

# Instrumentalism and Poetic Thinking:

## A Critique of Dewey's Logic of Thought

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**Abstract:** This paper offers a critique of the instrumental logic of thought found in the middle period of Dewey's philosophy. His instrumentalism requires that thought serves to effect a physical alteration in the conditions of experience through an experimental act, the results of which retrospectively determine the legitimacy of thought. But missing from his account, I argue, is an explanation of the significant alteration of experience brought about by more aesthetic forms of philosophical thinking, which do not aim to effect any kind of physical alteration. I therefore propose that "poetic thinking" be invoked as a necessary supplement to instrumental thinking.

### Introduction

One of John Dewey's most important innovations as a philosopher was his introduction of a new logic of thought, as laid out in his *Essays in Experimental Logic*.<sup>1</sup> Past schools of thought, he contends in this work, have placed too great an emphasis on the processes of reflection and inquiry themselves, without considering the non-reflective context in which thought is situated. If this context is recognized in its full import, it becomes clear that an account of the temporal development of experience must figure largely in any adequate logic of thought.<sup>2</sup> Reflection and inquiry are then found to occupy an intermediate and mediating position in the development of experience; they are found to be instrumental, meaning they serve to effect a physical alteration in the extant conditions of experience.<sup>3</sup> Dewey is convinced that this framework provides for all the possibilities of legitimate philosophical thinking.

This essay offers a critique of this notion. In Section II, I begin by providing a brief exposition of Dewey's account of the temporal development of experience and its constitutive moments—pre-reflective experience, reflective experience, and the post-reflective situation—in order to set the stage for what follows. In Section III, I proceed to the critique itself, where I suggest that Dewey's theory is legitimate (and even groundbreaking) within its own limits, but constricting to a survey of the broader possibilities of philosophical thought when taken to exhaust those possibilities. His instrumentalism requires that thought produce a physical alteration of the conditions of experience through an experimental act, the

<sup>1</sup> John Dewey, *Essays in Experimental Logic* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1916).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*



results of which retrospectively determine the legitimacy of thought. Missing from his account, however, is an explanation of the significant alteration of experience brought about by more aesthetic forms of thinking, which do not affect—nor intend to effect—any kind of physical alteration. Therefore, I propose that “poetic thinking” be invoked as a necessary supplement to instrumental thinking. In this way, one avoids the difficulties that appear when the latter is taken to account for all forms of philosophical thought.

### Exposition

The first moment of the temporal development of experience, which Dewey calls by several names, is pre-reflective experience.<sup>4</sup> This moment comprises what some may refer to as a “knowledge” experience (as when we speak of “acquaintance knowledge,” “immediate knowledge,” or skill and habit) although Dewey is convinced that this type of experience cannot properly be called a knowledge experience without perverting both of these terms. He explains that it may be guided by knowledge resulting from previous inquiries, and may even contain an element of thinking, but not in such a way that they structure the situation and lend it a pervading quality.<sup>5</sup> For a concrete example of this pre-reflective mode, consider the difference between, on the one hand, an experience of drinking water where the perception of water is peripheral to the action itself, and on the other hand, an experience where knowledge of the constitution of water is the controlling interest. In the former case, water is experienced in an unreflective, practical way, as something encountered in the midst of everyday concerns and projects; in the latter case, it is experienced primarily as an object of perceptual and cognitional apprehension, that is, as an object of knowledge.<sup>6</sup>

Philosophers, however, have a natural tendency to distort the unreflective mode of experience by attributing qualities to it that in fact belong to the cognitional mode. Such a misconception, Dewey claims, results in a falsification of the way we phenomenologically experience the world. Because philosophers do not think about knowledge except through the lens of reflective experience, they are predisposed to regard all experiences as if they were of the same sort as reflection.<sup>7</sup> The result is that they inadvertently attribute qualities to the whole that in fact are peculiar to one of its parts. Thus, whereas things are present to us most of the time in experiences of desire and antipathy, pleasure and pain, reluctance, indifference, and reminiscence, the professional philosopher tends either to think of such things as objects of conscious knowledge or to disregard them altogether.<sup>8</sup> While this inclination is pardonable insofar as it arises in homage to the value of thought and

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<sup>4</sup> As Dewey employs no fixed vocabulary in his writing, I have resorted to coining two terms for the sake of simplicity: “pre-reflective experience” and “the post-reflective situation.” The reader should bear in mind that Dewey does not use these phrases.

<sup>5</sup> Dewey, 2.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 2-3.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

reflection—a value that should by no means be underestimated—it is nevertheless damaging to critical philosophical investigation. Any inquiry that proceeds from this misconception is likely to be misguided from the start.<sup>9</sup>

Another important aspect of experience (whether pre-reflective or reflective) is that it is set in a non-cognitive context that holds in place a vast network of interrelations that inflect the focal object with meaning and significance. In other words, experience is structured by an internal organization by virtue of which the relations that comprise it “hang together” and are imbued with a saturating quality.<sup>10</sup> Consider, for example, how the focal point of experience—right now, the words of this essay—are surrounded by the page, the room, the building, the town, and so on, each successive level becoming increasingly indistinct, and how, in addition to these spatial horizons, one’s projects, habits, interests, and past stretch backward and forward in time, such that one interprets the environing world by their lights.<sup>11</sup> We find that experience is ensconced in sundry horizons, both spatial and temporal, which shade off indefinitely into the fringe of awareness and beyond, infusing its focal object with significance. Although as philosophers we tend to think of such internal organization as the outcome of conscious thought processes, it is actually, according to Dewey, constituted largely by experiences that are non-reflective in character. This immense and active nexus of varied and interrelated elements is precisely what he means when he speaks of “experience.”

Granted, then, that the greater part of experience is unreflective in character or at least constituted by unreflective factors, the task remains of describing the characteristics and purpose of *reflective experience*, the second moment in the temporal development of experience. Dewey claims that reflection first arises when the factors that comprise the empirical situation just described come into conflict; it is brought to the forefront of experience when something goes wrong, when friction and discordance disrupt our habitual, unreflective engagement with the environing world.<sup>12</sup> He emphasizes that such incompatibility of factors is not merely structural or static, as would seem to be the case if we supposed that our previous reflective inquiries had simply been inadequate in ordering experience. Instead, the factors of the empirical situation are incompatible in an “active and progressive” sense, as living hindrances to projects that extend beyond our intellectual concerns.<sup>13</sup>

Since incompatibility of factors obstructs some active interest of the knower, a particular purpose is set for thought in each case. The solution of this conflict (or, more accurately, the *re*-solution back into non-conflicted experience) must remain faithful to the existing conditions of the empirical situation. Only in relation to these may thought take its proper orientation. For example, if one ignores these conditions in formulating a solution, or evades them by escaping into imagination and fantasy, the conflict is either further agitated or remains unsettled (if it does not resolve itself). Conversely,

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.



if the problems one attends to do not arise from any real conflict—if they are problems purely of thought, divorced from experience—they should not be regarded as problems at all. Also, as long as the results of thought are not put into effect by being tested in action (as long as they do not serve as an instrument in effecting change in the empirical situation), the so-called knowledge gained lies fallow and thus does not qualify as knowledge at all. In order to become effective knowledge, it must translate into experimental action and thereby generate another non-reflective situation within which conflicts may again arise and new problems for reflection are set. I will refer to this second non-reflective situation as the post-reflective situation.

The post-reflective situation differs from the pre-reflective situation in three important ways. First (and foremost, for Dewey), the actual physical conditions of the situation are altered.<sup>14</sup> For example, if the factors of a particular conflict are thirst and the presence of unclean water, then the purification of that water—say, by boiling it—will result in a physical modification of the factors of experience: the cleansing of water and the quenching of thirst. The second way in which the situation is altered is through the changed character of the agent herself. With each successful operation of thought, she acquires new habits and skills, such as those involved in purifying water, that will be of use in future conflicts.<sup>15</sup> Finally, the post-reflective situation differs from the pre-reflective situation in that the factors involved in the experience accrue meaning and significance for the agent.<sup>16</sup> To continue with the example: Never again will she look at unclean water in the same way, as something undrinkable, and the tools she used to purify it will accrue meanings that were not previously there, presenting themselves as things that are useful for cleansing water.

As we will see, Dewey accords a certain priority to the first of these changes (physical alteration), while the latter two are regarded as secondary and posterior. I wish to call this priority into question. All the same, it should be kept in mind that this essay, whatever critique it may make of Dewey's instrumentalism, remains within the structure established by his distinctive notion of experience. This I leave untouched.

### Critique

Dewey's logic of thought, as he himself says, is instrumental. Thought is measured by the extent to which it serves as an instrument in effecting a physical change in the environment.<sup>17</sup> However, we are justified in asking whether this should be the only goal that thought sets for itself and more specifically, whether it should be the sole end toward which philosophical thinking aims. Might the possibility exist of a mode of thought that is interested

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Dewey is quite clear about this point: "The reorganization, the modification, effected by thinking is ... a *physical* one. Thinking ends in experiment and experiment is an *actual* alteration of a physically antecedent situation." Ibid., 31 (first italics mine).

in more than effects and results, a mode of thought that moves on more subtle levels?

Dewey suggests this possibility when he says that aside from being instrumental to gaining control of situations, thought may also serve to “enrich . . . the immediate significance of subsequent experiences,” hinting at a poetic mode of thought whose purpose is to enhance the meaning and quality of life, though not in any kind of physical way. “And it may well be,” he continues, “that this by-product, this gift of the gods, is incomparably more valuable for living a life than is the primary and intended result of control.”<sup>18</sup> He seems to soon forget this possibility, or else to relegate it to the realm of art and literature, when a few pages later he reiterates that thought must produce a physical modification of the environment. We are led to conclude that such poetic thinking lies outside the proper domain of philosophy, that it is merely a “by-product” of “the primary and intended result of control.” But should these by-products, which even he suggests are inimitably valuable, be regarded as incidental to thought? Perhaps there is a mode of thinking whose express purpose is to enrich and deepen the significance of experience, to forge value. Perhaps we may reasonably posit, in addition to instrumental thinking, what may be called poetic thinking, a mode of thought that aims not at the physical alteration of the conditions of experience but rather at the *significant alteration* of experience.<sup>19</sup> Before moving on to expound the purpose and characteristics of poetic thinking, it will be beneficial to illustrate in what ways instrumental thinking comes up short when it is taken to exhaust the possibilities of philosophical thought, as well as the dangers inherent in taking up such a view. The writings of Randolph Bourne and Martin Heidegger will aid us in this task.

At one time a disciple of Dewey, Bourne poses questions similar to those we have considered. His chief criticism is that Dewey’s instrumentalism, which concerns itself primarily with technique and expediency, is apt to come with a loss of “poetic vision.”<sup>20</sup> Instead of striving to create new values and open new horizons of thought, it settles with the goal of adaption to a pre-existing environment. “The defect of any philosophy of ‘adaption’ or ‘adjustment,’” Bourne writes, “is that there is no provision for thought getting beyond itself. If your ideal is to be in adjustment to your situation, in radiant co-operation with reality, then your success is likely to be that and no more.”<sup>21</sup> Thus, for Bourne, Dewey’s instrumentalism suffers from a devastating lack: It fails to account for the visionary side of thought, which he believes must “constantly

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 17-8.

<sup>19</sup> I do not mean for this distinction to suggest that philosophers must be either instrumental or poetic thinkers; the work of most philosophers contains both instrumental and poetic elements. Nevertheless, some tend so far in one or the other direction that they serve as paradigm examples of one particular mode. Dewey and Marx, for example, who both fervently advocated social and political reform, are typically instrumental philosophers. Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein, who aimed primarily at transforming the understanding of their readers, are characteristic examples of poetic philosophers. (These lists are by no means exhaustive, of course.)

<sup>20</sup> Randolph Bourne, *War and the Intellectuals: Collected Essays, 1915-1919*, ed. Carl Resek (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1999), 61.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.



outshoot technique.”<sup>22</sup> It stops short of what is possible as such, and limits itself to the circumscribed possibilities of a given set of conditions. By thus being assigned determinate limits, the field of potential human endeavor and thought is restricted.

Martin Heidegger points to a different, though related, shortcoming of instrumental thinking. While he acknowledges that it is justified and even necessary for living a life, he claims that instrumental thought (which he refers to as “calculative thinking”) leads to thoughtlessness when carried to an extreme. In “always reckon[ing] with conditions that are given,” it is prone not only to overlook what is possible as such but to lose itself in a frenzied ordering of the actual. “Calculative thinking races from one prospect to the next,” he writes. It “never stops, never collects itself.”<sup>23</sup> Whereas Bourne is concerned that instrumental-calculative thinking restricts philosophy’s range of possibilities and thus limits it, for Heidegger the risk is that we may come to expect too much of philosophy by demanding that it serve to manipulate the environing world in some way, and thereby overlook its less apparent effects.<sup>24</sup> He suggests that much philosophical thought moves on more subtle levels, such as attuning us with aspects of experience that normally pass unnoticed, evoking new modes of comportment toward the world, venturing into unexplored realms of thought. Philosophical thinking may also take the form of “self-meditation,” in which case thinking is directed back upon itself in an effort to see through its own determinations and historical constitution.<sup>25</sup> In demanding of such thinking that it produce physical changes in the world, Heidegger claims, we impose a foreign standard upon it. Its effects may be only mediate—but they are no less decisive.

One of my chief worries with Dewey’s instrumentalism is that, when adopted by others, it may become so forward-looking that it fails to recognize its own determinations. In order to be effective, as Dewey himself says, thought must bleed into experience, so to speak. But experience, we should remember, also bleeds into thought. We would be remiss to assume that one may adopt a wholly unbiased standpoint from which to philosophize; we bring much with us into reflection that is unreflective, assumptions so deeply embedded in our culture and concepts as to be imperceptible. These historical determinations shape and guide our inquiries to a great extent. Thus the risk of instrumental thinking, which ever keeps its sights on tangible results, on the future and progress, is that it may become so forward-looking as to let its determinations go unnoticed. One of the tasks of a more meditative, poetic mode of thinking, the kind Heidegger advocates, is to supplement and offset the blind spots inherent in instrumental-calculative thinking (necessary as it is) in order to

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Martin Heidegger, “Memorial Address,” in *Discourse on Thinking*, trans. John M. Anderson and E. Hans Freund (New York: Harper Perennial, 1966), 46.

<sup>24</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Basic Questions of Philosophy*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz and Andre Schuwer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 5.

<sup>25</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz and Daniela Vallega-Neu (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 39-44.

make it more historically conscious. To be sure, much of Dewey's philosophy is geared expressly toward this end, and may even be considered poetic in many respects, but such thought is not instrumental.<sup>26</sup> Heidegger's "self-meditation" (which may be regarded as a kind of poetic thinking, though not necessarily a paradigmatic example) reflects on determination not in order to bring about any change in the physical environment, but so that the thinker may stand in a more knowing relation to her historicity, the inconspicuous (and for that reason worrisome) force that prods us along in our thought and actions.

One might object that in having such a purpose it is indeed instrumental to something, but if we allow this point then every kind of philosophizing—even the question concerning how many angels can fit on the head of a pin—must also be considered instrumental, in that it serves some human interest and purpose. All thought is certainly instrumental toward something, but not in such a way as to meet the criterion Dewey sets for it. It is precisely this criterion that I wish to call into question. If we demand of thought that it render physical modifications in the environment, we may be excluding equally valid forms of thought that move on more subtle levels.

Another objection that might be raised in response to this critique is the assertion that poetic thinking—and, for that matter, experience itself—is in fact physical, and thus that the changes it brings about must also be physical. I do not deny a certain version of this point, but let us not equivocate on the meaning of the word "physical." If by "physical" we mean embodied, then certainly poetic thinking and its effects are physical, since experience is necessarily embodied experience. But notice that, according to this definition, all forms of thinking (even the most groundless) qualify as generating physical alterations. Therefore, it would make no sense for Dewey to say that thinking ought to effect physical alterations in experience if he also thinks that it necessarily does so. Bearing this in mind, it is clear that Dewey does not use this word to signify anything like embodiment. Rather, by "physical" he seems to mean external, or independent of the agent, such that "physical alteration" consists in reconstructing the objective conditions of experience (recall the example of cleansing water).<sup>27</sup> Such alterations, however, are the domain of instrumental thinking; they are not of the kind that poetic thinking brings forth.

Up to this point, we have said very little regarding the positive characteristics of poetic thinking. It will be useful to highlight certain key aspects by illustrating in what ways poetic thinking differs from

<sup>26</sup> Cf., for example, John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (New York: Henry Hold and Company, 1920).

<sup>27</sup> The use of the words "external" and "independent" does not necessarily compromise the unity of the phenomenon of experience. External physical conditions are an inextricable part of experience, but we may nevertheless speak of them as being in a certain sense separate from the agent. It might be useful to make a distinction here between external physical conditions, which lie beyond the bodily limits of the agent (what I refer to as "physical conditions" in this essay), and internal physical conditions, the physical conditions of embodiment mentioned above. Both inhere in experience and are inextricably related, yet each has a distinctive phenomenological quality of its own.



its instrumental counterpart. We said earlier that Dewey conceives of experience as constituted by a complex of physical conditions, the same conditions that thought endeavors to modify. However, as Dewey himself acknowledges, experience is also constituted by significant conditions, that is, by conditions of meaning and value; it is saturated by the accrued (and ever accruing) significance of history and past experience. Rather than effecting any kind of physical alteration, poetic thinking sets in motion a significant alteration of experience. In much the same way as poetry and literature, it transforms the thinker's perception of the surrounding world, of things and others, altering the meaning of experience or bringing to light aspects of it that were previously hidden or overlooked. Such alteration of experience is most often unaccompanied by any corresponding physical alteration, but this does not make it any less actual or decisive. Poetic thinking certainly has effects, only they are not of the same kind as instrumental thinking. Whereas the latter intends its results, that is, projects the alterations it aims to implement in a clear-sighted manner, according to clear-set objectives, there is no equivalent conscious projection in the latter. In a certain sense, then, we may say that poetic thinking is purposeless, or even *useless* (according to everyday standards of utility). However, these should not be regarded as damning characteristics. I highlight them simply to illustrate that poetic thinking is unconcerned with technical expediency or manipulation of experience. Rather, it keeps within that domain which precedes all possible action and instrumentation—i.e., the interpretive domain. This is where its work is accomplished, and to demand that it bring about tangible, physical results is to foist upon it an incommensurable standard.

### **Conclusion**

We find that Dewey's instrumental logic of thought gives us only a fragmentary picture of the potentiality of philosophical thinking. While he rightly recognizes that experience is constituted by significant as well as physical conditions, he demands of thought only that it generate physical alterations in experience, and as a result, significant alterations are regarded as mere by-products. This leads him to posit instrumentalism as accounting for the whole of philosophical thought. If, however, we are justified in claiming that thought may also aspire to significant alteration of experience as an end in itself, it becomes clear that instrumentalism is inadequate. In view of the aims of poetic thinking, physical alteration is of little concern and thought occupies itself with the interpretive domain, that is, with the significant conditions of experience. Thus, while instrumental thinking is legitimate when considered within its own limits, it fails to account for the whole of the possibilities of thought. Poetic thinking must be posited as its necessary supplement. ❖