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Conflict, Tragedy, and Survivance

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

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## Introduction

- 1 For more than three decades, there has been a renaissance of interest in John Dewey. As illuminating and beneficial as those contributing to this development have been, there are still important respects in which facets of *his* contribution or approach are not as widely or deeply appreciated as they ought to be. First, the sensibility animating his work is anything but superficial or naïve. It is, in the colloquial sense, realistic (see, e.g., MW.10: 48), and courageously so. That is, his sensibility is attuned to the struggles, conflicts, and failures going no small distance in defining the world in which he lived and the one in which we continue to do so. For yet another, the extent to which his philosophy directly and profoundly influenced psychiatry at least in his own country is even less appreciated than the first respects.

- 2 In this essay, then, I want to bring into sharper focus: (1) the agonistic dimension of Deweyan pragmatism and (2) Dewey's historical contribution to American psychiatry, specifically, Adolf Meyer's deep indebtedness to Dewey's pragmatist approach to "mental health" or, more accurately, human flourishing or vibrancy. The spiritual malaise with which William James struggled in early adulthood and throughout his later years might be taken as a pervasive condition of the late modern period. Dewey was acutely aware of the ways in which his world was sick (see, e.g., MW.15: 42-6). He was tirelessly attentive to the degree to which inter- and intrapersonal conflicts undermined possibilities of harmonious cooperation at all levels of human life. In bringing into sharper focus what still tends to be overlooked or slighted, I also hope to illustrate how Dewey is anything but superficial or naïve when it comes to the darker impulses of the human psyche and the pathological features of virtually any human culture (*ibid.*). Just as precarity is ineliminable (see, e.g., LW.1: 45), so is conflict. Dewey's pragmatic meliorism was indeed conceived in the face of ineradicable conflict. It is not an exaggeration to characterize his pragmatism as *agonistic*. The argument for doing so is straightforward and the implications of this argument are profound. What is this argument? What are its implications?

## 1. Dewey's Agonistic Pragmatism

- 3 Dewey's pragmatic pluralism means that no single qualifier captures its essential meaning.<sup>1</sup> It is often not even clear what ought to be the noun and what ought to be the adjective (whether we ought to be calling his position pragmatic naturalism or qualifying his pragmatism by adjectives such as *melioristic*, *pluralistic*, or *genealogical* [Stuhr 1997]) (cf. LW.1: 60). At present, I am disposed to characterize it as *agonistic*.
- 4 As already intimated, there is still insufficient appreciation of the extent to which Dewey's pragmatism is agonistic, even tragic, though the emphasis on the tragic needs itself to be qualified (cf. Wilshire 2000; West 1993: 31-58). This failure inclines some critics to judge Dewey to be superficial and naïve. The agonistic and the tragic are tied together. But it is, in my judgment, more accurate to describe his orientation as tragicomic rather than simply as tragic. It includes the tragic but refuses to give the tragic sense the last word: not only because there is no last word but also because even our most considered judgment cannot but be, from a pragmatist perspective, an expression of "the irrepressibly human" (Ellison 2002: 48), accordingly, a quest for a melioristic response to a unique situation. Even so, an unblinking acknowledgment of fateful conflicts is at the center of Dewey's vision (cf. James 1977).<sup>2</sup> In "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life," James was quite explicit about this: "Some part of the ideal must be butchered, and he [the moral philosopher] needs to know which part. It is a tragic situation, and no mere speculative conundrum, with which he has to deal" (James 1979: 154).
- 5 Dewey is neither emphatic nor even for the most part explicit about the tragic dimension of the agonistic situations in which we as moral agents are entangled. He does however stress the ineliminability and indeed centrality of conflict. Moreover, he is not in the least naïve about our resolution of present conflicts sowing the seeds for the eruption of future ones. In a world such as ours, the unintended, often unwelcome consequences of even our most responsible decisions frequently disclose the range of our ignorance and the superficiality of our understanding of both natural processes

and social relations. Finally, there is, in his judgment, no neutral arena in which conflicting claims might be rationally adjudicated, to the satisfaction of all contestants or rivals. Nor is there a set of uncontested norms and criteria to which disputants can appeal. Meta-conflicts abound. What one group takes to be a conflict of immense significance another often dismisses as a phenomenon of negligible concern. Our conflicts pertain to what matters (cf. Liszka 2021). What matters to you might not matter – or matter as much – to me. An antecedently fixed hierarchy of values or ideals is a chimera, though an historically evolved and evolving consensus need not be. The forging of such a consensus however has taken place in the crucible of conflict.

- 6 Dewey's agonism is implied in his emphasis on a consideration of the conditions and consequences of our beliefs and valuations, above all, our doxastic and axiological practices (our specific ways of fixing beliefs [cf. Peirce's "The Fixation of Belief"] (LW.1: 301-2, 312, 323; LW.4: 212, 215) and of identifying the valuable or desirable in contrast to the valued or desired (especially Dewey's "The Construction of Good" in *The Quest for Certainty* the final chapter of *Experience and Nature*, and *Theory of Valuation*).
- 7 The agonistic character of Deweyan pragmatism (or "instrumentalism") is nowhere more evident than in his attempt to identify the "independent" factors (or variables) constituting our moral inheritance (Fesmire 2019: 214-21; Edel & Flower 1985: xxvi-xxvii). He opens "The Three Independent Factors in Morals" (1930) by asserting: "There is a fact which from all the evidence is an integral part of moral action which has not received the attention it deserves in moral theory: that is the element of uncertainty and of conflict in any situation which can properly be called moral" (LW.5: 279; cf. Fesmire 2019).<sup>3</sup> Just as Dewey suggests moral conflicts deserve greater attention than they have received, I am disposed to argue Dewey's attention to conflict in general itself warrants fuller consideration than it has received.<sup>4</sup> Theorists who are widely recognized as thinkers finely attuned and deeply sensitive to the centrality, contours, forms, and depth of human conflict – authors such as Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud – are in truth no more so than Dewey.
- 8 It is illuminating to recall just how Dewey revised this essay, even if he appears never to have completed his revision (Fesmire 2019). As significant as anything, there is Dewey's alteration of the title: "Conflict and Independent Variables in Morals." The first word in this revised title unmistakably indicates the principal emphasis. Conflict is inherent in the unique situations in which we as social actors are implicated. We are uncertain about what we ought to do, not because of any intellectual deficiency, but because of the constitutive conflicts of our historical moment.
- 9 One more preliminary word is in order. Dewey's pragmatism is far more programmatic than many of his interpreters and champions seem to recognize (Fesmire 2019: 213). As much as anything else, Dewey sketched a program of research for generations to come, taking pains to fill in many substantive details and, at the same time, to cultivate critical methods as possible ("systematic completeness [being]," as Peirce noted, "about the idlest decoration that can be attached to a philosophy" [quoted by Fisch 1986: 238]). Given the nature of the task, this program of research and reconstruction was destined in some respects to be carried out much better by his successors. Above all else, Dewey conceived philosophy as a criticism of criticism (LW.1: 298)<sup>5</sup> and, at least by implication, a method of methods (*ibid.*: 326). In his judgment, philosophical discourse had become far too insular. This is most manifest in the problems of philosophers having become so distant from those of humans in the tangled circumstances of everyday life.

“Philosophy recovers itself,” he proclaims in one of his most often quoted claims, “when it ceases to be a device for dealing with the problems of philosophers and becomes a method, cultivated by philosophers, for dealing with the problems of men” and women (MW.10: 46).

- 10 The programmatic character of Dewey’s pragmatist approach however comes into even sharper focus when we see how Dewey was manifestly a *methodological* pluralist. At a general level, the only methods to be employed are empirical or, more precisely, experimental. But the form taken by the appeal to experience might significantly vary from context to context and, even within the same context, from problem to problem. So, philosophical inquirers have as much to learn from, say, social scientists as the latter have to learn from the former. The way any inquirer might learn from experience is itself a function of context and Deweyan experimentalism is uniquely qualified to accomplish this by its nuanced sensitivity to the salient context(s) in which claims are being made and evidence being marshalled, moreover, (see Dewey 1998), equal sensitivity to the distinct forms of utterance and of argumentation.
- 11 If we turn from such considerations and focus on one of the works in which the agonistic character of Dewey’s pragmatic approach is most prominent, *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922), we can clearly see how deep and nuanced Dewey’s appreciation of conflict is. This central text in effect offers a vivid portrait of an agonistic theorist engaged in a project comparable to those of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. For Dewey and Nietzsche especially, there is no neutral space, only contested ground. There are no incontestable criteria for evaluating rival forms of human life, only contested ones. There might not even be any generally accepted methods or procedures for resolving moral and political disputes, seemingly prejudiced in favoring the position of one or another of the disputants. But the exigencies and aspirations of life require us to prioritize (Midgley 1994). Lacking such space, such criteria, and such methods might seem to make our efforts to prioritize utterly arbitrary, but Dewey remained convinced some ends are more desirable than other ends, some criteria more defensible than one ones, and some methods more fecund and effective. A candid acknowledgment of radical conflict does not completely destroy either the relevance or the power of intelligence, though it does make clear the human context in which pragmatic intelligence is forced to craft its melioristic experiments. More pointedly, it makes clear the severity of the challenge confronting such intelligence: creative intelligence is often defeated, thwarted or frustrated, in its efforts to solve problems and resolve conflicts (cf. Liszka 2021).
- 12 At first blush, however, readers of *Human Nature and Conduct* might be disappointed in what appear to be Dewey’s lack of precision and rigor. This is for the most part unjustified. The text no doubt does bear traces of its origin (it was originally composed as a series of lectures given in Asia). It is, moreover, almost colloquial in its mode of presentation. Nonetheless, there is no lack of precision or rigor. Its subtitle, *Introduction to Social Psychology*, might suggest it was designed to be a work addressed to experts or possibly even a textbook. Even the quickest perusal of its deliberately informal treatment of a wide array of canonical psychological topics (e.g., instincts, habits, emotions, intelligence, and pathology) makes clear that this work is designed, paradoxically, to introduce readers to a discipline with which they are already acquainted. That is, *Human Nature and Conduct* is a re-introduction to psychology and, at the same time, a reconstruction of that discipline along more functionalist lines than

anything yet achieved. Dewey's intellectual life closely tracks the degree to which philosophy and psychology were intimately associated in the latter half of the nineteenth century and, then, the increasing extent to which the two disciplines grew apart. Nothing however was going to stem the tide of behaviorism in the U.S. Rather than offering an alternative and indeed, in some fundamental respects, a rival to behaviorism, functionalism became for the most part eclipsed by John B. Watson and his disciples. As it turned out, James was wrong: the future of psychology did not belong to Freud, Jung, Ferenczi, and Jones himself (Freud 1925/1952: 57-8; Jones 1975) or it did so in the U.S. only to a small degree. In terms of academic psychology, that future belonged to behaviorism.

- 13 As the old joke goes, the triumph of behaviorism signaled, for the discipline of psychology, the loss of consciousness (psychology having lost its soul several decades earlier). As far as Dewey (and Meyer) were concerned, however, the rediscovery of consciousness was never an exigency, since consciousness has a straightforwardly empirical sense and, in their minds, it was never lost. Consciousness "proves itself" but where it does the very functioning of consciousness itself intimates the *absence* of awareness. The suspicion that something is going on behind the back of consciousness is rooted in a number of intimations, intimations proving to some, such as von Hartmann, Nietzsche, Freud, and Peirce, to be revelations to and, paradoxically, of consciousness (Hegel 1977: 56). There is indeed more to mind than consciousness (LW.1: 230). The critical question is *how* to conceive those depths and dimensions of mind ordinarily operating outside the purview of consciousness (cf. LW.1: 227-8).
- 14 To begin by focusing on habit, as Dewey does in *Human Nature and Conduct*, does not preclude, in the same breath, speaking of consciousness. Regarding the human animal at least, the two are functionally inextricable, if only because human habits inevitably break down and, in turn, the disconcerting experience of such breakdowns expresses itself in heightened or intensified consciousness. The inevitable disorganization of habits is, from a therapeutic perspective, much more important than their situational disruption, so, too, the inability to sustain awareness in a focused, consecutive manner is more instructive than the wavering, scattered consciousness of agents who are in a panic when they are thrown into a problematic situation. In effect, consciousness ensuing upon the breakdown or simply the disruption of habits signals to the agent a somatically registered failure (an indication that as agents we do not know, at least adequately, what we are doing).
- 15 Impulses conflict with one another, just as habits conflict with one another. Of course, an impulse might conflict with a habit or set of habits. Finally, reason or intelligence as conceived by Dewey, especially in *Human Nature and Conduct*, is born of conflict. The human psyche is a conflictual affair. Dewey refused to sever the inner and the outer, the psychical and the cultural. Part of this refusal entailed also refusing to privilege one or the other side of this distinction. The human organism in its infancy is an impulsive being. Indeed, there might be compelling reasons to see impulses as instinctual or constitutional (MW.14: 17, n.1; 124), though this claim immediately needs to be qualified. But the human organism is no less social being, even if not yet a socialized one. Sociality is one thing, socialization quite another. Sociality makes socialization possible. The irony is that, in Dewey's *social* psychology, original impulses in a sense have a derivative status. At least, he opens *Human Nature and Conduct* by discussing habits, including manifestly social habits, not by considering innate dispositions. Given

his understanding of the human animal, this is the only appropriate way in which to proceed. The infant is born into a community and the very being of the infant implies the primacy of community, albeit a community in the optimal case being solicitous of the individuality of the infant (LW.14: 65-8).

- 16 We might recall here D. W. Winnicott's seemingly paradoxical assertion. "There is no such thing as an infant" (Winnicott 1965: 39, n.1). The most minimal unit of human life is, at infancy, a dyad, a child and mother or someone who discharges the indispensable tasks of the maternal caregiver. Upon the earliest phases of the extrauterine life of the human animal,<sup>6</sup> the social habits of mature agents are always already in place. Apart from intention or consciousness, the infant from the first breath it draws and the first cry it utters is initiated into a "conversation of gestures" (Dewey MW.14: 43, 65; Mead 1934: 50) and, one might even say, on occasion, the infant itself unwittingly initiates such a conversation. The meanings of its own exertions, expressions, and movements however are, in the first instance, imputed, not intended. They are imputed *by others*. This inescapable fact about human infancy entails that the relationship of the self to itself is indelibly mediated by the relationship of the self to others. The capacity of the child emerging into speech to identify its own states, feelings, and wants draws heavily upon having had those states, feelings, and wants identified by others. The infant would remain forever an infant if it did not master a language other than that of impulsive movements, expressions, and gestures. Its "inner" life would be opaque and illegible were it not for means of articulation implicated, to some degree, in a struggle for power, not least of all in a drive for self-affirmation. When the child pouts, "I'm *not* tired!" the very disavowal tends to carry an unintended acknowledgment of the very state being disavowed. Being told one is tired when either one does not feel tired or simply does not want to go to bed – to be told one needs to eat when one does not desire to sit down and eat – point to the contexts in which the language of desire is acquired in the intricate meshes of interpersonal "politics" (it is *political* because it encompasses a struggle to exercise power, for the most part in direct opposition to others exerting far greater power.)
- 17 We acquire from others the language to identify our own states and impulses. The acquisition of such language is part of a series of renegotiations in which the exercise of power, also, an initiation into the game of giving and evaluating reasons, and, finally, experiences of frustration and conflict along with ones of solidarity and reconciliation are all woven together into an incredibly complex tapestry. The terms by which we come to be able to identify our own states and processes (e.g., hunger, tiredness, anger, and desire) are ones we have inherited, not invented. Accordingly, the terms in which we are related to others have always already been set for us. In a sense, we have in the colloquial sense been set up. In the same sense, we have been framed. This is part of what it means to be enculturated. No human culture is a perfectly congenial medium in which the diverse impulses, habits, and promptings of intelligence of multidimensional organisms find harmonious expression (MW.14: 230; Meyer 1921: 39; also, in 1948: 11).
- 18 In "Dewey's Individual and Social Psychology," Gordon W. Allport notes that Dewey has written "extensively on the very subjects that psychologists are interested in, and he has fashioned his views into a coherent scheme" (Allport 1939: 288). This prompts Allport to ask, Does this make Dewey a "systematist" or systematizer of the discoveries and insights of experimental psychologists? "Many psychologists would say no," Allport reports, "for *the system* Dewey offers is of such a nature that at it *lacks fixed*

*points of reference*” (*ibid.*; emphasis added).<sup>7</sup> This makes that system “elusive and difficult to grasp.” “The reciprocal interpenetration of impulse, habit, and thought, the continuous relating of these functions with the properties of the environment [...] – such a flux of processes and events make it difficult for the psychologist to gain a familiar hold.” “Evolving circuits may,” Allport concedes, “indeed be, as Dewey insists, the course of mental life,” but he claims “these spiraling processes make orderly analysis in terms of separate variables impossible” (*ibid.*).

- 19 This criticism is at once just and misguided. It is just, insofar as Dewey’s scheme fails to conform to the dominant pattern of psychological inquiry in the middle decades of the last century. It is however misguided since part of Dewey’s purpose is to offer a rival paradigm of social psychology. The critical question is whether a Deweyan can identify sufficiently determinate points of experimental reference, not absolutely “fixed points of reference.” The level of generality on which Dewey and, as it turns out, also Meyer are operating does not preclude this, but the functioning, integration, and dis-integration of habits needs to be more concretely spelled out in terms of human tasks and performances (as Meyer does in *Psychobiology* and elsewhere). An untiring insistence on evolving circuits identifiable within the ongoing life of social actors is compatible with functional distinctions of the vital factors within these “spiraling processes” (say, what in *this* context counts as an impulse, or habit, or experience of intelligence). Antecedently fixed points of reference (e.g., the id, ego, and superego) are neither necessary nor desirable, whereas contextually identifiable points of reference, themselves identifiable in terms of a situationally improvised vocabulary,<sup>8</sup> are necessary and, given nothing more than the resources of Dewey’s functionalism, available.
- 20 In large and small, trivial and tragic, ways, human beings often do not measure up to the conflicts in which their lives are implicated. This can extend to the ability to get out of bed, to care for oneself, to go outdoors, and to engage others in the most minimal manner. More often than not, the avoidance of conflict does little or nothing to eliminate conflict; it tends to exacerbate and even multiply conflicts. Deweyan meliorism is predicated on the candid acknowledgment of the defining conflicts of one’s historical moment and, at a personal level, of one’s dis-integrating psyche.

## 2. Adolf Meyer’s Psychobiological Approach

- 21 What would a Deweyan approach to psychiatric care look like? There is no reason to speculate here. We actually have at hand such an approach worked out in detail, by an intimate associate of this pragmatist philosopher. I am referring to the work of Adolf Meyer (1866-1950). The groundbreaking work of this prominent figure in American psychiatry was at once clinical, pedagogical, theoretical, and institutional (or administrative). It unmistakably shows the influence of Dewey, while Dewey’s thought (see especially MW.14) no less clearly manifests Meyer’s influence.<sup>9</sup> The two met in 1893 while both held positions at the University of Chicago.<sup>10</sup> Dewey’s theoretical and pedagogical interest in the nervous system prompted him to consult colleagues such as Jacques Loeb, Henry Donaldson, C. L. Herrick, and Meyer (Lamb 2014: 82; cf. Dalton 2002). Though without apparent consciousness of doing so, Dewey is in effect guided by C. S. Peirce’s methodological suggestion: “The cloudiness of psychological notions may be corrected [or counteracted] by connecting them with physiological conceptions”



- (CP.6.22). No reductionism is implied here, since Peirce's suggestion and indeed Dewey's procedure pertains to obtaining a clearer understanding of distinctively *psychological* phenomena, not to explaining them away.
- 22 Meyer was an unabashed advocate of critical commonsensism. We must begin with and return to the manifest facts of human experience and, however refined the discoveries of cutting-edge sciences and forbidding the terminology in which they are expressed, their experiential import must be, to some extent, translatable into more accessible language and their principal designata must be shared phenomena to which experts can point and everyone else has access (cf. Dewey LW.1). The "large facts" of our shared life can be illuminated by the astonishing discoveries of the experimental sciences, but they can never be jettisoned. Science no less than philosophy proves itself worse than useless when it indulges in brilliant feats of "explaining away" commonplace phenomena (Whitehead 1978: 17). For it thereby blocks the road of inquiry and, in doing so, proves itself to be obstructive, not merely useless.
- 23 In general, animals, including humans, have their habitats and habits, their *Umwelten* and repertoire of behavior (Jakob von Uexküll). There is no organism apart from an environment, no self apart from a world. "The human organism can never," Meyer notes, "exist without its setting in the world. All we are and do is of the world and in the world" (1948: 3). The specific ways in which human beings are *in* and *of* the world, paradoxically, even when they take themselves to be *beyond* this world and *of* another one, demand critical attention (cf. Dewey MW.10: 25). Meyer joined Dewey (along with Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud) in turning this drive back upon itself in an effort to (re)claim, in a radical manner, human finitude.
- 24 To attain a balanced view, "the vision of man [and nothing less than vision is required of psychiatrists no less than philosophers] had to expand to take a sane and practical view of all of human life – not only of its machinery" (Meyer 1921: 25; also, in Lief 1948: 3). For such a view, a "concept and vision of *integration*" (*ibid.*) are needed. As important as a detailed knowledge of the specific machinery of human life (e.g., the brain and, more inclusively, the entire nervous system [cf. Dewey LW.1: 224]) is – and it is extremely important – the *functioning* of this machinery *in situ* is even more important. Meyer's anti-reductive naturalism accordingly encompasses what might be called a methodological anti-elementalism. The most basic units of natural beings, especially living organisms do not go the full distance toward explaining the states and activities of those organisms. Only life explains life and this implies, at least for Meyer (no less for Dewey), life in its totality and irreducible complexity (see, e.g., Dewey LW.1: 387). Meyer's holism is in the end more than methodological, but it is first and foremost a heuristic stance toward what he takes to be *irreducibly* complex phenomena.<sup>11</sup> While the reductionist (or "elementalist") takes such phenomena to be reducible, without loss, into their elements or constituents, Meyer as both a clinician and theorist resists this approach (see, e.g., Meyer 1948: 123). He insists: "What we know clinically as function is always the expression of the activity of the whole *mechanism*" (Lamb 2014: 74). Methodologically, however, the emphasis more often falls on "the *whole mechanism*" than the "*whole mechanism*," especially since his anti-reductionism is to some extent an anti-mechanism.
- 25 Consequently, Meyer tended to prefer the term *mentation* to *mind* since he felt the former more clearly conveyed a sense of activity or process, whereas the latter all too readily evoked images of a thing or container.<sup>12</sup> His eventual objections to the Freudian

unconscious were akin to his standing misgivings regarding mind more generally, even if this might be readily countered by psychoanalysts (the unconscious mind is, from their perspective, *not* a thing, but a chaotic welter of unavowed tendencies) (see, e.g., Lamb 2014: 245). What matters is not what takes place subcutaneously or “subjectively,” but what is yet taking place *transactionally* – the dialogue between self and world. We cannot theoretically account, or therapeutically care, for human beings without explicitly taking into account *mentation*, Meyer’s word for symbolization or sign-functioning. “Symbolization or sign-function begins to be [i.e., we begin to realize it is] more than a mere logical figure [or form]; it becomes [for us] itself the characteristic psychobiological function and activity that we call mentation”<sup>13</sup> (Meyer 1933; also, in Lief 1948: 31; cf. Dewey LW.1, Chapters 7 and 8). In Meyer’s lexicon, *mind* designates “a sufficiently organized living being in action; and not a peculiar form of mind stuff” (1951, II: 584; also, in Lief 1948: 172). The recovery of mind and consciousness is predicated on the fact of these phenomena having been jettisoned.

- 26 Humans are fundamentally social beings (Meyer 1921: 31; also, in Lief 1948: 7). “There are,” Meyer adds, “reactions in us which only contacts and relations with other humans can bring out” (Meyer 1921: 31). Moreover, there are attitudes and beliefs bearing the indelible imprint of common sense. Meyer indeed explicitly links our social nature with common sense: “We are social beings and members of a family and of a community and act as a rule as *agents of a common sense consensus*” (quoted by Lamb 2014: 85; emphasis added).
- 27 Strictly speaking, there is, at least for Dewey and Meyer, no such thing as mental illness or, for that matter, bodily illness. To be sure, they both use both expressions. But the implication of their approach precludes this. For there is only human illness. Human illness is a functional category and, thus, to some extent, a culturally variable one. What counts as illness, for any individual, as a member of a community, is what significantly disrupts or, in extreme cases, destroys the efficacy and fluency of functioning (e.g., the sudden inability of a literate person to make sense out of significant sounds or marks). No illness is ever wholly in the head of anyone, just as none is completely confined to the body of anyone. Are there not verifiable cases of psychosomatic illness? Moreover, are there no demonstrable instances of purely physical or bodily illness not even known to the individual but, in principle, discoverable by physicians? Yes, but no putatively mental malady is without physical symptoms, just as physical illness is hardly ever devoid of mental symptoms.
- 28 On this account, at least, illnesses are first and foremost problems in living. The extent to which the organism, in contrast to the environment, is the locus of the problem is a matter for deliberative judgment. The only tenable position is that the living organism<sup>14</sup> in continuous transaction with a multidimensional environment *is* the locus of illness (Gendlin 1996, 2012; also, Severson & Krycka 2023), though for certain practical purposes we can and even must isolate what we take to be the elemental units. As a pragmatist or, more precisely, a psychiatrist who had absorbed the principal lessons of Dewey pragmatism, Meyer was a contextualist. This disposed him to reject what he called elementalism. But, as a pragmatist, this rejection hardly blinded him from seeing the tremendous advantage accruing to isolating functional units operating in the dynamic context of larger such units (e.g., the brain as only a part of the nervous system and, in turn, that system as only a part of the organism [see, e.g., LW.1: 224]).<sup>15</sup> As S. D. Lamb notes, “Meyer explicitly acknowledged psychobiology as a pragmatist

project” (2014: 88).<sup>16</sup> “Fortunately there is,” in Meyer’s own words, “a positive constructive philosophy, that of John Dewey” (1951, 4: 417; also, in Lief 1948: 490).<sup>17</sup>

- 29 Before turning to a transition to the topic of survivance, three additional points need to be made. First, there is Meyer’s emphasis on *spontaneity*. “It is,” Meyer announces, “spontaneity that I want to study and inquire into and cultivate and respect as the all-important characteristic quality of a person” (Lief 1948 [1933]: 581).<sup>18</sup> It is perhaps not hyperbole to claim that the goal of therapy is, for him, in some instances the recovery of spontaneity and in other ones gaining a measure of control over one’s impulses so that the exertions of agents do not contribute to the maintenance or, worse, the increased dis-integration of human beings as functional units capable of envisioning worthwhile pursuits and crafting effective means for attaining (or, at least, approximating) their chosen goals.
- 30 Second, there is *mutuality*. Even though this topic is not as loudly or often noted as spontaneity, it is quite central to Meyer’s project. “In the natural formation of groups,” regard and respect are intrinsically linked to “a deeply rooted and well-earned feeling of *mutuality*.” This feeling of mutuality is however more than a feeling, for it is “positive reciprocity, responsibility, respect, with uniform deep regard for the golden rule, and a definite and general disdain for an overrating or underrating of oneself or the others in the most feeling of respect” (1948 [1944]: 630; emphasis in original).<sup>19</sup> An important topic for future research would be the complex interplay between spontaneity and mutuality (e.g., some of the most important ways in which demands for respect or acknowledgment can work against spontaneity, also some of those ways in which giving free rein to one’s spontaneous impulses can work against an *ethos* of mutuality). This means “surmounting as far as possible the residue of an arbitrarily dualistic culture in the medical language” (in Lief 1948: 624; cf. Dewey’s “The Unity of the Human Being,” LW.13: 323-37). As narrated by Meyer, the patient as a “centre of experience” (LW.1: 382) and thus as a potential collaborator in the therapeutic process makes a dramatic entrance on the cultural stage.
- 31 Third and finally, there is Meyer’s direct and detailed *engagement with psychoanalysis*, specifically, with Freud’s psychoanalytic theories. In 1909, he was present at the famous gathering at Clark University, convened by G. Stanley Hall. Along with Freud and others, Meyer received an honorary doctorate and gave a lecture (Freud in fact gave a series of five lectures, but it is indicative of Meyer’s status that he was asked to present a talk at this gathering). The best place to commence a study of Meyer’s engagement with Freud’s work is “Some Fundamental Issues in Freud’s Psychoanalysis” (1951, II: 604-17; also, in Lief 1948: 260-76), a paper written shortly after Meyer’s encounter with the theorist, having become acquainted with the theory a decade or more before the meeting in Worcester.
- 32 In time, Meyer’s misgivings about Freud’s approach grew ever deeper, but he never adopted a completely dismissive attitude toward the psychoanalytic variant of dynamic psychology (Lamb), at least as a theoretical approach. Virtually all the criticism levelled at Freud and, more generally, psychoanalysis by Dewey in *Human Nature and Conduct* and elsewhere can be found, albeit in a more detailed, developed, and indeed documented form, in Meyer’s writings. It is reasonable to surmise that, in face-to-face conversations and otherwise, these two intimate associates hammered out a pragmatist critique of the psychoanalytic project. In Meyer’s hands, the force of this critique is greater, simply because of the qualities already indicated. But the extent to which their

critique might have missed the mark has yet to be ascertained, at least in a precise fashion. Their terminological aversion to the word *unconscious* tends to obscure their substantive agreement with some of Freud's most basic insights regarding the large extent to which dynamic presence of vital forces, not of a rational nature, shape human conduct (see, e.g., Dewey LW.14: 333). We might go forward by (at least, provisionally) splitting the difference, suggesting that there is, on the one hand, more to the unconscious than Freud tends to admit and, on the other, there is more to Freud's understanding of the dynamics of mind than pragmatists have been willing to concede. Is not repression, whatever word is used, one of the "large facts" regarding human life (see Dewey MW.14: 108-14, 113-6)?

## Conclusion. Therapy and survivance

- 33 For a truly pragmatist conception of human experience is possible only by incorporating into itself insights from psychoanalysis, while a genuinely experiential understanding of the dynamic unconscious needs to be articulated in pragmatist terms. On the one side, the forms of irrationality exhibited in, and sustained by, our experience need to be more carefully identified and thickly described than anything yet done by pragmatists, classical or contemporary. On the other, appreciating the depth of sociality stressed by pragmatism requires us also to appreciate the social dimensions of even the most apparently private features of the human mind. Mind is, at bottom, a biological category (cf. Milikan 1987) and life itself, in the case of a species such as ours, is a thoroughly social affair. Hence a biopsychological (or psychobiological) approach to human life seems to be the one most attuned to the "large facts" disclosed by human experience, facts indispensable for framing an adequate understanding of the human mind, but also for instituting effective forms of psychiatric treatment.
- 34 The programmatic work of Dewey and Meyer, both individually and conjointly, is in effect a call, specifically, a call to go to history (cf. Dewey LW.1: 370), to life as experienced and interpreted by individuals bound together in complex, intricate, and variable ways (Lamb 2014: 132, 136). Whatever *elemental* units might be identified and provisionally isolated are likely to assist us in coming to terms with the vicissitudes, vagaries, and simply variations of experience and conduct. First and foremost, however, the observable functions of social actors in concrete situations provide, at least for anyone committed to a psychobiological approach, *the* key to understanding ourselves and others. In our observation of these functions, we ought to use ordinary language as much as possible, but we are, time and again, forced to craft a set of terms deliberately designed to describe the plain facts without becoming unduly entangled in verbal disputes (Dewey LW.13: 323; cf. Schafer 1976).
- 35 While Meyer on more than one occasion reminded his readers that etymologically *psychiatry* means "the healing of souls" (see, e.g., Meyer 1921: 21; also, in Lief 1948: 1), the mature Dewey tried to recover the jettisoned words *soul* and *spirit* (LW.1: 223-4; cf. Bettelheim 1983) in a strictly naturalistic context. Despite their misleading associations, these commonplace words denote crucial aspects of human functioning.<sup>20</sup> A discourse about the *soul* or *psyche* is perhaps still possible,<sup>21</sup> a form of psychiatry conceived as "the healing of souls" might also be. *Psyche* can be used as a name for the organism as it has been profoundly transformed by its fateful immersion in a wide

array of cultural practices (see, e.g., LW.1: 261), not the least of all linguistic practices. It simply *is* the organism, viewed from a certain angle – the angle of psychobiology wherein all instances of symbolization trace their roots (in one sense) to the body and all physiological functions are always more than merely physiological functions. Of course, this way of stating the matter reinscribes the dualism it intends to neutralize. So too does body-mind (Dewey LW.1: 217).

- 36 The language in which to articulate, consistently and effectively, the functional unity of a human being has yet to be crafted. But the vocabulary of *survivance* might be helpful here (Vizenor 2008: 1; Lee 2023: 225, 233). For our purpose, the relevance of a neologism is – or ought to be – immediately obvious. Even so, the term *survivance* is likely to be unfamiliar to many professional philosophers, not least of all professed pragmatists. It was in fact an old word simply meaning *survival* but, in the hands of Gerald Vizenor and others, it has become a new one. At minimum, the question of *survivance* is always one of *going on*, more precisely, *how* to go on, especially in the face of devastation (cf. Lear 2008). But even at its minimum *survivance* is not minimalist. The question of how to go on means, except in the most extreme circumstances, not how to eke out an existence. Indeed, even in the most extreme circumstances, there is often an effort to resist having one's life being reduced to any base sense of merely physical survival. The question is rather how to *live* a human life in inhuman circumstances, not simply how to survive (cf. Des Pres 1980). The word *survivance* is used to conjoin survival to vibrancy, resilience, adaptability, and resistance (see Lee especially).
- 37 If we recall one of the basic tenets of both Dewey's agonistic pragmatism and Meyer's psychobiological approach to therapeutic practice (there is no organism without an environment, no self without a world), we are led to see that ultimately *survivance* cannot be anything but *ecological*. For an individual or community to go on in the manner celebrated by this word, it is necessary for the world to be reclaimed and repaired, insofar as this is possible. In a sense, Jonathan Lear's question (How can I or my community go on when the material condition for our distinctive form of human life have been destroyed?) (Lear 2008, see especially 1-15) is misplaced. The question is rather, How can the world be restored so that our presence is vital, however marginal to the mainstream? The reclamation of any form of life requires nothing less than a restoration of a world in which that form not only makes sense but also signifies vibrancy. This makes it clear why the focus is on nature or the world, not simply on the community or the individual – that is, why *survivance* must be ecological in scope.
- 38 Stories of *survivance* constitute the most important form of such descriptive narratives (Dewey LW.1: 216), by which human beings show more than “the dumb pluck of the animal” (MW.14: 200).<sup>22</sup> They exhibit the implicit vibrancy of an articulate being. Consequently, the task of therapy not infrequently turns out to be less that of translating the unconscious into consciousness as the endeavor to translate this implicit vibrancy into sustaining and inspiring (or in-spiring) stories. Sometimes implicit vibrancy is more than sufficient: it however can occasionally even be decreased by our efforts to make it explicit. At other times, however, articulation can serve to maintain, focus, intensify, or even recover a sense of vibrancy. In any case, the human spirit is indeed an empirical matter and a natural phenomenon (Dewey LW.1: 192-4, 223-4). But, then, so too are its collapses, dysfunctions, and dis-integrations (see, e.g., Meyer 1948: 61-70, 117-20, 178-83, and 412-7) natural phenomena and, as such, observable states, processes, or (mal)functions.

- 39 The therapeutic function of pragmatism cannot be gainsaid, but the pragmatic character of therapy itself, at least in the hands of a groundbreaking figure such as Meyer, also should not be overlooked. If the ideal of “sound and whole human beings [...] in a sound and healthy human environment” (LW.13: 336) is the one by which Dewey’s agonistic pragmatism is ultimately guided, he appreciated that it is an ideal forged by realistic and imaginative consideration of sick psyches in a sick world (MW. 15: 42-6). Sick humans are indications of a sick world (see especially MW.15: 42-6 and LW.15: 210-23). And Dewey is unblinking in his therapeutic assessment of human history: “The world has always been more or less a sick world” (MW.5: 42). “The interest in cures and salvations [therapies and panaceas] is,” he adds, “evidence of how sick the world is” (*ibid.*: 43). The principal loci are not isolatable units within individual organisms, but the encompassing world in which you, I, and others – beings with a name and history, an identifiable singularity and identifying lineages (Meyer 1948) – are destined to function and to break down, into a vast array of debilitating disintegrations.
- 40 For Dewey, however, his focus is for the most part not on a highly general level, but rather on a humanly specific one. Sick or malfunctioning organisms are signs of environmental deficiencies or shortages. The sickness of the organism is only identifiable in reference to the world as an arena of activity. In brief, the *world* itself is sick and this is nowhere more evident than in its capacity to generate countless forms of human pathology. The breakdown of humans is as observable and incontrovertible as their fluency, vibrancy, and ingenuity – our madness and self-destructive tendencies as manifest as our survivance and self-restorative strategies. Dewey’s agonistic pragmatism and Meyer’s psychobiological approach to human illness provide invaluable resources for illuminating both sides of human life. We must begin with what illness or malfunction is *experienced* as by human beings<sup>23</sup> (Lamb 2014: 82), how “illness” (the inability to execute even the minimal tasks of everyday life) is not simply had but *lived* by humans (Meyer), above all, by those whose habits put them at such debilitating odds with the world and themselves. Their survivance depends upon their collaboration and, in turn, their collaboration can be secured only by an effective acknowledgment of what can only be, to some extent, their idiosyncratic spontaneity.<sup>24</sup>

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## NOTES

1. Of course, it does not in the strict sense have an *essential* meaning, though an historically consolidated cluster of emphatic usages makes clear the import of this word.
2. “Any author,” James suggests, “is easy if you can catch the center of his vision” (1977: 44).
3. There is something at least slightly misleading about Edel and Flower’s claim that, in this paper, “Dewey traces *finally* the conflict of the three factors” (xxvii; emphasis added). In fact, he opens this text by stressing conflict. His presentation of the three independent factors opens with this emphasis and eventually returns to indicating the specific way in which there is a radical conflict among these distinct traditions.
4. Take the example of Pappas 2019.
5. In a justly famous passage, Dewey asserts, “philosophy is inherently criticism, having its distinctive position among various modes of criticism in its generality; a criticism of criticisms, as it were” (LW.1: 298).
6. A thoroughgoing naturalist cannot be indifferent to, or uninquisitive about, *intrauterine* life. See, e.g., Piontelli 1992.
7. This seems to be Allport’s own position, though it is almost as though he is too polite to own it as his.
8. Of course, we always fall back on our inherited terms, but the salient facts of a unique situations, such as those with which especially psychiatrists must contend, require the linguistic facility and indeed fluidity of a literary artist far more than any dogmatic insistence on a strict nomenclature. Even a word such a *depression*, as apt as it must often seem, likely obfuscates more than it illuminates. Sticking closer to descriptive terms and narrative description serves both diagnosis and therapy than the loaded terms of an institutionalized lexicon (Dewey LW.1: 128, 232, 384, but especially 216; Meyer 1921: 40; also, in Lief 1948: 12; Schafer 1976).
9. Dewey specifically cites very few authors in *Experience and Nature* (LW.1), though he alludes to many of his predecessors and several of his contemporaries. Meyer is however one whom Dewey does specifically cite in his *magnum opus* (LW.1: 116-7). The text cited by Dewey is “The Contribution of Psychiatry to the Understanding of Life Problems,” the psychiatrist’s contribution to *A Psychiatric Milestone: Bloomingdale Hospital Centenary 1821-1921*, a privately printed collection celebrating the founding and work of a New York state hospital. At the time of this gathering (May 26, 1921 [1921: xi]), Meyer was formally associated with the Henry Phipps Psychiatric Clinic (in fact, he was the Director of this Clinic) at Johns Hopkins University. This text was included by Alfred Lief, the editor of *The Commonsense Psychiatry of Dr. Adolf Meyer*, as the Introduction to this collection of essays by Meyer. Dewey stresses he is quoting “a psychiatric writer speaking of his own field” (LW.1: 116). But the point Meyer is making about “elementalism,” the deeply entrenched tendency to see in the most basic units [or “elements”] *the* explanatory principles of complex phenomena, has significance for fields other than psychiatry, including of course philosophy. The question of elementarism obviously pertains to both what constitutes the objects of knowledge and the factors by which the behavior of these objects are illuminated. Dewey finds in Meyer’s work corroboration for his functional, contextualist approach in all fields of inquiry.
10. What Dewey disclosed about himself in his autobiographical essay “From Absolutism to Experimentalism” is dramatically displayed in his intellectual friendship to a figure who is presently unknown to many psychiatrists, let alone philosophers: “Upon the whole, the forces that have influenced me have come from persons and from situations more than from books” (LW.5: 155) (“the great exception” being James’s *The Principles of Psychology* rather than his *Will to Believe, Pragmatism, or A Pluralistic Universe* [LW.5: 157]).
11. See especially his “Subject-Organization” (Lief 1948: 616-22) and “The Concept of Wholes” (Lief 1948: 623-7). “Subject-Organization” is taken from remarks made by Meyer on the Fourth

Conference on Psychiatric Education (Baltimore, April 1936) and from other ones made at the National Committee for Mental Hygiene (New York, 1938). “The Concept of Wholes” is extracted from “The Rise of the Person and the Concept of Wholes or Integrates,” a piece written for the centennial number of the *American Journal of Psychiatry* (April 1944).

12. Another remark on his terminology is in order, if only as an aside. He tended to use *symbolization* in a very broad sense, one encompassing all forms of signification or signifying. As Peirce and others have convincingly argued, however, it is best to reserve *sign* as a genus and restrict *symbol* to designate a species of signs.

13. “British Influences in Psychiatry and Mental Hygiene,” originally a presentation to the Royal Medico-Psychological Association (London; May 17, 1933).

14. Meyer contrasts placing undue emphasis on what is revealed in an autopsy, looking to the dead body in isolation from the environment, *with* paying sufficient attention to the living organism entangled in variable pursuits, often simultaneously. As revealing as corpses can be, living organism are far more so.

15. Dewey was alert to the possibility that, within naturalism and more dramatically within a culture awed by the triumphs of science and technology, the dualism of brain and body (or organism) threatened to be as obfuscating as the traditional dualism of mind (or soul) and body. See especially LW.1: 222-4.

16. “Meyer’s engagement with pragmatism began immediately after his arrival in the United States and intensified thereafter. He became [personally] acquainted with [...] William James between 1896 and 1900” (Lamb 2014: 78). Shortly before his death, most likely with vivid memories of the 1909 gathering at Clark University, where Freud, Jung, Ferenczi, and (for a day or so) James himself were in attendance, the American psychologist and philosopher declared of Meyer to a shared friend: “[T]hat man has the levellest mind on psychology that I know!” (*ibid.*). In turn Meyer found a theoretical home in James’s functional psychology and told his wife he could easily envision a “thoroughly Meyerian” and distinctively American psychiatry based on Jamesian functionalism (*ibid.*).

17. The full quotation reads: “Fortunately there is a positive constructive philosophy, that of John Dewey, that of Progressive education, and that of common sense psychiatry” (quoted by Lamb 2014: 88).

18. An address published in Meyer (1933) and presented to the Illinois Conference on Public Welfare (Chicago, October 1933).

19. From a paper presented at a Conference on Science, Philosophy, and Religion (New York; September 10, 1943) and published in Bryson 1944.

20. “The concept of psyche with its abstractness and load of tradition is,” Meyer notes, “hard to make definite and a part of actual life, since it is too apt to detach itself from biological principles and materials” (Lief 1948 [1938]: 611). In contrast, when “I speak of the ‘he’ or ‘she,’ and the person (implying also his or her sense) I know I am speaking of a ‘somebody’ and a real biological object and its function on sure and real ground” (*ibid.*). Originally, remarks made by Meyer at the Fourth Conference on Psychiatric Education (Baltimore; April 1936). Nonetheless, when Meyer recounted what prompted him to pursue a career in psychology he invoked the name of psyche: “Somehow both Lange’s and Wundt’s essays had failed me in my quest for a satisfactory understanding of life and mind – of what the philosophy of my environment and those speaking of psychology and psychiatry emphasize by the prefix ‘psycho-,’ the soul and the soul concept [...] I found myself before a decision between theology, with perhaps a philosophical and linguistic-historical preference related to my father’s interests, and medicine, with the possibility of a naturalistic career closer to the physician’s world, as suggested by my reading of Eduard von Hartmann’s *Philosophy of the Unconscious*” (Lief 1948 [1933]: 25-6).

21. As Dewey suggests in *Experience and Nature*, “‘soul’ when freed from all traces of traditional materialistic animism denotes the qualities of psycho-physical activities as far as these are organized into unity” (LW.1: 223), i.e., *functional unity*.

22. The human animal is, Dewey asserts in *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922), a work specifically cited by Meyer, “instinct with activities that carry him on. Individuals here and there cave in, and most individuals sag, withdraw and seek refuge at this and that point. But man as man still has the dumb pluck of the animal. He has endurance, hope, curiosity, eagerness, love of action. These traits belong to him by structure [or constitution], not by taking thought” (MW.14: 200).

23. This is of course the thesis of Dewey’s “Postulate of Immediate Empiricism” (1905), MW.3: 158-67.

24. “Respect for experience is,” Dewey notes, “respect for its possibilities in thought and knowledge as well as an enforced attention to its joys and sorrows. Intellectual piety toward experience is a precondition of the direction of life and of tolerant and generous cooperation among men. Respect for the things of experience alone brings with it such a respect for others, the centres of experience, as is free from patronage, domination and the will to impose” (Appendix 2 in LW.1: 392). Those who are overwhelmed by traumas, crises, and problems can only be helped if respect for experience truly encompasses respect for these “centres of experience.” As Meyer revealed in an important address, “we [as psychiatrists] have learned to be more eager to see what is sane and strong and constructively valuable even in the strange notions [and conduct] of our patients, and less eager to call them queer or foolish. *A delusion may contain another person’s attempt at stating truth*” (1921: 44, emphasis added; also in Lief 1948: 14). When the patient is seen in this light, the struggling individual is approached as personal agents exercising (in however impaired a form) rational autonomy, thus, animated by legitimate concerns and relying on intelligible even if ultimately ineffective means of addressing these concerns.

## ABSTRACTS

This contribution aims at discussing the agonistic dimension of John Dewey’s pragmatism. The paper starts by reconstructing Dewey’s influence on Albert Meyer, a leading figure of 20th-century American psychiatry. This comparison will shed light on Dewey’s influence on Meyer, focusing on some core psychological notions such as mental health and growth. Moreover, it will show the key role played by the category of conflict in Dewey’s pragmatism, and how the latter can account for the darker and more problematic sides of human life. The paper ends with a quick elaboration on the notion of survivance, which denotes the ability to “go on” – both as individuals and as societies – in the face of conflict and devastation.

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