

Pragmatist Representationalism and the Aesthetics of Moral Intelligence

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Important work on the relation of pragmatic ethics and aesthetics, such as Steven Fesmire's *John Dewey and Moral Imagination: Pragmatism in Ethics*, misses an important feature of the entire issue unless non-mimetic representation is invoked to explain the relation between what Dewey would call the "problem" and the "solution" presented in experience. This cannot be elaborated within a Rortyan neo-pragmatism, nor can it be addressed without attending to the "spiritual" aspect of moral agency.

Steven Fesmire, who teaches philosophy and environmental studies at Green Mountain College in Vermont, has recently authored *John Dewey and Moral Imagination: Pragmatism in Ethics*, which addresses the juncture of ethics and aesthetics.¹ This is an area not always appreciated even among Dewey's admirers, and one of this book's best features is its usefulness as a guide to some of the literature around this important issue. Part I lays out the standard scholarly terrain, through a well-documented treatment of character, belief, and intelligence in William James and Dewey. It recapitulates what Dewey's original story involves and whose more recent work that story resembles. Its well-chosen quotes and anecdotes brighten the classical pragmatist story.

This is a familiar tale, however, which connoisseurs might well skim, moving on to the more provocative part of the discussion, in Part II. For it is clear, right from the book's opening pages, that Steven Fesmire sees his own task as much more ambitious than just a standard account of some issues in Deweyan scholarship. He is hopeful that this own work here will contribute to "a Copernican revolution in ethics" (3). Part II of the book intends to sketch out this Copernican shift away from foundationalist ethics, and towards "an account of imaginative situational moral intelligence" (30). And here is Fesmire's important contribution. The power of art to affect the moral imagination is well known, but artistic production and enjoyment is a less familiar but more helpful model for moral experience, superior to Dewey's own rather bland notion of "growth" (107–8).

It is important to consider what this book intends to do and what it does not. Most apparently, it is not intended for those who are deeply skeptical of the pragmatist story. It seems to have been written on the assumption that its likely readers are its most likely allies. This might even be seen as one of the book's strengths, because when it comes to characterizing "the moral artist" — the title of the book's culminating chapter — Fesmire can use broader strokes, to paint a more intuitively vivid picture. On the other hand, this means that Fesmire has room for only so much. He gives only the sketchiest account of the objections to Decision Theory, for example, assuring us (but not really showing us) how the calculus of utilities "requires metaphorical interpretation, via the 'Nash equilibrium', to be relevant to human choice" (29).

So, as regards the agenda of classical pragmatism, this book is more celebratory than persuasive. This is no deep criticism of Fesmire's achievement. It is no failure of execution not to have embarked on a different project. However, this can only be Volume One. There is vastly greater potential to a book subtitled "Pragmatism in Ethics" than just how ethics appears to many pragmatists. It would seem no less crucial to consider how pragmatic ethics can appear generally, to ethicists (and others). The very fact that the book's intended audience seem to be allies, already committed to many if not most of Fesmire's intuitions, indicates the amount of promising work still left undone, if Fesmire's proposal is going to have a much deserved wider impact. The natural next step, in other words, would be to carry the proposal beyond what Daniel W. Conway once, perhaps teasingly, called "Deweydom."² This book does not do that.

But what the book does do is bring even more excitement to a discussion that many others have also been engaging. What some will find exciting, in Fesmire's championing of the moral artist, is the idea that there is after all something substantial to say about the aesthetics of moral intelligence.³ Others have led the way on this, in indicating why this might be so and what might be preserved and expanded from classical pragmatism, and Fesmire's work shows the influence of many of these colleagues.⁴ But Fesmire is sounding a rather new and important note here.

For one thing, though this itself is certainly not new, Fesmire is unabashedly willing to grant what Rorty (in some deep sense) certainly is not, which is that we are embedded within a complex of "structural factors independent of immediate human perception" (41).⁵ The difference between moral artistry and routine or impulsive behavior occurs within a context of fixed factors such as these, though on what level of specificity that fixture hangs is not clear. We do need to pay close care not to universalize features of purely local context — religious fundamentalism and colonialist apologetics come to mind — but Fesmire also seems unwilling to simply assume that no universal features are carried over.

However, here is where it gets really interesting. For this was generally Dewey's own view regarding what he called "generic traits of experience," and these are exactly among the features that Rorty finds most problematic in Dewey.⁶ This complicates Fesmire's task enormously, because he and Rorty share some of the same targets. This is hardly surprising, since Dewey's favorite target was always the "intellectualized theory of belief" influenced by the orthodox Calvinism of his own day (30). This form of what we might call *linguistic fundamentalism* — a literalist view about the text of our lived experience — has gotten a modern upgrade in the Christian Right of American politics, and so it is still worth emphasizing that a belief is (at least partly) a disposition to act. Once this is seen in all its ramifications (classical pragmatists are convinced), there will be no philosophical room for construing reference mimetically, ignoring its naturalistic, semiotically imbued role in human socialization. Fesmire's own critical mention of Calvin, along with his disinterest in decontextualized theories of morality, speaks to this naturalistic concern on the part of Dewey, who wanted to ensure that nature's foreground not be "superadded from outside,"⁷ whether by supernaturalistic metaphysics or by any other compartmentalization of theory from actual practice. This is especially true of moral deliberation as it occurs in the toughest cases, which Dewey took to be "genuine and acute" conflicts impervious to formalized decision-procedures.⁸

It is natural for any pragmatist to emphasize this social side of belief, which holds that language is a feature of a social praxis rather than some power of a disembodied eye. For the ideal observer resisted by Dewey, Fesmire, and Rorty alike, something like mimetic resemblance dominates, at least as a metaphor for the semantic relation required for real correspondence. (Mimesis was the canonical target in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*.⁹) Mimetic resemblance is of course only one kind of semantic relation which "vehicles of understanding"¹⁰ can feature, but this is the one that makes fundamentalism even intelligible. Without it, there could be no literal understanding of God's Will. Without it, there is no sense in supposing, with Calvin, that the universe is "a sort of mirror in which we can contemplate God."¹¹ Without it, perhaps it is not immediately apparent how we ourselves could be engraved in His image, so that even if we see through our glass only very darkly and corruptly, we are glassy essences nonetheless, straining to discern the befogged reality to which we are literally bound and perhaps damned.

This suggests two observations. The first hovers unspoken and often unnoticed in the background of this entire discussion. It is that mimesis need not exhaust the possibilities for a representational image. Representation need not be thought of, literally, as the re-presentation of something we see, as generally assumed from Plato up through the early Wittgenstein. It was

Wittgenstein, for better or worse, who made the revolutionary move here: "Wittgenstein did not so much look for another way of explaining how language might fit the world, but gave up altogether on the idea that language fits the world at all."¹² The fact that Wittgenstein did not look does not mean there was nothing to look for.

The second point takes a more prominent role in Fesmire's book. Pragmatists know that we do not need to leverage a semantic notion of resemblance — the most vivid example of the misguided quest for certainty — in order to be at home in the world. And if we are not at home in the natural world, at least by the time we die, we'll find no home elsewhere, and "empiricism" is the only way of finding that home in the world in which we live and act. Proceeding from disbelief to certainty is the enterprise of the foundationalist; proceeding from doubt to conviction is the office of the true empiricist. This is the point James had made in his famous debate with Clifford.¹³ On the other hand, there is obviously more to this story, which does not fit this simple formula. This contrasting doublet (moving from disbelief or from doubt) also features a surprising reversal of correspondence: certain forms of "religious" conversion seem to make a sustained difference in practice,¹⁴ while the movement from doubt to a rather bland conviction can be a rather shallow intellectual affair. The interests of the classical pragmatist like James certainly stand with Clifford on this one narrowly construed but crucial point.

In any case, it certainly seems true that the activity of any imaginative artist invokes if not the power of religious conversion, then at least a process of identity formation which even Foucault called "spiritual."¹⁵ This can feel like a sculptor's struggle with an obstinate medium (41), and here the problem is not (as is sometimes said) the formlessness of the stone. The problem is that the stone already has a too solid form of its own, and our purposes seem at times unnatural to it. So we do our best to change some natural feature of our medium, and (if we are moral artists) of the social contours of our lived world. How we do this as moral agents is what Fesmire's book is about.

On the other hand, the temptation to be reductive (or, as Rorty would say, eliminative) might seem overwhelming to some of Fesmire's readers. Linguistic reductionism is the semiotic equivalent of the phenomenological turn, which had reduced (or at least bracketed) reference wholly within the intentionality internal to consciousness (and insofar as experience is theory-laden, to the significations internal to language). The function of language is thus reduced to its intensionality. This holds understandable philosophical attractions for anyone opposed to the Christian orthodoxy which "funds" right-wing politics (as Dewey might say), since that funding is bankrupt without the linguistic fundamentalism which is its indispensable tool.

Now it may well be true that the most philosophically efficient way of avoiding any intellectualist theory of belief (including religious fundamentalism) would be to cut off the very possibility of correspondence, and deny that representations can be externalist (extra-textual) once their internalist (intensional or semiotic) features have been fully accommodated. If we take this one Rortyan step, however, we are on intellectual terrain very different from Dewey's metaphysical naturalism. "It is impossible to emphasize too heavily the sheer incommensurability of an externalist and an internalist approach to knowledge."¹⁶

Linguistic reductionism is not a move that Fesmire is willing to take. And avoiding it is not what this book is about. Yet clearly, Fesmire wants a way out of the Rortyan trap. He cites Dewey's pronouncement that *only* the pragmatist is a true correspondence theorist (42), and this quip by Dewey was only partly sarcastic. The best creative artists know that they are working against real resistance, and for the moral artist, not only are purely physical limitations marked (if not literally pictured) by scientific law, we have to confront social habit as well (1–26). These are the "funded truths" we inherit culturally, somehow contained in the language (and other semiotic vehicles) through which we become agents and persons. Fesmire emphasizes at one point the plasticity of habit he sees in Dewey (18), but Dewey is just as likely to regard our customary habits as relatively fixed.¹⁷ For the moral artist — one thinks here of the idealized AIDS activist from Act-Up or Queer Nation — the habits embodied in society are like stone to chisel. They can be molded, but the task is no simple one.

Only real correspondence seems to account for the fact that problem-solving occurs with a context of fixed limits — at least if we choose to engage in a conversation that *really* edifies the actual praxis of living. There we face a level of recalcitrance that a mere tinkering with linguistic convention cannot overcome. And it is easy to overlook this. As with the dispersed self of Hume's primitive psychology, we may find neither precise word nor vivid impression of that resistance. This is because all our experience is theory-laden, and a kind of natural semiotic prolixity always engages us if we simply choose to attend to it. We are easily distracted from what lies at life's very nose, especially if we spend lots of time in seminars and conferences.

Dewey's idea was heavily drawn from the commonsense of his very non-academic generation, that a real interaction with this world could actually be "experienced" and that language was a tool for that, and not an end in itself. Experience occurs for Dewey in at least two ways — as the preciously powerful moments of experiential "consummations" known to artists and to any "live" person,¹⁸ and as the less direct but philosophically vivid recognition of its generic traits, made specific in consummatory experience. (And one additional feature of this turns out to be important as well, which is that the

impact of artistic production reaches into the entire situation, creating an organic unity condensed in the consummatory experience itself.¹⁹⁾ All this was never completely worked out in Dewey, who lacked a full sense of the role the “atmosphere of artistic theory” plays in the construction of historical moments,²⁰ and the formal limitations that govern plausible accounts of lived experience.²¹ Nevertheless, the mere fact that our lives take narrative form and that human language is imbued with the intensional/semiotic texture of folk psychology²² does not imply that our language does not also succeed in being “about” something other than itself, or as Rorty’s *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* holds, that it can achieve nothing more philosophically interesting than conversational edification.

For Rorty, on the other hand, there is nothing “beyond” to which we need pay any attention, and reading Rorty, one even begins to imagine that Dewey, in his more lucid post-epistemological moments, might have dimly sensed this. But this is not Fesmire’s Dewey, and though Dewey himself preferred to elaborate all this in terms of “experience” rather than language, a similar point can be made either way. In a very late paper, in response to S. J. Kahn, Dewey specifically declines to deny, in the vein of a proto-neopragmatist, “any existence *beyond* experience.” Instead, even as late as 1949, Dewey insists that nothing lies “beyond the *reach* of experience.”²³ What we experience is the foreground of a larger situation, which constitutes a sign of its basic features — just as what we linguistically signify reaches beyond the content of mere signification itself. And here is fertile ground for Fesmire’s continuing project. For his analogy with the artist suggests that the larger situation is “expressing itself” through the moral agent (41), with a kind of *power*, a critical control exercised by qualitative thought.²⁴

Contemporary pragmatism faces challenges from a number of sides, and the response needs to fit the audience. Fesmire writes this book very much in the historical shadow of linguistic fundamentalism. He does this not because he is at all tempted by such a referentially clunky theory, but because he (like Dewey) wants to tell the pragmatist story in terms of where that shadow has fallen so heavily upon us. On the other hand, contemporary pragmatism faces a challenge on another side as well. For Rorty presents a real challenge to the entire spirit of pragmatism, at least as pressing as the more traditional critics Fesmire more often targets. Alan Malachowski has remarked on the “post-pragmatic” turn that Rorty took in the 1980s,²⁵ and there is no reason to suppose that Rorty finds anything more philosophically solid in Fesmire’s pragmatist tropes than he does anywhere else. For Rorty, moral artistry is likely to be plagued by “the same ambiguity between the descriptive and the normative which plagues [Dewey’s] metaphilosophical account of his own activity.”²⁶ For Rorty, “moral artistry” is elusive a notion as “intelligence” itself.²⁷ And since Rorty is a more radical break from the tradition even than

Dewey, those who are looking for a “revolution” in ethics need to be persuaded, first, that Copernicus is not, as it were, an “edifying, peripheral” forerunner of a post-pragmatist Dewey.²⁸ Fesmire’s sympathetic readers should be wanting more exactly at this point.

NOTES

1. Steven Fesmire, *John Dewey and Moral Imagination: Pragmatism in Ethics*. Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2003. Pp. 167. ISBN 0-253-21598-6
2. Daniel W. Conway, “Of Depth and Loss: The Peritropaic Legacy of Dewey’s Pragmatism,” in *Dewey Reconfigured: Essays on Deweyan Pragmatism*, ed. Casey Haskins and D. Seiple (Albany: State University of New York, 1999), p. 222.
3. David Ilett Seiple, “John Dewey and the Aesthetics of Moral Intelligence.” Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Philosophy, Columbia University, 1993.
4. Especially prominent are Thomas Alexander, Raymond Boisvert, James Gouinlock, Larry Hickman, Mark Johnson, Victor Kestenbaum, George Lakoff, John McDermott, Hillary Putnam, and Charlene Haddock Siegfried.
5. This is not for Fesmire just a socially constructed feature of edifying conversation: here Fesmire specifically invokes the psychological realism of Owen Flanagan (1).
6. Richard Rorty, “Dewey’s Metaphysics,” in *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), pp. 72–89.
7. John Dewey, “Experience and Existence: A Comment” (1949), in *The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925–1953*, vol. 16, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989), pp. 383–394.
8. John Dewey, “Three Independent Factors in Morals” (1930), in *The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925–1953*, vol. 5, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), p. 287.
9. Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 368.
10. Arthur C. Danto, *Connections to the World* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989), p. 48.
11. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), I. v. 1.
12. Arthur C. Danto, “Depiction and Description,” in *The Body/Body Problem* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), p. 106.
13. William James, “The Will to Believe,” in *The Writings of William James*, ed. John J. McDermott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), pp. 717–735.
14. Especially if the change in a believer’s life is so radical as to invoke the symbolism of, say, a dead man’s resurrection. This is truly a passage from disbelief to belief.
15. Michel Foucault, “The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom,” trans. P. Aranov and D. McGrawth, in *Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: New Press, 1997), p. 294.
16. Danto, *Connections to the World*, p. 153.

17. John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922), in *The Middle Works of John Dewey, 1899–1924*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983), p. 76.
18. John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (1934), in *The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925–1953*, vol. 10, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987), chap. 1.
19. David I. Seiple, “Dewey, John: Experience and the Organic Unity of Artworks,” in *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, ed. Michael Kelly (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), vol. 2, pp. 28–30.
20. Arthur Danto, “The Artworld,” in *Philosophy Looks at the Arts*, ed. Joseph Margolis (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987), pp. 156–167.
21. Arthur C. Danto, *Narration and Knowledge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), pp. 233f.
22. Danto, *Connections to the World*, p. 252.
23. Dewey, “Experience and Existence: A Comment,” p. 383.
24. Seiple, “John Dewey and the Aesthetics of Moral Intelligence,” pp. 34f.
25. Alan Malachowski, *Richard Rorty* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 125.
26. Richard Rorty, “Introduction,” in *The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925–1953*, vol. 8, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986), p. xii.
27. Arthur C. Danto, “Philosophy as/and/of Literature,” in *Post-Analytic Philosophy*, ed. John Rajchman and Cornel West (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), pp. 63–83.
28. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 368.

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