A Study of Pathology in Dewey's Theory of Experience

—A New Look into His Philosophical Project—

*鵜　飼　峻　二
Shunji UKAI

Introduction

One of the important traits of Dewey's naturalistic theory of experience is that it does not presuppose an immutable subject. When we are seeking for knowledge, "it is the needs of a *situation* which are determinative" (Dewey, 1980, p. 363).[1] This emphasis on situation leads him to write counter-intuitive statements concerning experience in his later works such as the following: "[m]an fears because he exists in a fearful, an awful world. The *world* is precarious and perilous" (Dewey, 1981, pp. 43–44). In common sense, we say that *we* are fearful since the world is a certain way, but in Dewey's philosophy, the emotion of fear is attributed to the situation. The reason why he theorized experience this way is that he wanted to avoid constructing "the insoluble problem of how a subjective experience can beget objective knowledge" (Dewey, 1980, p. 364). In other words, he wanted to stay away from the modern problem of epistemology.

However, Dewey's sensitive maneuver to overcome the difficulty of past philosophical distinctions does not indicate that he came to disregard the influence of the subject in experience:

> The constancy and pervasiveness of the operative presence of the self as a determining factor in all situations is the chief reason why we give so little heed to it; it is more intimate and omnipresent in experience than the air we breathe. Only in pathological cases, in delusions and insanities and social eccentricities, do we readily become aware of it; even in such cases it required long discipline to force attentive observation back upon the self. It is easier to attribute such things to invasion and possession from without, as by demons and devils. Yet till we understand operations of the self as the tool of tools, *the* means in all use of means, specifying its differential activities in their distinctive consequences in varying qualities of what is experienced, science is incomplete and the use made of it is at the mercy of an unknown factor, so that the ultimate and important consequence is in so far a matter of accident. (Dewey, 1981, pp. 189–190)

The claim that the subject is omnipresent in every situation and determines every act of the individual is convincing enough to show that the subject is still a significant subject-matter of inquiry. But he provides another powerful statement that even science is incomplete until we understand the function of the subject. Thus, the block quotation above forcefully indicates that,

* 名古屋大学大学院学生

without taking the self in a situation into consideration, we have a one-sided understanding of his philosophy.[2]

Interestingly, in the same passage, Dewey writes that it is the pathological cases in experience that point toward the self for attentive observation. In other writings too such as his aesthetic theory and his theory of inquiry, he refers to the pathological behavior as both an obstacle that prevents healthy interactions and a beginning of effective ones. In *Art as Experience* (1934), his masterpiece on aesthetics, he writes that emotion which does not attach to events and objects in their movements "soon generates a delusion in lack of something real" (Dewey, 1987, p. 48). These privately contained emotions are "either preliminary or pathological" (p. 59). With regards to his theory of inquiry, a doubtful state usually becomes a beginning of inquiry as an 'indeterminate situation.' But when it remains private, the subject becomes a "mania of doubting," which, in extreme cases, leads to "some form of actual insanity" (Dewey, 1986, pp. 109–110). Despite the ambivalent character, these illustrations clearly show that Dewey sees a positive function in the pathological behavior.

Dewey scholars who acknowledge the significance of the subject in experience —Alexander (1987) and Garrison (2003) among others— mention the pathological behavior in the context of discussing Dewey's theory of emotion, but they only mention it in passing as a negative behavior to overcome. Seigfried's (1996) feminist critique that Dewey was completely oblivious of the gendered tendencies of emotional expression sheds some light on the maladjustments, but she still treats them only as obstacles (Seigfried, 1996, pp. 164–169). In this essay, I attempt to flesh out the positive aspect of pathological behavior.

Needless to say, Deweyan philosophy of education is constructed around the notion of interest which implies an orientation toward a bright future. Analogously, other aspects of his philosophy focus on the positive ideals of human life. The rich scholarship on his philosophy has already accumulated research on them. To raise just a few, they are the works on aesthetics by Alexander (1987) and Stroud (2011); ethics by Fesmire (2003) and Pappas (2008); intelligence and democracy by Eldridge (1998); and philosophy of technology by Hickman (1990). This essay aims to explore yet another reading of Dewey's philosophy by shedding some light on an overlooked negative aspect of his philosophy.

Since Dewey never discussed the topic in depth, I approach it contextually. I first present his theory on human behavior from his influential "The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology" (1896). The "Reflex Arc" paper is an appropriate place to start because it is the groundwork of his standpoint concerning human behavior — a standpoint that he continues to refine throughout his philosophical career. I then situate his view on emotion from "The Theory of Emotion" (1894–1895) within this larger picture. I locate and analyze the pathological cases of behavior by means of this general understanding.

1. Dewey's Understanding of Human Behavior

1. 1 Continued Action as Primary

The "Reflex Arc" paper is a criticism of the stimulus-response dualism in psychology. Dewey argues that this framework of understanding is problematic because it takes a disjointed characterization as if it is the whole. Stimulus is taken as a disconnected signal of the external environment, and response as an automatic bodily jerk. In this view, the cause of human movement can only be sought externally; that is, either in "an external pressure of [the] 'environment,' or else in an unaccountable spontaneous variation from within the 'soul' or the 'organism'" (Dewey, 1972, p. 99). Dewey dismisses this dualism as a vestige of the outdated philosophical distinction between the sensation and idea, or the body and soul (p. 96). The "Reflex Arc" paper presents an alternative way of understanding human behavior.

I use the illustration of a child getting burnt by reaching out for the fire of a candle light —an illustration from James's *The Principles of Psychology* (1890)— to explain Dewey's point because it helps us imagine his alternative view in a specific situation. In the orthodox interpretation, "the sensation of light is a stimulus to the grasping as a response, [and] the burn resulting is a stimulus to with drawing the hand as response" (p. 97). Each pair is taken as an independent unit, and its relationship with other pairs is ignored. While it is convenient to pair up one stimulus with one response, this mode of explanation fails to take temporal continuity into consideration. Dewey alternatively takes the act of seeing, rather than a particular stimulus or response, to be primary. Although it is the sensory quale ('the stimulus of bright light') that gives value to the act of

seeing, it is never taken as a disparate unit or a mere replacement of a previous one. It is rather a culmination of numerous previously coordinated responses. In this example, the sensory quale directs the child to reach out for the light and to eventually touch the the candle light. The initial act of seeing transforms into the act of seeing-for-reaching, then into the act of seeing-of-a-light-that-means-pain-when-contact-occurs. In this continued development, an act is wholly dependent upon the previous one. Without an accurate sense of where the light is, the child cannot successfully reach for the light. While the vision is sustained, added relationships transform its meaning. Stimulus and response are exaggerated because they concern a selected feature of the situation which is at stake in the transformation. There is a stimulus when a condition of action is specified, and there a response when a condition "serve[s] to complete" a "disintegrating co-ordination" (p. 107). They are contextually designated, and they will change depending on how one interprets the situation.

1. 2 Emotion as a Sign of Failure in Adaptation

Within this continuous process of coordination, where is emotion situated? Dewey succinctly puts it in the following way in "The Theory of Emotion" (1894–1895):

> [T]*he mode of behavior is the primary thing, and... the idea and the emotional excitation are constituted at one and the same time...* [T]*hey represent the tension of stimulus and response within the coordination which makes up the mode of behavior.* (Dewey, 1971, p. 174)

The first part of the statement is precisely what the "Reflex Arc" paper discusses. Instead of assuming the existence of an identifiable faculty of emotion or muscles intended for emotional expression, Dewey sees "*the mode of behavior*" to be "*the primary thing*." For him, the assumption of anything antecedent is a product of "sheer reflective interpretation" (p. 174). He argues that "*reference to emotion in explaining the attitude is wholly irrelevant; the attitude of emotion is explained positively by reference to useful movements*" (pp. 154–155).

Second, "*emotional excitation*" occurs when there is "*tension of stimulus and response within the co-ordination*." Before there is tension, human behavior consists of habitual reactions. Dewey describes them as the behavior that is the "easiest possible," or useful (p. 162). Insofar as "our experience runs smoothly we are no more conscious" of any of them (Dewey, 1972, p. 108). However, obviously, habitual behavior is forced to fail because life consists of constant changes within and without the organism.[3] When a normal mode of response fails, there is a physiological discharge. This discharge is a "reproduction of an attitude or, rather, a mixture of attitudes which have been useful in the past" (Dewey, 1971, p. 161). In other words, while "some feature in the stimulus (the situation or object) awakens its appropriate reactions," they "do not co-ordinate with the reactions aroused by other features of the situation" (p. 161). Thus, there is discrepancy between stimulus and response.

Discovering the appropriate stimulus or response is the same thing as discovering the coordinating counterpart (i.e., a coordinated response is the same thing as an appropriate stimulus). The only way a frustration is solved is by actually constituting the appropriate stimulus-response relationship. But there is discharge precisely because the desired end is unknown. The excitation hence becomes a trigger of inhibiting habitual behavior, and for seeking an alternative way to behave in the situation.

Third, the block quotation helpfully indicates that "*ideas*" occur simultaneously with "*emotional excitation*."[4] There is nothing mystical about the occurrence of ideas. They are "abstraction[s] from the activity just as much as is the 'feel' or seizure" (p. 176). In the beginning, they are simply unnoticed for they merge in the situation. But when their consequences are learned by means of the surrounding media, they attain significance in behavior because they become indications of the "objective differences in external things and of episodes past and to come" (Dewey, 1981, p. 198). Just as any other coordinating behavior like learning how to walk or ride a bicycle, the significant function of ideas is acquired by continued trials. A complete, or mature, idea is evoked only when the whole act is completed because it is able to fully coordinate itself with the environment only in the actual experience (Dewey, 1971, p. 178). Conversely, it is often vague because, in the immediate moment, the subject is not actually undergoing

the experience. The more the subject is attending to and coordinating with the existential movements, the more an idea becomes clear. Dewey also reminds us that there is an important distinction between idiopathic and emotional responses, exemplified by the difference between the "trembling with cold or sheer fatigue" and "the tremble of rage or fear" (p. 160). They are similar in that the subject is making a response to an appropriate stimuli, but only the latter involves the evocation of ideas. While the former is merely a biological reaction against a physical condition, the latter is a reaction against some fearful or infuriating *object*, which assumes selection of certain aspects of a situation.

The perception of objects is enabled by the use of language. Dewey in fact writes that, "[w]ithout language, the qualities of organic action that are feelings are pains, pleasures, odors, colors, noises, tones, only potentially and proleptically. With language they are discriminated and identified. They are then 'objectified'; they are immediate traits of things... The qualities never were 'in' the organism; they always were qualities of interactions in which both extra-organic things and organisms partake. When named, they enable identification and discrimination of things to take place as means in a further course of inclusive interaction" (Dewey, 1981, pp. 198–199). While the range of language is limited to spoken and written words in *Experience and Nature* (1925), he comes to take it "in its widest sense, a sense wider than oral and written speech" in his most mature works such as *Art as Experience* (1934) and *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (1938). It includes any objective medium which can represent existential change, such as sounds, gestures, shapes and colors. Insofar as one is able to anticipate particularized consequences by means of another thing (e.g., a sound means a tone in music, dark clouds in the sky is a sign of rain, and so on), the signifying object is language.

Although Dewey does not make an existential distinction between the intellectual and emotional, he does make a functional distinction between them. Of course, the two modes of experiencing are never mutually exclusive. Intellectual activity is driven by emotion, and emotional (rather than idiopathic) discharge is funded by intellectual meanings. They are only different ways of responding to a situation. Yet, while the former aims to perceive possible consequences, the latter emphasizes the aspect of experiencing the world first-hand (e.g., seeing, hearing, or touching). This develops into the distinction between secondary experience and primary experience in *Experience and Nature* (1925).

2. Pathological Behavior and its Conditions

Now that we have a general view of Dewey's understanding of human behavior, I introduce the pathological behavior into the picture. In his "The Theory of Emotion" (1894–1895), he argues that, when the subject continuously fails to coordinate her psychic functions for readaptation, the subject "becomes entirely taken up with its own state and is unable to attend to the object" (Dewey, 1971, p. 164). This is because there is "no defined channel of discharge" even though there is "a great stirring up of energy preparatory to activity" (p. 164). Simply put, the subject of the emotional excitation becomes immobilized even though coordination is not successful. Dewey writes that pathological behavior is problematic because "[t]hose factors of the organism which relate most immediately to the welfare of the organism, the vegetative functions, absorb consciousness, instead of being, as they normally are, subsidiary to the direction of muscular activity with reference to the 'object'" (p. 164).

Dewey's explanation on pathology stops here. A limitation of his early arguments is that, inspired by James, he focuses exclusively on the biological matrix of human activity. His situation-oriented understanding of emotion develops, in his later works, into what Pappas (2008) explains as a "radical" and "thoroughgoing contextualism" in which "no general rule or principle can escape its relativity to context" (p. 48). Thus, there will certainly be conditions of "social pathology which works powerfully against effective inquiry into social institutions and conditions" (Dewey, 1984, p. 341).

Based on my discussion, I raise four possible variations on the condition of pathology. First, coordination will continue to fail when an appropriate channel of response is not yet prepared. As the illustration in section one shows, the ideal function becomes effective only after particularized consequences in the environment can be anticipated. When the subject is not familiar with the environment, she is unable to form ideas. Undergoings may become strong shocks, but reactions will continue to be rather arbitrary. For example, newly

born infants will continue to be frustrated by the environment because she is not familiar with her living conditions. Obviously, this inability is only due to the fact that the subject is still in the process of learning how to successfully coordinate herself in the dynamic environment. Thus, insofar as the environing condition remains foreign, the subject will be unable to form effective ideas for adaptation. I henceforth call this condition of pathology C1.

Second, despite the undeniable fact that ideas are products of coordination in a situation, there are instances when the subject comes to consider ideas to be justifying themselves without coordinating reference. Ideas which have no reference to their surroundings are universalized without limits, and they are often regarded as an independent realm that is distinguished from the objective situation. While the ideal function becomes an effective organ when it is accompanied by coordinating criteria of the situation, it loses its effectiveness when its sources are neglected. This condition will be referred to as C2.

Third, when a medium is continuously forcing a frustrating idea upon the subject against her intention, it works to obstruct successful coordination. It has been discussed in section one that language enables one to discriminate and convey ideas, and that, for Dewey, it includes any kind of existing thing which serves the function. The subject is then continuously funded by ideas —both vague and clear, frustrating and satisfactory— in everyday life.[5] Naturally, among the many ideas evoked, there will be unintended ones that hamper adaptation. For example, say, a student is studying for an exam and is passionate about getting high scores. She goes to the same environment everyday (same books, writing utensils, tables, chairs, and so on) in which each evoked idea enables the student to coordinate her actions to study. However, let us imagine that the student cultivates an idea of anxiety concerning her ability to study because an inconsiderate peer has told her that she has no talent. Subsequently, when the student interacts with her studying environment, the frustrating idea will be evoked along with her idea to study. The productive idea, along with its interacting condition, has become a medium to evoke the frustrating idea. Not only will both the positive and negative idea be reproduced every time she studies, they will be reinforced because, in Dewey's theory, ideas become concertized when they undergo functionally identical consequences. The problem in this case is that, while ideas are successfully evoked by means of a medium, they become a burden rather than an aid for readaptation. Thus, insofar as ideas are external to the subjects' interests in a situation, there will be continued conflict. I will call this condition C3.

The fourth condition of pathology (C4) occurs when there is a defect in the vegetative and motor function of the organism. The subject is simply unable to form ideas to redirect her behavior as a biological organism. Since there is very little possibility of spontaneous recoordination, we can easily imagine that it leads to continued immobilization.

3. The Positive Aspect

Pathology connotes something negative by the nature of the word, but the complexity of each condition indicates that it is impossible to point to something pathological in itself. Dewey's understanding indicates that it must be inferred by looking into the situation. However, there is one trait that is common regardless of the condition of pathological behavior, and this trait is positive in that it constantly becomes a branching point between perpetuating and transforming tension. By definition, pathology indicates the persistent failure of identifying a channel of response even in a situation of need. But the failure of coordinating ideas and the failure of habitual responses is not identical. Whether and how ideas are functioning depends on the situation, but *all* instances of tension indicates that a habitual response has failed. In other words, a pre-intellectual recognition that *something* is not successfully coordinating itself with other events signifies the need of transformation. In these instances, whether the particular behavior is socially designated pathological is only secondary in significance because it occurs both in the context of temporary and persisting immobilization.

There are two ways to react to this recognition. First, one can reject it and revert back to her ready-made behavior. The recognition of tension will then be undergone as an external frustration to be avoided. A habitual rejection is characterized by C2, and the inability of readaptation by C4. Second, it is possible to inhibit habitual responses and attend to the causes of tension. Those who undergo continued tension this way

will perceive it as a possibility of a new mode of adaptation. In this mode of response, rigid habits, rather than the movements of the environment, are external energies which do not agree to the coordination. To carefully inspect the causes of discrepancy is to face our inane mode of activity, which virtually means that we are open to the transformation of our behavior. While the former perpetuates or strengthens the tension, the latter continues to acquire new ideas for better coordination. If the former is how one is experiencing the situation, past experience becomes a burden of the present. But if it is the latter, past experience becomes a force that presses the present into the future because her accumulated habits are formulated by means of coordinating ideas. Unless the living condition radically changes, the latter will continue to transform her in-habiting perception into a medium that is full of untried possibilities, or emotionalized visions for the future. Since it embraces tension as a default in any situation rather than something negative to avoid, it almost seems like a necessary preliminary to constructing any positive ideal. I shall call this response R1.

The limitation of this solution is that everyone has preferences of certain ideas over another because we inevitably think and act in the midst of our familiar living conditions (Dewey, 1987, p. 334). There are conditions like C3 in which the very reason of immobilization is that the interacting medium is unbearable, and in more extreme cases, conditions like C4 in which ideas cannot be evoked. An alternative approach is to alter the living environment so that it fulfills the needs of the subject. While this approach is instrumental in that it is applicable to all four conditions, it has its limitation as well; since the altered environment is constructed to serve a particular mode of response, there is a possibility that the specialized environment will cultivate pathological behavior for others, or C3. Therefore, an *Either-Or* solution is too simplistic because any immobilizing condition is far more complex than the means we employ. The only point that this theoretical illustration can make is that the validity of a solution depends on the specific context, and that tension becomes a constant branching point.

4. Resonance With Dewey's Perspective on Philosophical Inquiry

Dewey's perspective on the role of philosophical inquiry resonates with R1. He writes that "the *standing problem* of Western philosophy throughout its entire history has been the connection-and-distinction of what on one side is regarded as *human* and on the other hand as *natural*" (Dewey, 1981, p. 331). Division occurs because there is always a gap between old and new perceptions of meaning amid the ever-changing environment. Matter-of-fact inquires continue to discover new meanings by means of new arts, hence altering *natural* meanings. But the transformation of *natural* meanings does not automatically alter the cherished *human* meanings. These social and moral ideals, which are funded by tradition, lag behind. According to Dewey, then, a philosophical division is a "formulated recognition of an impasse in life; an impotence in interaction, inability to make effective transition, limitation of power to regulate and thereby to understand" (p. 186). While the eventual discrepancy between 'hard facts' and beliefs is inescapable, he explicitly states that it is "ridiculous" for philosophy to set itself up "as a rival of science" or any matter-of-fact inquiry (p. 305). When it is taken as an independent form of knowledge, there is a danger of merely becoming an expression of C2. His persistent criticisms of philosophical dualism (ex. subject and object, mind and body, individual and social, logic and inquiry, and morality and science) indicate his dislike of taking divisions to be inherent. He dismissively writes, "[N]o such sharp division actually exists" (p. 186).

"[D]uality," Dewey asserts, is "rightly understood" only when it is taken "as challenges to remaking of personal desire and thought" so that they are "integrate[d] with[in] the movement of nature and by participation" to "direct its consequence[s]" (p. 186). While matter-of-fact solutions continue to be effective, to depend exclusively upon them deepens the spasm between old and new beliefs because they ignore the old for the sake of the powerful matter-of-fact effects of the new. There is thus a need for a mode of inquiry that discovers, expresses, and reconciles tension by taking both the old and new into consideration. Philosophy, for Dewey, is a general mode of inquiry that inherits traditional beliefs in order to reconstruct them amid the new situations

by taking the locus of frustration as an indicator for transformation. He in fact writes that "[e]very significant philosophy is an attempt to deal with" this sort of discrepancy (p. 4).

Conclusion

This essay was a speculative attempt to inquire into the positive aspect of pathological behavior. I surveyed "The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology" (1896) and "The Theory of Emotion" (1894–1895) as a platform of my discussion, and provided an analysis of the conditions. My conclusion on the positive function is that its recognition constantly becomes a branching point between its perpetuation and transformation. This essay achieves two things: it provides a new perspective on a topic that was neglected by scholars, and it points out that this perspective resonates with Dewey's view on the role of philosophical inquiry. However, the analysis does not allow a judgment on whether it leads to a new reading of Dewey's philosophy because there is no specific examination on how he connected old and new views on human life.

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Notes

[1] Dewey repeats in *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (1938) that he does not assume the existence of anything mental (Dewey, 1986, p. 29, 43, 107, 161). See Tiles (1995) for a systematic analysis of how the word 'mental' is conceived in Dewey's philosophy.

[2] Alexander (1987) has already eloquently presented how the subject is an important part of Dewey's philosophy in his famous *John Dewey's Theory of Art, Experience, and Nature: The Horizons of Feeling.* Chapter three ("The Metaphysics of Experience") discusses Dewey's theory on situation, and chapter four ("The Embodied Mind") focuses on the subject which is an intimate part of it.

[3] The precariousness of human life is one of the fundamental pillars of Dewey's later naturalism. His speculations begin with the brute fact that life is full of dangers and frustrations. For his exposition, see chapter two ("Existence as Precarious and as Stable") of *Experience and Nature* (1925).

[4] Cunningham (1995) claims that findings in neuroscience offer empirical evidence to Dewey's thesis that cognitive and emotive states occur together.

[5] Dewey argues in his aesthetic writings that the products of the arts become a part of our living environment once they are completed. These formed objects are potential meanings to be discovered by others. There is virtually nothing in our everyday environment that has not been re-formed by our ancestors and the people who inhabit the world today. Hence, astoundingly, Dewey argues that "the history of human experience is a history of the development of arts" (Dewey, 1981, p. 290). For a detailed discussion, see chapter fourteen ("Art and Civilization") of *Art as Experience* (1934).

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A Study of Pathology in Dewey's Theory of Experience: A New Look into His Philosophical Project

Shunji UKAI*

One of the philosophical contributions of John Dewey's naturalistic theory of experience is that it overcomes the epistemological problem of assuming an immutable subject. Instead of reducing experience into some sort of mental faculty, the theory discusses the general features of a situation. However, this sensitive maneuver does not undermine the importance of the subject. This essay focuses on an overlooked trait that concerns the subject, namely, the pathological. Dewey scholars who acknowledge the importance of the subject in experience —Alexander (1987) and Garrison (2003) among others— only mention it in passing as a negative behavior to overcome. This essay is an attempt to flesh out its positive function. I first illustrate Dewey's understanding of human behavior from his famous "The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology" (1896), and situate his "The Theory of Emotion" (1894–1895) within it as it serves as a basis of locating the pathological behavior. From this discussion, I sketch out four conditions that cause the behavior, namely: 1) the lack of past experience, 2) the neglect of situations, 3) the unintended evocation of ideas, and 4) the dysfunction of biological functions. While the complexity of the conditions does not allow simple solutions, they all share the trait that the sense of tension indicates its recognition. The positive function is that every recognition constantly becomes a branching point between the perpetuation and transformation of the immobilizing conditions. Finally, I suggest that there is a possibility of reading Dewey's broader philosophical project as a continued attempt to detect such tensions.

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* Student, Graduate School of Education and Human Development, Nagoya University