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Deweyan Naturalism

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I

The contemporary philosophical world is full of self-described naturalists, and there is probably some minimal cluster of theses on which all of us who claim this badge agree.¹ Nevertheless, as articles and books discussing naturalism typically note (or complain), in the house of naturalism there are many mansions. John Dewey, America's premier philosopher, was among the first to choose the title. My aim in what follows is to elaborate his style of naturalism so as to expose its attractions.

Because Dewey's writings range so widely, a full articulation of his naturalism that examines its development throughout his career and its influence on his treatment of all the topics he addressed lies beyond the scope of any moderately-sized essay—and beyond my own current expertise. Instead, I shall try to reconstruct the position that emerges in three significant later works. Two of these, *Experience and Nature* (*EN*) and *The Quest for Certainty* (*QC*) offer general accounts of his conception of philosophy and its proper role. The third, *A Common Faith* (*CF*), pits his naturalistic approach against a contrasting alternative, in the domain—religion—where a deviation from naturalism has been most evident historically.² Although I take the naturalistic approach I reconstruct to capture important aspects of these works, I shall not attempt to refute all rival interpretations of them, nor shall I consider how other parts of Dewey's corpus might favor a different reconstruction. Modesty seems appropriate; hence my title “*Deweyan Naturalism*” rather than “*Dewey's Naturalism*.”

Part of the minimal cluster of theses associated with naturalism is a claim that the natural sciences are great accomplishments and unusually worthy of respect. Yet a positive attitude toward the sciences is hardly enough to distinguish a thinker

as naturalistically inclined. Many of those whose approaches Dewey saw as insufficiently naturalistic not only expressed their enthusiasm for major scientific developments but also contributed to them (René Descartes and Gottfried Leibniz are notable examples). Some contemporary naturalists advocate a far more ambitious thesis. Natural science is viewed as *superseding* philosophy. Naturalists of this stripe sometimes contend that the achievements of particular areas of science—physics, neuroscience, and evolutionary psychology are prominent candidates—provide the means to answer, or to dismiss, questions with which philosophers have struggled for millennia.³

Many philosophical naturalists prefer a more modest approach. They suppose that the contemporary development of the natural sciences provides the means to address *some* but not all traditional philosophical questions, and they foresee future elaborations of natural science as gradually mopping up the rest. Often, the naturalist will restrict attention to a particular domain—the philosophy of mind, say—arguing that once-popular conceptions of the mind must be abandoned, given contemporary research in psychology and neuroscience, and that with their departure many of the conundrums that have occupied philosophers also vanish.⁴ It seems to me undeniable that natural scientific developments sometimes undermine philosophical theses and remove issues from the philosophical agenda—that happened, for example, with respect to philosophical speculations about the nature of life and living things in the wake of discoveries in biology from the late nineteenth century to the present (particularly the molecular revolution of past decades). If this example is not salient for contemporary philosophers, that is largely because of a tendency to draw the boundaries between the philosophy and the science (or the “natural philosophy”) of previous centuries in such a way that the earlier speculations are taken to be part of science, so that the replacement is seen as an instance of scientific change rather than the reformation of philosophy through scientific progress.⁵

Philosophers who decry the naturalistic tendencies of some of their colleagues typically concede that the natural sciences can make philosophical theories obsolete and reframe long-standing questions, and that they have sometimes done so. What they question is the confidence that, in time, all will be resolved and philosophy will disappear in the triumphant march of natural science. In this debate, there are firm believers, firm deniers, and agnostics. Deniers argue that certain limits on the power of scientific explanation can be identified in advance: we can recognize that *however* our understanding of the brain increases, it will never be possible to answer certain questions about consciousness (to cite a perennially popular example).⁶

In my view, the ambitious claim that future science will either answer all philosophical questions or enable us to overcome them is an optimistic conjecture, perhaps even an article of faith. But the skepticism of the deniers who claim to know in advance that particular issues must permanently resist scientific resolution embodies a limited understanding of the history of science, one that fails to appreciate the variety of ways in which philosophical perspectives and questions have been gradually displaced and that consequently insists on artificially limited forms of resolution.⁷ To revert to my earlier example, we now treat as misguided formerly popular conceptions of the living world, and the questions that flowed from them, not because we have any ability to give a full physicochemical specification of the concept of a living thing but because we have learned to treat many of the functions of organisms within the framework of physicochemical theory.⁸

The versions of naturalism I have been reviewing might be dubbed *content naturalism*, in that they turn to the content of various areas of natural science in search of insights for the reform of philosophy. Dewey's naturalism is not of this type. Dewey is a *method naturalist*,⁹ and his guiding idea in campaigning for a naturalistic renewal of philosophy looks to the ways of proceeding that he identifies as crucial to the success of the natural sciences.

II

Dewey begins *Experience and Nature* by suggesting that his "philosophy" might be given any one of three labels, all of which contain either *naturalism* or *naturalistic* (Dewey 1981, 10). His opening chapter is, as its title promises, devoted to the concept of experience and the identification of proper philosophical method. From the beginning, the inadequate methods of the philosophies Dewey intends to reform are contrasted with the procedures of the successful natural sciences. He offers a concise account of what distinguishes those procedures:

He [the scientific investigator] uses reason and calculation freely; he could not get along without them. But he sees to it that ventures of this theoretical sort start from and terminate in directly experienced subject-matter. Theory may intervene in a long course of reasoning, many portions of which are remote from what is directly experienced. But the vine of pendant theory is attached at both

ends to the pillars of observed subject-matter. And this experienced material is the same for the scientific man and the man in the street.

(Dewey 1981, 11)

It's very easy to read this passage as an informal characterization of something many twentieth-century thinkers saw as central to scientific inquiry, the hypothetico-deductive method, discussed in more detail by later logical empiricist philosophers like Rudolf Carnap, Hans Reichenbach, and Carl Hempel. I maintain that this assimilation should be resisted, but, for the moment, it's worth seeing how scientific investigations contrast with the practices of philosophers.

"The charge that is brought against the non-empirical method of philosophizing is not that it depends upon theorizing, but that it fails to use refined, secondary products as a path pointing and leading back to something in primary experience. The resulting failure is three-fold" (Dewey 1981, 16–17). Dewey immediately goes on to list the three failures: philosophers fail to "test and check," their proposals do not enlarge and enrich the "meaning" of the things of ordinary experience, and the refined subject matter they posit becomes disconnected, and consequently "arbitrary, aloof"—or, as Dewey charges elsewhere "isolated from life."¹⁰

If you concentrate on the first of these failures and ignore the second two, it's easy to combine Dewey's diagnosis with the thought that he takes the proper practice of science to be a simple and straightforward application of the hypothetico-deductive method to yield an equally simple and straightforward reading of his proposal for reforming philosophy. Science works by scientists' dreaming up conjectural answers to questions prompted by their observations, and subsequently testing and confirming their conjectures by using them to predict consequences that can be observed. Philosophy should do the same. There's a common language spoken by scientists and by ordinary people (recall the kinship of the "scientific man" and the "man in the street"), a language that can be employed to characterize what is observed—call it the *observation language*. Scientific hypotheses are well supported because they have consequences, statements in the observation language, that can be checked directly in experience and found to be correct. If philosophical theses were developed to yield similar observational consequences, they, too, would be susceptible to confirmation and philosophy could become a form of rigorous inquiry.

This is so easy a reading of Dewey that it's hardly surprising that many of his interpreters presuppose it, without argument or even statement. Yet it's worth probing the assumption that Dewey is subscribing to an informal version of logical empiricism. If asked, what account of the observation language would he

provide? Apparently not the phenomenalist version, popular in the early stages of the logical positivist/empiricist project; one of the major concerns of *EN* chapter 1 is to restore the connection between experience and nature. Dewey (1981) is often forthright: “We primarily observe things, not observations” (21); experience is distorted by treating mental states as what “is primarily *given*” (24, emphasis Dewey’s).¹¹ It seems, then, that we should interpret Dewey as supposing a “thing language,” in which both scientists and ordinary folk can report their observations. In practice, the hypotheses of the sciences are tested by verifying consequences formulated in this language—and, in principle, philosophers could emulate this good example.

The connection between Dewey’s program and later trends in logical empiricism can be elaborated further by fastening on his talk of “the instrumental nature of the objects of scientific knowing” and his claim that the role of physical science is to fathom connections that can be used to determine outcomes (Dewey 1981, 6). It’s very natural to assimilate such remarks to the instrumentalism much discussed in philosophy of science in the 1950s. Apparently, Dewey sees the “thing language” as a privileged vocabulary, in which we can characterize objects of knowledge, and takes those parts of theoretical science that appear to talk of unobservable entities and processes as convenient devices for organizing the everyday world to which the scientist and the man in the street have access in observation. What he would then demand of the theoretical language of philosophy is that its apparent invocation of unfamiliar entities should be equally fruitful in predicting observational consequences—and that philosophical posits, like those admitted in theoretical science, should not be viewed as part of the deep structure of nature.

So understood, Dewey’s program for philosophy faces an obvious rejoinder, and it’s no surprise that it has been frequently dismissed for its misunderstanding of the character of philosophy. Philosophy, it is often claimed, is simply not in the business of providing theses that might be tested by observation of the world. Metaphysics isn’t a special sort of physics; ethics isn’t a descriptive account of human decisions and actions. To think that issues about the existence of universals could be settled by verifying observational consequences, or that principles of ethics could be tested in experiments, betrays a deep confusion about the philosophical project. Hence, for many philosophers, it hardly matters that Dewey’s naturalism starts with method rather than content. In the end, he wants to do what other, more candid naturalists aim to achieve—to replace philosophy with empirical science.

In my view, Dewey is guilty of no such confusions. They are artifacts of inadequate ways of reading him. Widespread though it is, straightforward though it

appears, the strategy of reading him as an instrumentalist *avant la lettre* is a woefully inadequate approach to his writings. The idea of a privileged observation language, whether of sense data or of physical objects and properties, is at odds with fundamental features of his philosophical perspective; perhaps because of his Hegelian background, he reaches forward to the critiques of logical empiricism offered by Wilfrid Sellars (1963) and Thomas Kuhn (1962). The straightforward instrumentalism is complicated by his claims that the sciences reach into nature's depths, by his willingness to see geology as acquainting us with objects from the remote past that we are not capable of observing directly, and by the casual remark that characteristics often dismissed as subjective are as real as "sun or electron" (Dewey 1981, 11–12, 14).

More significantly, the remarks about the need for method, in the social and human sciences as well as in philosophy, suggest that what is needed is not something that lies ready to hand, something bequeathed to us by the pioneering physicists of the seventeenth century and their successors, but something *analogous*. In his insightful essay on Charles Darwin, Dewey (1977, 7) had already claimed that proper method in pursuing human questions depended on an extension of the method of the physical sciences to cope with the phenomena of life: "But prior to Darwin the impact of the new scientific method upon life, mind, and politics had been arrested, because between these ideal or moral interests and the inorganic world intervened the kingdom of plants and animals." The thought is articulated in his later works, where Dewey (1984, 200) warns against misinterpretations of his views that suppose him to be claiming that "science is the only valid kind of knowledge." Creative work is required, if the methods of the sciences are to be extended to the human domain and to philosophy.

Yet the principal reasons for abandoning the simple reading of *EN* chapter 1 lie in that chapter itself, first in Dewey's recognition of three failures of traditional philosophizing and second in his lengthy discussions of the concept of experience. I'll take these as clues to a better understanding of his claims about philosophical method and to a more distinctive style of philosophical naturalism.

III

Philosophers go astray, Dewey (1981, 17) tells us, not only because they fail to "test and check" but also because their reasonings do not lead to "enlargement and enrichment of meaning" in the things of ordinary experience. The counterpart of this defect (Dewey's third form of failure) is the creation of an unreal world of

pseudo-objects, “abstract” and “aloof,” which, to the extent that it might be taken seriously, would detract from meaningful experience. Part of his self-appointed task is to defend the meaningfulness of ordinary experience against philosophical distortions and dilutions, but beyond this he seeks a mode of healthier philosophizing that will provide the same kind of enlargement and enrichment that the natural sciences have achieved for our experience of physical (and, more recently, organic) nature.

Because it isn't easy to identify exactly what Dewey has in mind when he discusses the enrichment of meaning in experience or, despite the many sentences he devotes to attempts to explain, just what his concept of experience is, there's an obvious appeal in the strategy of dismissing these murky passages, of concentrating on the first form of failure, and of settling for the straightforward reading of Dewey as a scientific instrumentalist who wants philosophy to be a branch of science, instrumentally conceived. That interpretation allows the (impatient?) reader to skip most of the pages in chapter 1 of *EN*. But patience is a virtue, and I recommend going more slowly.

Dewey recognizes very clearly that the notion of experience can be characterized in many different ways, and (as already noted) one of his major targets is the approach that identifies experiences as subjective states of cognitive subjects. Citing William James, he draws attention to two aspects of experience: the states of the world (typically the world beyond the subject) that are experienced and the way in which those states are registered in the experience (Dewey 1981, 18). From the beginning of the book, he locates experience by starting with sentient organisms and their responses to their environments. As the account of *EN* chapter 7 eventually makes fully explicit, Dewey borrows the biological notion of animals embedded in environments and introduces distinctions as they are fruitful for understanding animal activity in general, the processes of conscious activity in particular, and the very specific functions that occur in our own species. The categories of traditional philosophy are to be replaced or supported by an inquiry into what divisions are most helpful for the human purposes of understanding animal behavior and achieving the richest sense of our own lives and their possibilities.

To recognize what Dewey is about in his probing of the notion of experience, we do best to start with a theme from James. In *The Principles of Psychology*, James advances the thesis that the structured world in which we live, the world of objects divided into kinds and of processes taken to follow natural courses, is constructed out of something independent of all cognitive subjects—the world in a bare, relatively unstructured, sense. The structure introduced reflects the sensory and cognitive characteristics and capacities of the organism; the world of the bat is

different from the world of the human being. In the human case, it also embodies the culturally and socially evolving interests and concerns of particular groups. Thus, we may correctly say that the worlds of different cultures are distinct and that people belonging to the same cultural tradition may inhabit distinct worlds at different stages of their history.

James (1981, 277) offers a vivid (but in some ways misleading) analogy: “The mind, in short, works on the data it receives very much as a sculptor works on his block of stone. In a sense the statue stood there from eternity. But there were a thousand different ones beside it, and the sculptor is alone to thank for having extricated this one from the rest.”¹² If we suppose Dewey to be developing James’s thesis that the world of experience is partially constructed by human faculties and human interests, we can make sense of his discussion of experience and of his claims about proper philosophical method.

We inherit a world of experience structured by the generations who have preceded us. All too often, those structures are simply accepted as “natural,” as inevitable constituents of the world we experience. Yet it is possible to reflect on them, to stand back and inquire whether they continue to answer to present purposes and interests. One important aspect of the sciences consists in their revisions and restructurings—people come to recognize Earth as one among many planets, to see swinging stones as pendulums, to read the strata in a rock face as records of previous geological and biological events. A primary task of philosophy is to probe our inherited categories more systematically, attending especially to those that might seem to be most deeply embedded in our structuring of the world.

Dewey (1981, 40) offers a diagnosis of the pre-philosophical predicament: “There is a special service which the study of philosophy may render. Empirically pursued it will not be a study of philosophy but a study, by means of philosophy, of life-experience. But this experience is already overlaid and saturated with the products of the reflection of past generations and by-gone ages. It is filled with interpretations, classifications, due to sophisticated thought, which have become incorporated into what seems to be fresh, naïve empirical material.” Simple enculturation presents a world of experience in which the residual structures of the past are taken for granted, whether or not they continue to promote the goals of those who live in that world. When the construction of the world figures as a source of constraint and limitation, people need to take up the enterprise of reconstruction—in search of “enlargement and enrichment of meaning.”

At this point, we can begin to understand how the practices of the natural sciences serve as a model for philosophy. For scientists not only formulate new hypotheses and test them against the results of experiment and observation. They also refine and replace the categories they have inherited from the past. Although

this sometimes results in redrawing the boundaries of objects or of modifying the standards for the normal course of processes, it is most evident in the grouping of things, states, and events into kinds: living things come to be ranked together on the basis of common descent, respiration is recognized as akin to combustion, social arrangements are related to game-theoretic equilibriums. From an ambitious realist perspective, the resultant taxonomies might be viewed as reflecting a prior and independent structure in the world, as if the scientists concerned had come to speak “nature’s own language,” but that is neither Dewey’s perspective nor my own.¹³ Dewey envisages scientific inquiry as aimed at the contingent purposes of a particular species of animal (with a particular stock of psychological and biological capacities), attempting to introduce order into parts of the environment, so that the phenomena pertinent to the goals envisaged can be understood, predicted, and controlled and so that the classifications properly introduced are those that facilitate the attainment of this ordering. I’ll summarize this view by taking science to be directed toward producing *spheres of order*, well-organized parts of the world of experience that answer both to nature (how it will admit of organization) and to evolving human purposes.¹⁴

As my last formulation suggests, Dewey’s approach is partly realist, partly constructivist. The world of experience is a construct, but the work of construction is constrained by something outside ourselves—we are by no means free to postulate entities as we fancy. One way to present the point is to distinguish two senses of *world*. In the bare sense, the world is everything independent of the thinking subject; it is that to which subjects of experience respond. So conceived, the world is relatively unstructured. There is no privileged division of it into objects with well-demarked boundaries, no privileged groupings of objects into natural kinds, no privileged standards for the normal course of processes. All that is our work. We select certain parts of the world (in the bare sense) to count as objects, we group them into kinds to facilitate the building of spheres of order, and we set the standards for the normal course of processes (as, for example, when we come to view swinging stones as imperfect pendulums). So we produce the world of experience, a world containing living things and physical objects, parts of which we can enumerate and measure. To say that the world is finite (for example) can only be to make a claim about this constructed world, the world of experience.¹⁵

Notice that the discussion in the previous paragraph depends on making a particular categorical division, in separating a thinking subject from the independent material to which that subject responds. Language must deploy categories, and so, even when you try to gesture toward the independence of the world (bare sense), some minimal construction is presupposed. In principle,

the categories used in formulating the picture, in distinguishing the two senses of *world*, might themselves be scrutinized and replaced by a different construction. They are simply part of a fallible, indeed recognizably inadequate, means for presenting the background picture against which the Deweyan idea of construction proceeds.¹⁶

At this point, we can return to the critique of traditional philosophy offered in *EN* chapter 1. Science, as we have seen, responds to the need for creating or extending spheres of order by developing new categories, reconstructing the world of experience so that the needed organization is produced—and its novel hypotheses and “thought objects” are validated by revealing just how they are effective in yielding that organization. The social and human sciences would ideally emulate this pattern by developing methods for generating similar results. So, too, for philosophy. Dewey sees philosophy as focusing on pervasive categories and reacting to points at which the categorical organization inherited from previous generations no longer serves important human purposes. Traditionally, philosophers have been moved to respond to some problems that call out for reconstruction, and have built new systems inspired by the difficulties they have perceived, but they have not returned to life experience and embedded their proposed categories in analogues of the scientific spheres of order. In consequence, they have failed to deliver the enlarged and enriched meaning that is the whole point of reconstruction and have offered, instead, abstract systems that float free of life experience, offering brilliant scholars opportunities for speculative play—but nothing more.

If you read Dewey in this way, it becomes abundantly clear why he writes the kinds of books he does. The central philosophical work lies in reforming human thought—and consequently human practices, human material products, and human institutions—in regions of the inherited world of experience where the traditional categories are no longer adequate, so that new and liberating ways of going forward in those regions are achieved. *Art as Experience* seeks to reorganize thought and practice with respect to the arts, so that art will no longer be divorced from most of human life; *The Public and Its Problems* aims to reorganize political thinking and political practice so that citizens of complex democratic societies will lead lives that are richer and freer; *Democracy and Education* reorganizes thought about education so that future educational practice will allow for richer and more meaningful lives; and, as we shall see in the next section, *A Common Faith* reacts to the breakdown of literalist religions with a new set of categories for continuing the liberatory and enriching functions that religion has traditionally served. In all these instances, Dewey is doing highly specific work, reacting to problems he diagnoses in the lives of people in his own times. He is

proposing to reconstruct the world of experience in ways that we may test—first by imagining what it would be like to live under the new forms of organization he recommends, and then by engaging in social experiments to try them on for size.

EN and *QC* supply the general framework and the tools for the particular projects and activities that constitute, in Dewey's view, the primary work of the philosopher. By interpreting them as I have suggested, we can understand the connection among the various, apparently disconnected characterizations of philosophy scattered through his major later works. Thinking of philosophy as "the general theory of education" or as "seeking to clarify men's ideas as to the social and moral strifes of their own day" or as "criticism in its generality" or as "a liaison officer between the conclusions of science and the modes of social and personal action through which attainable possibilities are projected and striven for"—all of these are ways of focusing on different facets of the process of reconstruction I've seen as central to Dewey's thought and to his practice.¹⁷ To pursue the general theory of education is to ask for categories that are apt for unfolding human lives so that they will develop as richly as is possible; to clarify ideas about social and moral strifes is to seek ways of organizing thought that will resolve the conflicts that limit human lives; criticism in its full generality scrutinizes the most prevalent conceptions and methods that frame our lives; and the "liaison officer" attempts to build on our best available picture of the world to enlarge the opportunities for living.

I'll close my account of Deweyan reconstruction by looking briefly at a puzzle that emerged briefly in considering the interpretation of him as a scientific instrumentalist. As I noted, Dewey is often quite happy to suppose that scientific inquiry extends our reach, connecting us with parts of nature inaccessible to ordinary observation, and he sometimes writes in an unabashedly realist vein about particular scientific posits: "It is as much a part of the real being of atoms that they give rise in time, under increasing complications of relationships, to qualities of blue and sweet, pain and beauty, as that they have at a cross-section of time extension, mass, or weight" (Dewey 1981, 91). On the other hand, there are many passages suggesting that scientific theorizing should be viewed as providing tools for organizing and connecting events and states we detect with our unaided senses. Although I have pointed toward the "realist passages" as challenges for the instrumentalist reading, it would be perfectly legitimate to demand that my own account should make sense of the emphasis on viewing theorizing in terms of the provision of tools (Dewey 1984, 152–53, represents one among many such discussions).

Our knowledge of the things of experience is always incomplete; we identify particular aspects of them and can sometimes use those identifications to advance our ends. If I come to know enough about the various kinds of mushrooms that grow in the local woods, I can engage in profitable gathering without risk of injuring those for whom I cook. Relying on the inquiries of others, I create a sphere of order that helps me achieve some of my ends. Nevertheless, the mycological insights guiding my successful expeditions would fall far short of exhausting all that is known about these fungi, and even the sum total of human knowledge in this area is inevitably extraordinarily selective. Nobody would be tempted to equate the mushrooms with schematic entities that have all and only the properties I could ascribe to them.

With respect to the posits of scientific theory, however, that temptation can easily arise. The scientist hypothesizes an abstract atom or an abstract electron, conceived as having all and only the properties in a specified set, and, on this basis, is able to organize particular phenomena (e.g., chemical reactions or radioactive decay). Conceived as model, the posit is a useful tool. When the success of the positing becomes sufficiently pronounced, scientists often regard themselves as having discovered a new constituent of reality, and, in his realist moments, Dewey is happy to follow them in this.¹⁸ What disturbs him is the supposition that these constituents have *exactly the properties ascribed to them in the scientist's model and no more*. For that conjures up a world of allegedly "fundamental" constituents, one that displaces the qualities rightly ascribed to everyday things. *EN* and *QC* are intent on resisting the remaking of reality in the image of theoretical models, but that does not in any way preclude Dewey from supposing that macroscopic things are made up of microscopic constituents, constituents that *include* among their properties those ascribed in the abstract description. Those constituents also have the properties of giving rise, under the appropriate conditions, to the manifest qualities ("blue," "sweet," and so forth). Dewey (1984, 191) can, quite consistently, assert that the macroscopic table is "the only table"—denying the existence of something made up of the abstract posits of the model—while affirming that that sole real table is made up of tiny constituents, whose interactions generate its familiar properties and which have among their properties the qualities the model ascribes to them.

The error that gives rise to Arthur Eddington's supposed problem of the two tables is a *philosophical* mistake (although it is one of which scientists may be guilty). It is already diagnosed in Dewey's third failure of standard philosophizing, in which reflection, "aloof" from experience, generates a "realm of its own"—and becomes lost in it (Dewey 1981, 17).

IV

The “method naturalism” I have outlined can be seen at work in Dewey’s Terry Lectures, where he proposes to reform our usage of such concepts as *religion* and *God*. Dewey begins by describing the controversy about religion as it played itself out in the early 1930s in the United States. He characterizes the debate as involving two principal factions, one of which takes religion to be indissolubly linked to beliefs in something supernatural and another which sees the “advance of culture and science” as completely discrediting the supernatural (Dewey 1986, 3).¹⁹ At the beginning of the second lecture, he implicitly offers a verdict on this opposition, referring to a “crisis in religion” (Dewey 1986, 21). After arguing that science is to be conceived in terms of its method, he draws the conclusion explicitly: “Scientific method is not only adverse to dogma but to doctrine as well” (27).

So far, it appears that Dewey is drawing the same conclusions about religion as those trumpeted by many naturalistic thinkers from his time to ours. The distinctive move in his naturalism, however, consists in his “study, by means of philosophy, of life-experience” (Dewey 1981, 40). The starting point for that study is the type of experience to which friends of religion appeal in attempting to defend their beliefs about the supernatural. He tells us that “there is much talk, especially in liberal circles, of religious experience as vouching for the authenticity of certain beliefs” (Dewey 1986, 9). Because of his understanding of the varieties of religious doctrine and of the ways that people who accept (or who know about) particular doctrines characterize very similar parts of their life experience, using the categories of those familiar religions, Dewey is rightly skeptical about the “vouching.” He sees the hypotheses about particular supernatural causes, or, indeed, *any* supernatural cause, of the doctrines heralded as religious as being a gratuitous addition to the phenomena. These are, one and all, speculations about *different* supernatural features of the world, and none of them is in any way privileged over the others. To recognize that fact is not to abandon the notion of the “religious elements of experience” (9). But some reconceptualization is in order.

We err, Dewey thinks, in treating religious experience as if it were a category of experience akin to aesthetic or scientific or political experience (9). We should conceive the religious quality in experience as something that can attach to any of these types of experience. He recommends that we focus on this religious quality, wherever it is to be found, and that we do so not because experiences with this quality point us toward some important cause but because of the effects they have within human lives.²⁰ When the religious quality is present, the result is “an adjustment in life, an orientation, that brings with it a sense of security and peace”

(Dewey 1986, 10). Instead of worrying about, or squabbling about, which experiences are “genuine” in the sense of properly pointing to the supernatural as it really is, we ought to concentrate on the class of experiences that can yield this important effect. Dewey equates religious experience with the production of that effect: “The actual religious quality in the experience described is the *effect* produced, the better adjustment in life and its conditions, not the manner and cause of its production. . . . If the reorientation actually occurs, it, and the sense of security and stability accompanying it, are forces on their own account” (11).

He goes on to offer a more detailed phenomenology of the transformation accomplished. The subject of experiences with a religious quality undergoes a psychological restructuring, one that may prove permanent.²¹ The change consists in a “harmonization of the various elements of our being,” one that brings a voluntary acceptance of the external conditions of our life (Dewey 1986, 12–13).²² Through an analysis whose details are not easy to follow, Dewey then elaborates this harmonization of the self as an imaginative projection of an ideal, one that yields a unified self from the fragments of our being and that conceives the universe as an “imaginative totality” (Dewey 1986, 14).²³ The crucial feature of this (to my mind, shaky) connection is the introduction of the notion of an ideal, for this concept enables Dewey to see the product of the transformation as an orientation of conduct. Ideals have authority over what we do, and this makes room for faith—now conceived as the product of the transformation that has been wrought—as *moral* faith (Dewey 1986, 15). The joyful acceptance of self and universe, generated by the experience with religious quality, consists in a determination to make the world and the self as they *should be*. The subject becomes oriented toward what is valuable.

The analysis just presented prepares the ground for a crucial move in Dewey’s second lecture. There he considers what sense, if any, can be retained for the most prominent term in American religion: What could we mean by *God*? Dewey (29) states, “On one score, the word can mean only a particular Being. On the other score, it denotes the unity of all ideal ends arousing us to desire and actions. Does the unification have a claim upon our attitude and conduct because it is already, apart from us, in realized existence, or because of its own inherent meaning and value?”

The structure of the argument developed in the previous pages, with the sustained undercutting of supernatural entities supposedly manifested in religious experience, as well as the epistemological opposition to timeless objects of knowledge, articulated throughout *EN* and *QC*, leave no doubt about what Dewey’s answer must be. A few pages on, he provides us with his preferred definition:

This idea of God, or of the divine, is also connected with all the natural forces and conditions—including man and human association—that promote the growth of the ideal and further its realization. We are in the presence neither of ideals completely embodied in existence nor yet of ideals that are mere rootless ideals, fantasies, utopias. For there are forces in nature and society that generate and support the ideals. They are further unified by the activity that gives them coherence and solidity. It is this *active* relation between ideal and actual to which I would give the name “God.”

(34)

Plainly, by replacing talk of “religion” with references to the transformation wrought by the religious quality in experience, by seeing this as potentially available in a wide range of contexts and effected without any belief in some supernatural aspect of reality, by identifying the transformative effect with a projected unification of the self and a corresponding unification of the world, by interpreting the projected unification in terms of an orientation toward conditions recognized as valuable but as not yet realized, Dewey has prepared the way for substitutes both for the concept of faith and for the idea of God, apparently scheduled for elimination once the thought of anything supernatural has been abandoned. Faith is now viewed in terms of commitment to realizing what is valuable—possibly including the hope that such realization is possible. The active work that flows from that commitment becomes the replacement for the traditional conception of the deity.²⁴

The principal goal of the third (and final) lecture is to reconceive the religious community as a locus and a vehicle for the active pursuit of ideals. The ideals Dewey has clearly in mind are centered on human well-being.²⁵ Although he recognizes the human good that traditional religions have often done, he supposes that liberation from the false devotion to the supernatural will make the projects undertaken by communities moved by “the religious element in experience” even more wide ranging and powerful. His objection to the emphasis on conventional doctrines is not merely the expression of ontological parsimony or of epistemological rigor; he thinks the supernatural blocks important endeavors: “The objection to supernaturalism is that it stands in the way of an effective realization of the sweep and depth of the implications of natural human relations. It stands in the way of using the means that are in our power to make radical changes in these relations” (Dewey 1986, 53).

From this perspective, there is no need to eliminate some of the social institutions that have been central to religious life. Dewey speaks of “churches,” but his

remarks apply equally to mosques, synagogues, temples, or any other place at which people come together, bound by faith and directed toward joint attempts to realize shared goals. Once you have made the transformations he commends, once supernaturalist doctrine gives way to the new conceptualizations he has proposed, the activities of religious communities are liberated. “The fund of human values that are prized and that need to be cherished, values that are satisfied and rectified by *all* human concerns and arrangements, could be celebrated and reinforced, in different ways and with differing symbols, by the churches. In that way, the churches would indeed become catholic” (54–55, emphasis in original). That is to say, the churches would become focused on the most prevalent human problems—such as war and economic injustice.

CF closes with one of Dewey’s most eloquent passages (unlike James, he is hardly notable for the stylistic elegance of his prose), a passage in which Dewey connects his entire line of argument to the thoughts about enrichment of life expressed in *EN*’s account of well-conducted philosophy: “The things in civilization we most prize are not of ourselves. They exist by grace of the doings and sufferings of the continuous human community in which we are a link. Ours is the responsibility of conserving, transmitting, rectifying, and expanding the heritage of values we have received, that those who come after us may receive it more solid and secure, more widely accessible and more generously shared than we have received it” (57–58). The philosophical analysis of life experience thus leads to a conceptual transformation that, if it were implemented in the reform of individual attitudes and social institutions, would provide “enrichment and enlargement of meaning,” in the concrete sense that human lives would contain a greater variety of valuable aspects and that more of them could be expected to share in this increase of values.

All I have attempted to do here is to provide an analysis of what I take to be the central line of thought in *A Common Faith*. It would be possible—and worthwhile—to look more closely at some of the concepts Dewey employs and some of the transitions in which they figure (such as, for example, the notion of unification and its elaboration in terms of ideals). Even more, it would be worth considering ways in which Dewey’s proposals might be implemented in small-scale “experiments of living” (to use Mill’s famous phrase), contemporary analogues of Robert Owen’s New Lanark community, in which the framework Dewey constructs would be tried on and assessed.²⁶

These are projects I hope to pursue elsewhere. My aim in this chapter, however, is to illustrate a Deweyan version of naturalism by seeing its conception of philosophy as exemplified in *CF*. Dewey starts, as *EN* recommends, from life

experience, specifically from those experiences that religious people often take to validate their doctrines. He then embarks on a chain of reasoning intended to free our existing modes of categorizing this area of experience from dubious presuppositions. New ways of figuring the notion of “religious experience” are proposed, and the novel concepts are articulated and connected to other concepts—unification, ideals, faith, God—that form a new framework for thinking about what we are and what we do. Finally, Dewey points the way to implementing that framework, in our individual attitudes and in our social organization. The concepts and theses of *CF* can be led back to experience (as Dewey 1981, 17, demands that they should be). They are not simply a new field for detached philosophical speculation—a recreational facility in which philosophers can play—but a blueprint for change. Dewey thinks that, if we make that change, values will become “more solid and secure, more widely accessible and more generously shared” (Dewey 1986, 58). His naturalism accords with the fundamental idea of pragmatism—it is intended to make a difference.

If a particular society, or the entire human population, were to follow Dewey’s proposal, the world—the world of experience—would change. That is not because a character who once existed, the supernatural deity, would have vanished from the scene. Our powers of world making do not extend that far. In the traditional sense of the term, God never existed. Dewey began from the powerful arguments that exposed the falsehood of all the substantive doctrines of all the world’s religions. Rather, the reconstruction of the world consists in the reconceptualizations Dewey provides, in the new accounts of the religious aspects of experience, of faith, and of God. As those new concepts are embedded in our thinking, and as they guide us in remaking the physical environment and the social world, becoming instantiated in new places and artifacts, new social groups, new customs, and new forms of social interaction, the world of daily experience becomes very different. According to Dewey, this brave new world would be a better place, one deserving celebration for the rich lives of the people in it. Perhaps it would be worth experimenting to find out if he was right.

Surely the most prominent versions of naturalism on the contemporary philosophical scene are forms of the content naturalism with which I began. Initially, attempts to articulate method naturalism appear to lead back to content naturalism after a dispensable detour. I hope to have shown that some of Dewey’s writings suggest a different naturalistic approach, an alternative species of method naturalism, one concordant with his frequent emphasis on reconnecting philosophy with life. I also hope to have shown that this rival species of naturalism might be worth taking seriously.

NOTES

1. I'm delighted to dedicate this essay to Wayne Proudfoot, in gratitude both for his friendship and for all that I have learned from him. Matthew Bagger and Nancy Frankenberry offered me insightful comments on an earlier draft, and I am very grateful to both of them.
2. I refer to *Experience and Nature* as *EN*, *The Quest for Certainty* as *QC*, and *A Common Faith* as *CF*. Page references are to the splendid editions published by Southern Illinois University Press (Dewey 1981, 1984, 1986).
3. Distinguished scientists sometimes formulate this judgment extremely clearly; Stephen Hawking and E. O. Wilson are obvious examples. A philosopher who presents and defends the thesis is Alexander Rosenberg (2011).
4. See, for example, Churchland (1986).
5. Many critics of philosophy respond to historical episodes in which philosophers have paved the way for later scientific advances by arguing that the insightful innovators were practicing science all along. A counterpoise is the tendency of some philosophers to offer a retrospective account in which the displacement of philosophical theories by developments within science is reconceived as a change internal to the sciences. Intellectual historians and historians of science rightly take both lines of response to be misguided and consider the projection of sharp categories from the present into the past to be methodologically naive.
6. The most eloquent presentation of the limits of those sciences to which the most ambitious naturalists point is found in the writings of Thomas Nagel. See, for example, *Mind and Cosmos* (Nagel 2012).
7. Charles Darwin (1871, 2) is less gentle than usual when he maintains that "it is those who know little, and not those who know much, who so confidently assert that this or that problem will never be solved by science."
8. I have expanded on this point in a discussion of Nagel's arguments in *Mind and Cosmos*, in "Things Fall Apart," in the *New York Times* (Kitcher 2013).
9. In his important book *Naturalism Without Mirrors*, Huw Price (2011) also distinguishes two types of naturalism: *object naturalism* and *subject naturalism*. My content naturalism embraces both Pricean forms of naturalism, since it looks to science as the source of information about both subjects and the cosmos with which they interact. Yet Price's subject naturalism might be seen as the key to articulating the method I ascribe to the Deweyan naturalist, so that, in an obvious sense, the naturalistic approaches we prefer would be akin. To sort out this kinship would require exploring our divergences with respect to representational states—and that would lead very far from the central issues of this chapter.
10. The list is given in *Experience and Nature* (Dewey 1981), 17. The accusation that (traditional) philosophy is cut off from life is articulated in *The Quest for Certainty* (Dewey 1984), 204.
11. As might be expected from someone who cut his philosophical teeth on G. W. F. Hegel, John Dewey is no great fan of the "given." In an uncharacteristically testy footnote, he distinguishes his own view from the subjectivism to which his critics have assimilated it (Dewey 1981, 24, note 3).

12. The analogy is potentially misleading in its ability to favor the idea of sense data as epistemologically fundamental.
13. I articulated a strong version of realism in *The Advancement of Science* (Kitcher 1993), but abandoned it in *Science, Truth, and Democracy* (Kitcher 2001) and (more thoroughly) in *Preludes to Pragmatism* (Kitcher 2012)—chapters 3, 4, and especially 5, of *Preludes* further articulate the approach I outline here. The phrase “nature’s own language” is due to Richard Rorty (1982).
14. Dewey sees spheres of order as the objects of scientific knowledge, elaborating this conception in Dewey (1981, chap. 4) and in Dewey (1984, chap. 4, especially beginning at 69). As I understand him, he anticipates the concept of a “nomological machine,” developed by Nancy Cartwright (1999).
15. The position outlined in this paragraph seems to me to be central to the pragmatist tradition, from the work of William James on. Its roots lie in *Principles of Psychology*, and it receives its Deweyan development in both *EN* and *QC*. It surfaces in the writings of later philosophers sympathetic to the pragmatist tradition, in Rorty’s (1982) *Consequences of Pragmatism*, in Hilary Putnam’s (1983) “Why There Isn’t a Ready-Made World,” and perhaps most obviously in Nelson Goodman’s (1978) *Ways of Worldmaking*.
16. At this point, it is worth addressing a charge leveled against my account of Dewey’s position in an illuminating recent article, “Dewey and the Question of Realism,” by Peter Godfrey-Smith (2013). Godfrey-Smith points out that Dewey’s preferred term is *reconstruction* rather than *construction* and concludes that Dewey must presuppose a prior structuring of the independent world (in the bare sense). But I think Godfrey-Smith misreads here. Dewey talks of reconstruction precisely because what is of most interest to him are the ways in which later generations respond to the constructive efforts of their predecessors. The picture is not of a reality-with-prior-structure that people reconstruct but of a reality-with-relatively-little-prior-structure that human beings have always been in the position of structuring and which we constantly reconstruct so as to answer our evolving needs. Godfrey-Smith is using *reconstruction* with the wrong contrast in mind.
17. The passages cited are from *Democracy and Education* (Dewey 1980), 338; *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (Dewey 1982), 94; *Experience and Nature* (Dewey 1981), 298; and *The Quest for Certainty* (Dewey 1984), 248.
18. Some of the most distinguished contemporary pragmatists would doubt whether Dewey has *any* “realist moments.” Following Rorty, and emphasizing both Dewey’s explicit concerns about “representationalism” (in a much-quoted letter of 1905), his 1909 “A Short Catechism Concerning Truth” (Dewey 1978), and the frequent characterizations of theories as instruments in his later works (in particular *EN*), both Huw Price (2011) and Robert Brandom (2011) hail Dewey as a foe of a correspondence account of truth. I suppose that, like James before him, Dewey is attempting to *understand* the correspondence of signs and things, not to *reject* the whole idea. See Kitcher (2012), chapter 5; and, for Dewey’s echoing of James, Dewey (1978), 5–6. Price (2011) helpfully analyzes his own position with respect to Rorty and Brandom, seeing Rorty as occupying one end of a line, Brandom another end, and positioning himself between them. This conception views Brandom as more

- sympathetic to the idea of representation than Price, and Price as more sympathetic than Rorty. We might extend the line by adding Godfrey-Smith and me: the trend to realist-representationalist involvement would then go Rorty, Price, Brandom, Kitcher, Godfrey-Smith. In future work, I hope to defend both the particular position I favor and the thesis that this position is Dewey's own considered place.
19. The situation Dewey describes is not so different from that obtaining today. In my own Terry Lectures, I follow him in regretting the simple opposition that dominates contemporary discussion (see Kitcher 2014). As I read him, Dewey and I also agree on categorically denying the existence of supernatural beings, and, as Nancy Frankenberry pointed out to me, we thus diverge sharply from the kinds of descriptions religious people would use in characterizing religion. Our dismissal may seem too blunt (or perhaps *my* dismissal and *my* reading of Dewey are too blunt?). An alternative approach would be to acknowledge that religion is focused on doctrines putatively referring to supernatural beings and to propose a different semantic treatment of those doctrines.
 20. This plainly recapitulates the emphasis on the "fruits for life" that pervades James's *Varieties of Religious Experience*.
 21. Dewey describes this psychological restructuring as "enduring" and as persisting through a variety of internal and external changes. This is, I think, a mistake. The change may be dissipated under the action of other causal conditions. The important thing is that, while it lasts, it is a large-scale restructuring of the self.
 22. Dewey's characterization of the contrast between the voluntary acceptance he has in mind and the "mere Stoical resolution" seems to recapitulate James's contrast between joyful "acceptance of the universe" and stoicism in lecture 2 of *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.
 23. As Matthew Bagger pointed out to me, the line of argument is easier to understand if Dewey is read against the background of James's *Varieties*. If we think of Dewey as endorsing the Jamesian thesis that religion unifies the self with the imaginative totality of the universe, we can view the transition in these pages as accomplished by replacing the thesis that the unification depends on psychological attitudes toward some supernatural being with the claim that it is accomplished by projecting ideals—a claim not so far from James's own frequent proposals that the religious believer identifies with the ultimate values. A detailed reconstruction of Dewey along these lines is something I hope to pursue elsewhere.
 24. I should note that, immediately after the passage I have quoted, Dewey explicitly points out that he doesn't insist on retaining the old terminology. As I read *CF*, he is evidently sensitive to the charge that continuing to deploy parts of traditional religious language can easily foster confusion and allow for slippage back into the supernaturalist positions he intends to leave behind. See, for example, Dewey (1986), 34–35, and the earlier worry that his approach will seem "a timid halfway position" (4).
 25. This is thoroughly in line with the account of ethics as growing "out of the very conditions of human life" (Dewey [and James Tufts] 1985, 308). In *The Ethical Project* (Kitcher 2011), I attempt to provide a detailed elaboration of the type of humanism I suppose Dewey to have had in mind.

26. We might see the development of Jewish Community Centers as a partial experiment along Deweyan lines. Mordecai Kaplan, who played a prominent role in the Jewish Community Center movement, was much influenced by Dewey.

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