnson and Shulkin argue that no plumb line of pure thought or transcendental reason is required as a leveling reference to orient our inquiries. Nor, they add, has such a universal level ever been available. The dream of an impartial state or act purified of natural interactions is itself a delusional partiality, all the more obnoxious for its evasive self-concealment and pretentiousness (see 1925/1929, LW 1:324; cf. Johnson and Schulkin 2023, 204). With Dewey as their muse, Johnson and Schulkin argue that it is far wiser to chart a course to make the best of humanity's inescapable contingency and provincialism.

Johnson and Schulkin's emphasis on giving natural, non-pretentious explanations for a very broad range of humane phenomena does not, as readers might reasonably worry, lead to a book that is unwieldly. The book avoids this by sustaining a disciplined scientific/explanatory focus on interpreting, critiquing, and expanding *Experience and Nature.* Dewey-steeped readers may wish to see a bit more contextualizing within the *Collected Works*, as well as more emphasis on the practical implications of Dewey's naturalism for redirecting education and public life. We may prefer to have our *Experience and Nature* steeped and dyed in *Democracy and Education* and *The Public and Its Problems.* Nevertheless, I have few bones to pick. I will, however, offer three compensatory emphases and nudges to complement their tight focus and further situate their analyses within Dewey's corpus.

First, more might have been explicitly said about Dewey's pluralism. Dewey imbibed the spirit of James's pluralism: "The word 'and' trails after every sentence. Something always escapes. 'Ever not quite' has to be said of the best attempts made anywhere in the universe at attaining all-inclusiveness" (1977, 145). Just as there is more to any person than what annoys us about them, there is *relevantly* more to any situation than is found in our theorizing. Whatever we see with a theory's help is situated within what is inconspicuous. Whatever reflection puts us in touch with is situated within what is ungrasped (cf. 1925/1929, LW 1:44). If we forget this, Dewey urged, we end up paying for conceptual clarities by neglecting aspects of existential subject matter that troubled us to inquire in the first place.

Johnson and Schulkin get this. Their naturalistic account is thoroughly pluralistic, though it is perhaps telling that variations on the word "naturalism" appear one hundred and ten times in their manuscript while variations on "pluralism" appear twice. My compensatory emphasis on pluralism rests on two fundamental agreements with Johnson and Schulkin: first, that they have successfully made the case for a naturalistic explanation of human capacities, and second, that our culture's anti-

naturalistic bias is just as deeply entrenched as they think it is.

I embrace Johnson and Schulkin's attempt to convince doubters that a thoroughgoing naturalism celebrates rather than denigrates human life. Let's see how far we can go in that direction. Meanwhile, the bias against naturalism will stubbornly persist for the foreseeable future. Thankfully, a revolutionary shift to widespread naturalism is not a prerequisite for maturing together toward a freer, healthier, more just, more secure, more peaceful, and more sustainable future. A prerequisite to these superordinate ends is that we must expand prospects for social learning and convergence on policy and action, as pragmatist environmental philosophers have argued (e.g., Light 2017; McKenna 2018, 2020; Minteer 2011; Norton 2015; Thompson 2015). When it comes to democratic decision making and citizenship education, pluralism is more practically pressing than naturalism, even though the former flows most coherently and compellingly from the latter. In short, we can help people be better pluralists without convincing them to be naturalists. Johnson and Schulkin do not disagree, but neither do they make the pragmatic point.

Second, this pluralistic emphasis underlies Dewey's democratic approach to value inquiry. Though not an explicit theme of *Experience and Nature*, the democratic ideal is written between the lines. Johnson and Schulkin's book is itself imbued with a democratic sensibility, though perhaps this is too understated. In the general spirit of Hume's *Treatise* (1739), the full title of which was *A Treatise of Human Nature: being an Attempt to introduce the experimental Method into Moral Subjects*, Johnson and Schulkin follow Dewey's lead in bringing experimental method to bear on value inquiry. "The growth of the experimental as distinct from the dogmatic habit of mind," Dewey asserted in *Experience and Nature*, "is due to increased ability to utilize variations for constructive ends instead of suppressing them" (1925/1929, LW 1:7). Dewey thus approached the natural human fact of variability in valuing and valuations as a useful starting point for constructive inquiry, rather than as a troublesome deviation to be suppressed or intellectually standardized in the name of systematic rigor. This warrants emphasis in any book engaging Dewey because the virtues of such a method of inquiry are so central to his approach. A democratic method can better reach its potential to be creative, critical, and self-corrective by raising questions, imagining alternatives, putting ideas to the test, and disclosing differences that might otherwise have escaped notice. At the same time, democratic participation can reduce apathy, build community, and create consummatory value from what had been a Babel of meanings (see 1927, LW 2:324).

Third, Johnson and Schulkin could more explicitly develop the distinction between primary and secondary experience, Dewey's most pivotal distinction in *Experience and Nature*. They write: "As much as we might appreciate Dewey's motivations for the primary versus secondary dichotomy, it does not hold up well under scrutiny. What is the alleged distinction, really?" (18) Dewey had no dichotomy in mind and would agree with Johnson and Schulkin that "the distinction is trying to capture the need for a nonreductive, context-sensitive description of the richness of our lived experience. It is not meant as a fixed categorical framework" (18). "Dewey probably could have written *Experience and Nature* without this distinction," Johnson and Schulkin assert, "but then he would have had to find another way to make" it (18). This is a considerable understatement. Frustrated as usual by Bertrand Russell's willful misinterpretations, Dewey wrote in 1939: "Mr. Russell has not been able to follow the distinction I make between the immediately had material of non-cognitively experienced situations and the material of cognition—a distinction without which my view cannot be understood" (LW 14:33).

The point behind Dewey's distinction, as Johnson and Schulkin go on to explain, is that "inquiry, as secondary processes, remakes experience by instituting new meanings" (18). They did not, but should have, anticipated the aesthetic connection here: inquiry serves and reconstitutes primary experience. "Knowledge," as Dewey clarified in *Art as Experience*, "is instrumental to the enrichment of immediate experience through the control of action that it exercises" (1934, LW 10:294). Johnson and Schulkin also might have given more compelling examples to show that primary and secondary experience are functional categories within the flow of experience. For example, radiometric dating is secondary experience in its dominant emphasis, but it is equally a felt opening of awareness, of making sense, of disclosure.

Johnson and Schulkin never *explicitly* revisit this distinction, leaving it hanging. Yet in subsequent analysis, they do an extraordinary job—one I would like to see them take credit for—of implicitly clarifying and developing this "alleged" distinction, especially in their chapters on "Meaning and Thought" (ch. 4), "Knowing as Transformative Action" (ch. 6), and "The Aesthetics of Life and Mind" (ch. 8).

In "Meaning and Thought," for example, Johnson and Schulkin read Dewey through the affective prism of what he, in "Qualitative Thought" (1930), called an objective qualitative unity to any reflective situation. Dewey wrote: "The gist of the matter is that the immediate existence of quality, and of dominant and pervasive

quality, is the background, the point of departure, and the regulative principle of all thinking" (LW 5:262). Dewey elaborated the felt horizon of experience as a pervasive, "underlying qualitative character that constitutes a situation." All meaning, whether linguistic or affective, is dependent upon this qualitative field, which suffuses and differentiates experience (LW 5:248). "The quality of a situation as a whole," Dewey clarified, "operates to produce a functional connection" (1930a/1988, 257). Johnson and Schulkin attempt to make neuroscientific sense of this qualitative unity in terms of dorsal pathways (primary/felt/qualitative experience) and ventral pathways (reflective analysis). The relevance here for clarifying and updating the primary/secondary distinction goes unmentioned.

The insight that symbolic experience must be integrated and coordinated with direct experience is fundamental to *Experience and Nature* and to the rest of Dewey's corpus. Johnson and Schulkin have, despite early downplaying, succeeded in pushing this insight to the cutting edge of twenty-first century philosophy and neuroscience. They have thereby shone a light on how we may together "find meaningful ways to carry on and to throw in with the better, rather than the worse" (234).