Dewey and the tragedy of the human condition

Abstract: Critics of Dewey have argued that he fails to recognise the tragic dimension that is central to human existence. I defend Dewey against these critics by elucidating Dewey’s conception of the tragedy of the human condition, which, I argue, is for Dewey a feature of our fundamental agential relation to the world that conditions human agency by necessitating, enabling, and constraining agency. I argue that this conception of tragedy gives rise to a secondary sense of tragedy located in our responses to the world that we can call hubris: a desire to transcend those limitations. That sense of tragedy underpins Dewey’s subsumption of theoretical to practical agency, his connection between agency and value, and his critique of certain forms of scientism.

Introduction

Critics have charged Dewey with a failure to recognise the tragic dimension of human existence. Randolph Bourne argued that Dewey’s pragmatism “has never been confronted with the pathless and the inexorable.”¹ For Bourne, Dewey’s support of America’s entry into WWI “subordinates idea to technique” in service of undemocratic ends.² Raymond Boisvert accuses Dewey of a hubristic “Baconian scientism” in thinking that technical intelligence could solve all social problems.³ Cornel West claims that Dewey “has not come to terms with the sense of the tragic” in failing to “confront candidly individual and collective experiences of evil”.⁴ As we can see from this selection of criticisms, the charge, and the conception of tragedy that underpins it, take many forms.

In this paper I take steps to clarify this debate. I argue that Dewey develops a sense of the tragic, beginning from the middle 1920s, consisting in what I will call the tragedy of the human condition. This is a property of the relation between human agents and the world that acts as a condition on human agency, in three senses: it 1) necessitates action; 2) acts as a general constraint on action; and 3) defines and enables the kind of agency we have. This primary sense of tragedy also gives rise to a secondary sense

² Ibid, 130.
consisting in hubris. 4) we desire to transcend the conditions of our agency and gain a kind of certainty in action that is impossible for us.

My explication will focus on two small parts of Dewey’s corpus in his late works: the opening chapter of *The Quest for Certainty* and Chapter II of *Experience and Nature*. These texts are sufficient, however, to elucidate Dewey’s conception of tragedy, given the framing role that such opening chapters play in his major works from the 1900s.5

**Tragedy as a transactional relation**

Dewey takes the tragedy of the human condition to begin from the fact that we are limited creatures in a world that is not immediately hospitable to us. The tragedy of the human condition is a property of the *relation* between humans and the world taken holistically. In that sense it is “transactional”; it inheres in the whole “situation”, comprising together agent and world.6 This transactional quality of the whole situation can, derivatively and for analytic purposes, be taken to imply properties of the world and of agents taken separately. A useful starting place from which to elucidate Dewey’s sense of the tragic is the opening sentence from *The Quest for Certainty*: “Man who lives in a world of hazards is compelled to seek for security.”7

The world is hazardous to us in a few senses. First, it contains dangers to which we must respond. The hazardous nature of the world thus *necessitates* action; if the world were not hazardous, then we would not need (would not be “compelled”) to act. Given we must act, second, the world is hazardous in two other senses: first, it gets in the way of our action – “the world pushes back” – and, second, given our human cognitive limitations, we do not and cannot know all the consequences of our actions, which outrun our intentions. For Dewey, “[t]he distinctive

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5 So, for example, the first version of *Ethics* (1908), begins with an anthropological genealogy on the “origin and growth of moral life” in human groups. The 1909 version of *How We Think* begins with a chapter on the nature of thought. *Democracy and Education* (1916) begins with a chapter on Life, which is a necessary condition for education. In *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (1920), the opening chapter is on emotion, memory, and past experience – the ways in which an organism can reconstruct its environment. In *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922), the opening chapter is on habit – the fundamental structure that Dewey will use to explain human agency. And so on. What is now Ch 1 of *Experience and Nature* (hereafter EN) was added as an introductory chapter after the first publication of the Carus lectures as *Experience and Nature* in 1925. It is justified, therefore, to treat Ch II as the first chapter and thus as playing the same role as the first chapters in the other works.

6 Cf “Conduct and Experience” (LW5:220): “The structure of whatever is had by way of immediate qualitative presences is found in the recurrent modes of interaction taking place between what we term organism, on one side, and environment, on the other. This interaction is the primary fact, and it constitutes a trans-action. Only by analysis and selective abstraction can we differentiate the actual occurrence into two factors, one called organism and the other, environment.”

7 *The Quest for Certainty* (LW4:3); hereafter *QC*. 
characteristic of practical activity, one which is so inherent that it cannot be eliminated, is the uncertainty which attends it.” The second hazard – epistemic uncertainty – rests on the first, metaphysical hazard: the instability and precarity of the world.

It's worth analysing the relation between the hazardous nature of our relation to the world and the kind of uncertainty that holds of action. We could treat this fundamental relation to the world in either of two un-Deweyan ways. First, we could, following a (mis)interpretation of Wittgenstein, think of that fundamental relation as simply necessitating thought: the “bumps that the understanding has got by running its head up against the limits of language.” The kind of agency that is necessitated by tragedy here is intellectual action; a realisation of where we tempt ourselves into thinking and talking nonsense which has practical effects only downstream. Or, second, we could think of the fundamental relation as calling for practical action only in the form of problems that we must solve, rather than hazards we must confront. The difference between problems and hazards is that problems are departures from a fundamental at homeness in the world, and the necessity for action arises only when we are temporarily pulled away from home.

There are elements of both of these lines of thought in Dewey: we do face problems that pull us up short; and thought is both a necessary part of this practical responsiveness to the world that itself leads to further problems when it (in some cases rightly) becomes reified and separated from action. But they are derivative phenomena of the underlying tragedy of the human condition. To take them as fundamental would be to underplay the hazardousness of the fundamental relation of agents to the world. Against the first reading, the world is not merely “that which cannot be fully grasped in thought”, but that with which we practicallly engage – it is dangerous to us; there are “sacred and accursed” powers that we do not control; it is “risky”, “perilous”, “awful”, and “fearful”. So, against the first reading, then, the world is immediately value-laden, not merely concept-laden. Against the second, value includes that which we ought and must avoid as well as that which we must seek. It would be “optimistic in a complacent way”, Dewey says, to think that values are solely good and not also evil: “Nature is characterized by a constant mixture of the precarious and the

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8 QC, 5-6.
10 EN, 41-2. As Dewey puts it at the start of *The Quest for Certainty*, “it is not uncertainty per se which men dislike, but the fact that uncertainty involves us in peril of evils. Uncertainty that affected only the detail of consequences to be experienced provided they had a warrant of being enjoyable would have no sting. It would bring the zest of adventure and the spice of variety.” QC, 7.
stable.”

We are not fundamentally at home in the world; home is something that must be forged through human effort.

These considerations help explain why the epistemic uncertainty that Dewey mentions is a function of the deeper precariousness of the world. It is not merely that our human cognitive limitations mean we cannot fully understand what we should do, but if only we could know more we could return to our fundamental at-homeness. Rather, a constitutive part of what is fundamental is being not-at-home. Our agency is called upon so that we can make the world more homely. But our action is not always successful, appropriate to our ends or fully within our control. We may not take the right means to our ends, our ends may turn out not to be the right ends, and we may cause consequences that we did not intend: “The best laid plans of men as well as mice gang aglee… Men always build better or worse than they know, for their acts are taken up into the broad sweep of events.”

In that sense the tragic condition functions as a general constraint on our agency, but one that is necessary for and enables the kind of limited agency we have: “[t]he situation is not indifferent to man, because it forms man as a desiring, striving, thinking, feeling creature.” It is only because of the contingency and tragedy of the world that we are agents who can reflect on our actions and thereby come to act better: “[t]he ultimate evidence of genuine hazard, contingency, irregularity and indeterminateness in nature is thus found in the occurrence of thinking.” Epistemic uncertainty is thus derivative of the fundamental hazardousness of the relation between humans and the world.

It may be the case that what we might call an intuitive agency is possible for which this constraint does not hold, for example the God of Genesis. But that is not our agency, which “is done with the body, by means of mechanical appliances and is directed upon material things”. Our agency works through and in the material world and is thus enabled by the way the world pushes back on us. Dewey rejects the Platonist thought that “mind’ is complete and self-sufficient in itself… it needs no external manifestation.” But he also does not accept its normal converse, what might be called the bald naturalist view: that mind is just another thing in the world like other things, to be understood

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11 “Popular teleology like Greek metaphysics, has accordingly been apologetic, justificatory of the beneficence of nature; it has been optimistic in a complacent way.” (EN, 103)
12 Human Nature and Conduct (MW14:143).
13 EN, 76.
14 EN, 69.
15 QC, 5.
16 QC, 7. I use the term “Platonist” here dialectically, to pick out a certain (caricatured) position that Dewey is criticising. I do not mean thereby to make any claims about the views of the historical Plato or historical Platonists.
through the methods of passive observation characteristic of the conception of the natural sciences inherited from Galileo and Newton.\(^\text{17}\) For Dewey, the Platonist transcendent view and bald naturalism are two sides of the same coin. Both take the natural world to be devoid of value and then seek to “place” value somewhere in that world.\(^\text{18}\) The Platonist, realising truly the constraints of the natural world on us and wishing to preserve value against those constraints, places value outside nature, in a transcendent world. The bald naturalist, confident in the powers of observational theoretical agency to capture the world as it really is, asserts either that values are myths or projections, or that they are really just transmogrified probabilities or statistical functions.

The Platonist and the bald naturalist share more than this common assumption; the force of the latter depends on the former. Dewey argues that the plausibility of bald naturalism rests on the “injection of an irrelevant philosophy” – the idea, inherited from the Platonist view, that what is most real is unchangeable and fixed – “into interpretation of the conclusions of a science”. It is only given the assumption that the world must be something eternal and unchanging that we take the deliverances of the natural sciences to give us that which is eternal and unchanging. Without supposing that the natural sciences reveal the world to us “as it really is”, we no longer feel the need to “eliminate qualities and values from nature”. “Drop the conception that knowledge is knowledge only when it is a disclosure and definition of the properties of fixed and antecedent reality”, Dewey writes, “and the supposed need and problem vanish.”\(^\text{19}\)

Both the Platonist and the bald naturalist cannot fully register the tragedy of the human condition insofar as they conceive of agency first solely in terms of knowledge and consequently in terms of a passive observer conception of knowledge. The Forms are to be contemplated; the Book of Nature read. Both exist outside the practical sphere in which agents attempt to better their situation. Dewey’s transactionalism begins instead from the idea that the fundamental situation comprises agents in practical relations with their environment: “knowing is not the act of an outside spectator

\(^{17}\) I call this naturalism bald insofar to contrast it with what David Macarthur and Mario de Caro call liberal naturalism, according to which “nature” is to be contrasted not with value but with the supernatural, and thus includes also the manifest image of the world, itself including values, agents, artworks, artifacts, and so on. Dewey would be this kind of naturalist. See, eg, David Macarthur, “Liberal Naturalism and the Scientific Image of the World”, Inquiry (2019) 62(5):565-585 and Peter Godfrey-Smith, “Dewey, Continuity, and McDowell”, in David Macarthur and Mario de Caro (eds), Naturalism and Normativity (Columbia University Press, 2010) 304-321.


\(^{19}\) QC, 83.
but of a participator inside the natural and social scene." Knowledge and thought are derivative of that fundamental practical relation, although essential for the kinds of intentional interactions with the world that agents like us have. The procedures of the natural sciences, for Dewey, need to be understood within this framework. Those procedures result in knowledge insofar as they “substitute data for objects”; they abstract away from the qualitative to establish controllable causal relations that facilitate our agency by linking together all objects into a single causal domain. In that sense the procedures of the natural sciences recognise that the world exists as “a challenge, rather than a completion”, that it “provides possible starting points and opportunities” for our agency. But the deliverances of those procedures ought not (and precisely for that reason!) therefore be accepted as determinative or revelatory of what the world is.

The Platonist and the bald naturalist are not wholly mistaken, however. With the Platonist, Dewey shares a sense that the world constrains one’s agency, even if the Platonist registers this constraint as “disappointment” and retreats to contemplation of the Forms. With the bald naturalist, Dewey shares a sense of the importance of understanding the world from an abstracted, objective point of view, even if they disagree about the nature of that importance: the bald naturalist thinks they are thereby getting to things as they are rather than facilitating better and more expansive agency. So, with the Platonist Dewey accepts the contingency of the existing world, and with the bald naturalist holds that there are parts of the world that are “settled and uniform” and thus more amenable to our agency, and that there is value in taking a particular abstracted, objective point of view in order to stabilise further our environment, to extend the “settled and uniform.”

Recognising the tragedy of the human condition as a transactional feature of the relation between agents and world requires that we reject the assumption that motivates both Platonism and bald naturalism: that the world is devoid of value. Dewey’s transactionalism is impossible to get in view if

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20 QC, 157.
21 QC, 79 (emphasis in original).
22 QC, 80-81.
23 The dialectic here may strike some as strange, in the following way. The bald naturalist, one might presume, would see the world denuded of opportunities, challenges, starting points and other such value-laden notions. So why am I attributing that position to “the procedures of natural science”? But recall that “the procedures of natural science” are here located within Dewey’s own transactionalism, which is not naturalist in the bald sense. Dewey’s dialectical move is to reposition the natural sciences outside the scientific ideology that characterizes bald naturalism. The procedures of natural science deliver us knowledge, but knowledge is merely “a mode of experiencing things which facilitates control of objects for purposes of non-cognitive experiences”: QC, 79.
24 EN, x: “the things of ordinary experience contain within themselves a mixture of the perilous and uncertain with the settled and uniform.”
one thinks of the agent as needing to be “placed” in a world without values. Conversely, neither Platonism nor bald naturalism, because of that commitment, can get the tragedy of the human condition fully in view. Platonism can in some form recognise the fact that we are not naturally at home in the world, that it constrains us, though it does not recognise that what agency we have is material and immanent. Bald naturalism is the more interesting foil for Dewey, since it takes seriously the possibilities for the procedures of natural science to deliver us knowledge, but take knowledge (as revelation of the eternal and unchanging) to be the end goal of inquiry. So, bald naturalism, through inheriting the Platonist view that what is most real and the object of knowledge is fixed and unchanging, and secularising that view so that the object of knowledge is not a transcendent world but this world, encourages the Faustian idea that if we could but know everything, then we could fully control all the workings of this world. This Faustian hubris is a secondary kind of tragedy, more firmly located in the agent, that compounds the more fundamental transactional tragedy of the human condition.

**Tragedy as hubris**

The Faustian hubris is located in the agent insofar as it is an attitude of an agent that takes as its object our own capacities: we “desire to get beyond and above” ourselves, and given the technological achievements that the procedures of natural science have given us, in a “juvenile assumption of power and achievement” we think that we have in fact gotten beyond and above ourselves.\(^{25}\) This desire and the concomitant thought that we have in some form achieved that desire arise, as I have argued, from a rejection of the underlying transactional tragedy of the human condition. We have deep motivations to attempt to transcend our limitations. Living with uncertainty in a world of hazards is difficult; we “dislike the dis-ease which accompanies the doubtful and [are] ready to take almost any means to end it.”\(^{26}\) Fearing those dangers, lacking in confidence and self-esteem, we may seek security at all costs. The point here is similar to Peirce’s: belief is the cessation of doubt, and there are many means to stop doubt, among them (in Dewey’s words) “acceptance of belief upon authority”, “intolerance and fanaticism” and “irresponsible

\(^{25}\) QC, 6; EN, 313. Dewey writes in *Unmodern and Modern Philosophy*, a late work, unpublished in his lifetime, that “excess, or passing beyond set bounds, was the one unforgivable sin of ἕρησις, I need not remind you.” *Unmodern and Modern Philosophy*, 23.

\(^{26}\) QC, 181.
dependence and sloth”. The desire to transcend is born of our original tragedy, as is the thought that we have satisfied that desire.

Whatever the motivations, hubris arises when we take ourselves not to be first and foremost practical agents in an uncertain world, but theoretical agents whose thought is prior to action such that we can first grasp in thought the world as a whole and then control its workings (from outside, as a puppeteer controls a puppet). As a concrete example of the kind of hubris he has in mind, Dewey gives the example of laissez-faire economics, which he argues rests on

“the theory of ‘natural laws’ in human affairs… These natural laws were supposed to be inherently fixed; a science of social phenomena and relations was equivalent to them. Once discovered, nothing remained for man but to conform to them; they were to rule his conduct as physical laws govern physical phenomena. They were the sole standard of conduct in economic affairs; the laws of economics are the ‘natural laws’ of all political action… Laissez-faire was the logical conclusion.”

Here we see the hubris of bald naturalism clearly displayed. We take true knowledge to be knowledge of the fixed underlying natural laws of a domain. Applying that model (inherited from early modern natural philosophy) to the social domain means that we treat human agents as objects in the world like other objects, governed by economic laws as “physical laws govern physical phenomena.” That knowledge grounds the perceived possibility of predicting and thus of controlling human phenomena – “exact knowledge and exact prediction”.

The hubris described here can be understood as thinking we know when we do not. But there are other forms that hubris takes. One fundamental form involves turning scientific knowledge into “a kind of sanctuary”, investing it with a “religious atmosphere, not to say an idolatrous one”. Hubris in this form involves prioritising knowledge as a specific kind of engagement with the world over other engagements, thinking that “scientific ways of thinking of objects give the inner reality of things, and that they put a mark of spuriousness upon all other ways of thinking of them, and of perceiving and

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27 QC, 181-2.
28 QC, 169; bold emphasis added. We should keep in mind that Dewey was writing this and similar works while at Columbia in the Lochner era, and much of his activism at the time was devoted to labour organising.
29 QC, 170.
30 QC, 176.
enjoying them.”

Doing so involves a “derogation of the things we experience by way of love, desire, hope, fear, purpose and the traits characteristic of human individuality”. Dewey’s mention of emotions and “human individuality” here is important: hubris in the sense of prioritising knowledge can mean we end up treating agents as just like other things in the world, things to be observed and controlled. Far from praising technological advance as an untrammeled good as some have suggested, Dewey is very sensitive to the specific human tragedies that it has brought in its train, tragedies that are a surface reflection of the hubris that comes from ignoring the tragedy of the human condition.

Conclusion

I’ve argued in this paper, against critics of Dewey, that he does have a deep sense of the tragic as fundamentally conditioning human life. That sense of tragedy, I have argued, is central to understanding Dewey’s subsumption of theoretical to practical agency, how agency relates to value, and his critique of scientistic hubris.

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31 QC, 109.
32 QC, 175.