

# Dewey and the tragedy of the human condition

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## Introduction

Critics have charged Dewey with a failure to recognize the tragic dimension of human existence. Randolph Bourne argued that Dewey's pragmatism "has never been confronted with the pathless and the inexorable" (Bourne, 117). For Bourne, Dewey's support of America's entry into WWI "subordinates idea to technique" in service of undemocratic ends (130). Raymond Boisvert (1999) accuses Dewey of a hubristic Baconian scientism in thinking that technical intelligence could solve all social problems. 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" (West, 228). As we can see from this selection of criticisms, the charge, and the conception of tragedy that underpins it, take many forms.<sup>2</sup>

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 a recognition of 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 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.

I begin first with some words of historical and chronological contextualization for this view that I attribute to Dewey, before moving onto the substance of Dewey's view. I will close by responding briefly to two of Dewey's critics that I quoted at the start of this paper: Raymond Boisvert and Randolph Bourne. I leave for another time and place the question of how Dewey's views on tragedy

are to be situated with respect to the broader tragic tradition, and to the related and important issues that Cornel West raises of the relation between Dewey's metaphysics and the political possibilities of his pragmatism.

### **Periodizing Dewey's sense of the tragic**

My explication will largely 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*.<sup>3</sup> In limiting my analysis to these later works, I do not mean to deny that some aspects of the conception of tragedy that I attribute to the later Dewey can be found in his earlier works.<sup>4</sup> Against some critics who have argued that (at least) the early Dewey is an unrepentant Whig, I think it is relatively clear that he – at least after his shift away from his explicit St Louis neo-Hegelianism in the early 1890s – was not such a character.<sup>5</sup> In an 1894 review of Lester Kidd's *The Psychic Factors of Civilization*, for example, Dewey criticizes Kidd for having “fallen into the old pit of a continual progress *towards* something” (EW4:212). And, in the middle of the First World War, Dewey begins an article entitled “Progress” with a criticism of the “fools' paradise... a dream of automatic uninterrupted progress” (MW10:234).

I do think, however, that there was an important shift in what is known as Dewey's “late period” thought towards a recognition of something deeper about the human condition that might be called tragedy.<sup>6</sup> Many intellectual historians have argued – in my view persuasively – that Dewey's thought underwent a significant shift after the horrors of the First World War, Dewey's time in China and Japan, and the concurrent events on the home front, including the Supreme Court's Lochner-era substantive due process decisions and, at least to some minimal degree, American imperialism in the Pacific.<sup>7</sup> As it did for a number of important thinkers, the war initiated a shift in Dewey's thought. In Dewey's case, I will argue that this took the form of an increased appreciation for the tragic dimension of human existence. Limiting my argument to his works from after WWI, then, I suggest that we can see a shift at least in Dewey's *explicit* framing of fundamental philosophical issues in this period.

One significant fact about Dewey's major mature works is that they all begin with one or two framing chapters that set out the context in which the problem he is addressing arises. For example, the first version of *Ethics*, published in 1908, begins with an anthropological genealogy on the

“origin and growth of moral life” in human groups. *How We Think*, published first in 1909, begins with a chapter on the nature of thought.

Starting from *Democracy and Education* (1916), however, we see a shift to a particular theme in these starting chapters: what Dewey would later call the “transactional.” The idea of the “transactional,” in short, is that the basic unit of inquiry is the whole situation, which comprises in relation both subject and object, agent and world, organism and environment, and does not separate them. As Dewey writes later in “Conduct and Experience”:

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. (LW5:220)

While this is not a *new* theme in Dewey’s works, present at least from “On the Reflex Arc” and in *Studies in Logic* and arguably a remnant of his earlier Hegelianism, it nonetheless takes on a fundamental structuring role in this period. The first chapter of *Democracy and Education* is on the concept of Life, which (Dewey says) is distinguished from inanimate objects on the basis that it draws on the material of its environment to sustain itself: “Continuity of life means continual readaptation of the environment to the needs of living organisms” (MW9:5). That we are living beings that grow in an environment and must therefore learn how best to act and survive in that environment is the necessary condition that gives rise to education.

In *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (1920), the opening chapter is on emotion, memory, and past experience – the ways in which an organism learns from its interactions with its environment and uses those past interactions to change the present ways in which it interacts with and changes that environment. Again, that we are beings that live in an environment and must cope with that environment through experience in better and worse ways sets the task for the reconstruction of philosophy that is to follow. And in *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922) the opening chapter is on habit, which “requir[e] the cooperation of organism and environment” (MW14:15). Habit will be the fundamental agential structure – our “human nature” – that explains our “conduct,” our ability to act on the world and to be influenced by the world.

Already in these three works we see a major theme that is to form an essential part of Dewey's conception of tragedy: that the fundamental human condition involves the fact that we are living creatures in a world that both *limits our action* and *provides us the means for action*. Whatever the nature of human agency, for Dewey, including how it is cultivated, the capacities in which it consists, and its ends or purposes, our theoretical understanding of our agency must take into account that fundamental relation we have to the world.

But Dewey's full sense of the tragic had not yet developed. Of his major works, it is *Experience and Nature* (1925) that first captures more fully Dewey's growing sense of the tragic. In *Experience and Nature*, Dewey begins to describe our existence – that transactional relation between agents and the world – as “precarious and perilous”, as “aleatory... a scene of risk... uncertain, unstable, uncannily unstable,” in which the “sacred and the accursed are potentialities of the same situation” (LW1:41). We will see later what exactly these descriptions amount to. The point for now is that such descriptions occupy the same framing opening location in the work as the organism's relation to the world and transactionalism did previously, and as an analysis of “thought” did in a work on thinking, or a genealogy of the growth of morals did in a work on ethics.

We find again similar opening chapters in both *The Quest for Certainty* (“Escape from Peril”) and *Art as Experience* (“The Live Creature”). In both opening chapters, Dewey describes life – the organism's fundamental relation to the world – as involving “perils”, “dangers”, “needs” and “lacks”, “resistance”, “things that are indifferent and even hostile to life”, and so on (LW10:20). Similarly, the *Logic* also begins with an extended discussion of the place of the inquiring organism in an environment, and treats inquiry as a form of agency that arises from and is made necessary by that environment.

It is worth noting, in closing, that this concern with tragedy extends until Dewey's very latest writings. A manuscript unpublished in Dewey's lifetime and now reconstructed by Philip Deen and published as *Unmodern Philosophy and Modern Philosophy*, which was begun in 1939 and rewritten until January 1942, contains a recapitulation again in the first chapter of the theme of tragedy more or less identical to that of *The Quest for Certainty* and *Experience and Nature*.

So, although my elucidation of Dewey's conception of tragedy will draw mainly on the opening chapters of *QC* and *EN* (with support from other of Dewey's late writings), I think it is justified to

claim that these chapters are representative of a more general theme of Dewey's mature thought after WWI – one that structured his thinking on a fundamental level.<sup>8</sup>

### **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. 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” (LW4:3).

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 characteristic of practical activity, one which is so inherent that it cannot be eliminated, is the uncertainty which attends it” (LW4:5-6). The second hazard – epistemic uncertainty – rests on the first, metaphysical hazard: the instability and precarity of the world.

It's worth analyzing 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” (Wittgenstein, §119). The kind of agency that is necessitated by tragedy here is *intellectual* action; a realization 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.

Of course, 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 *practically* engage – it is *dangerous* to us; there are “sacred and accursed” powers that we do not control; it is “risky”, “precarious”, “perilous”, “awful”, and “fearful” (LW1:41-2). So, against the first reading, then, the world is immediately *value*-laden, not merely *concept*-laden. Against the second, it can be said that the value-ladenness of the world means that the world includes 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 stable” (LW1:87; LW4:194). To put things in biological terms, Dewey does not think that our natural state is one of equilibrium with our environment; rather, our place in the world is one of more or less constant loss of equilibrium and therefore attempts, through the exercise of our agency, to bring about a new and different equilibrium.<sup>9</sup>

These considerations help explain why the *epistemic* uncertainty that Dewey mentions is a function of the deeper *precarity* 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 alee... Men always build better or worse than they know, for their acts are taken up into the broad sweep of events” (MW14:143). 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” (LW1:76). 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” (LW1:69). Epistemic uncertainty is thus derivative of the fundamental *hazardousness* of the relation between humans and the world.

### **Tragedy, the Platonist and the bald naturalist**

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” (LW4:4). Our agency works *through* and *in* the material world and is thus *enabled* by the way the world pushes back on us. Dewey rejects what we can call the *Platonist* thought (using the term “Platonist” dialectically and not to make claims about Plato or historical Platonists) that “‘mind’ is complete and self-sufficient in itself... it needs no external manifestation” (LW4:7). But he also does not accept its obvious converse, what might be called *bald naturalism*: that mind is just another thing in the world like other things, to be understood through the methods of passive observation characteristic of the conception of the natural sciences inherited from Galileo and Newton.<sup>10</sup> For Dewey, Platonism 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.<sup>11</sup> The Platonist, realizing 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” (LW4:83). 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” (LW4:83). “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” (LW4:83).

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 but of a participator inside the natural and social scene” (LW4:157). 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 (LW4:79, emphasis in original). In that sense the procedures of the natural sciences recognize that the world exists as “a challenge, rather than a completion”, that it “provides possible starting points and opportunities” for our agency (LW4:80-81). 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.<sup>12</sup>

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 stabilize further our environment, to extend the “settled and uniform”.



Recognizing 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 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 recognize the fact that we are not naturally at home in the world, that it constrains us, though it does not recognize 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 secularizing 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 (LW4:6; LW1:313).<sup>13</sup> 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" (LW4:181). 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 dependence and sloth" (LW4:181-2). 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”. (LW4:169, bold emphasis added)<sup>14</sup>

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” (LW4:170).

The hubris described here can be understood as *thinking we know when we do not* – after all, have we really discovered the natural laws of human action? This kind of hubris can come in lesser degrees than the imposition of a particular model or mode of knowing onto a subject matter unsuited for it. One may be wrongly certain about the grounds upon which we act, and thus act disproportionately. Or one may overestimate the reliability of certain beliefs, and thus be vulnerable to the manifold ways in which the world pushes back on our ways of categorizing and organizing it.

Hubris comes too in other forms. One fundamental form involves turning scientific knowledge into “a kind of sanctuary,” investing it with a “religious atmosphere, not to say an idolatrous one” (LW4:176). Hubris in this form involves *prioritizing 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 enjoying them” (LW4:109). 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” (LW4:175). Dewey’s mention of emotions and “human individuality” here is important. Hubris in the sense of prioritizing 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 untrammelled 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.

### **Responding to Boisvert and Bourne**

I will now respond briefly to Boisvert’s and Bourne’s criticisms that I raised at the outset. I will begin with Boisvert. Boisvert argues that Dewey does not recognize the limitations on human freedom that come from “necessity”, insofar as he – at least at times – falls into a “Baconian” scientism by taking “the scientific method” as it is derived from the natural sciences to be the solution to all social problems.<sup>15</sup> Boisvert thus directly accuses Dewey of the hubris that, on my reading, Dewey is at pains to diagnose.

For Boisvert, Dewey’s hubris consists in “the belief that a new method will be found that will move us forward in the social/moral sphere the way science moved forward after Galileo, so that some better recipes than those available to, say Elizabethans, for confronting tragic situations will manifest themselves” (576). Boisvert recognizes the turning point in thought that was the First World War, but, drawing on some comments that Dewey makes in *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, argues that the war did not have the effect on Dewey’s thought that I earlier suggested it did. For Boisvert, then, Dewey has a naïve optimism, a complacency in the powers of “the scientific method” to deliver constant progress that fails to recognize “a sphere of activity over which humans have no control” (153).

Boisvert here is reprising a criticism earlier made of Dewey by Dewey’s student Randolph Bourne. In “Twilight of Idols”, published in October 1917, Bourne tore into his former mentor, attacking “the inadequacy of his pragmatism as a philosophy of life in this emergency” (115). Dewey’s pragmatism, Bourne claimed, “has never been confronted with the pathless and the inexorable, and that, only dimly feeling the change... goes ahead acting as if it had not got out of its depth” (117). Pragmatism had been co-opted by the “war-technique;” its disciples had “subordinate[d] idea to technique” in service of undemocratic ends. Dewey himself, Bourne charged, was moved by a “high mood of confidence and self-righteousness... a keen sense of control over events” (117). These criticisms pick out precisely the aspects of hubris noted above: the prioritization of technical

knowledge over other forms of engagement with the world; the desire to control from above and beyond; of thinking one knows what is to be done to solve a problem when one is merely reiterating the terms of the problem.

The importance of Boisvert's reprise is his insistence that this tendency of Dewey's persisted after the war, after Dewey's realization of the correctness of Bourne's criticisms, and through Dewey's recognition of the "precariousness" and "contingency" of the world. On Boisvert's reading, although Dewey came to recognize the hazardous background against which humans act, he nonetheless maintained that intelligence as a technical discipline could overcome those limitations. In principle, Boisvert argues, Dewey does not think there is a "sphere of activity over which humans have no control" (153).

There's a lot one could say in response to Boisvert's interpretation of particular passages in Dewey. Instead of engaging in that enterprise, however, I will give a more general diagnosis of where Boisvert goes wrong. He goes wrong, I suggest, in locating tragedy *solely in the world*, in that "sphere of activity over which humans have no control" (153). He does not fully take into account the shift that also occurred in the war years, where Dewey more explicitly began to take the transactional relationship between agents and the world as primary. Boisvert's metaphysics begins with the world and then places us (as limited, fragile agents) in that world. Our impact on that world is puny; we are beset on all sides by the world in which we find ourselves. This starting point means that Boisvert cannot appreciate how the tragedy of the human condition also *necessitates* and *makes possible* agency; as Dewey puts it: "necessity is the mother of invention, discovery and consecutive reflection" (LW1:100). Intelligence is not only a *response* to tragedy, but is *enabled* by it. If one is committed to this view (as I have argued Dewey is) then one *cannot* think that intelligence can overcome tragedy; in doing so, it would overcome its own precondition.

## **Conclusion**

I've argued in this paper, against some 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 scientific hubris.

My argument leaves untouched, however, other criticisms that can be made of Dewey: that he does not have a full grasp of the possibility and the existence of human evil, that he does not grapple as deeply as he might with the inevitability of death. While I do not want to say that these concerns are unrelated to tragedy, they can and ought, for analytic purposes, be separated from it. Tragedy is distinct from evil, though it may lead to it or exacerbate it. And not all deaths are tragic, though many are, and tragic in different ways. There is also work left undone on the *political* consequences of this Deweyan view of tragedy, and particularly on what has been called Dewey's reformism and Dewey's meliorism. Getting clearer on exactly what Dewey means by tragedy, as I have tried to do here, will help us place tragedy more accurately with respect to these other important issues and concerns.

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<sup>2</sup> For responses to these criticisms and extensions of the debate, see Morse 2001; Saito 2002 and 2003; Boisvert 2001.

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<sup>3</sup> References to Dewey's works will be given to the Collected Works edition, published by Southern Illinois University Press at Carbondale.

<sup>4</sup> In particular, the transactional or biological element in Dewey is there as early arguably as "On the Reflex Arc" in 1897 and definitely from his early logical works in 1903, let alone before his Darwin essay in 1909. On the general claim about a sense of tragedy, I disagree with Boisvert and other critics who view the earlier Dewey (and elements of the later Dewey) as an unrepentant Whig.

<sup>5</sup> Though for an important Whiggish neo-Hegelian strand in his political thinking, see "The Ethics of Democracy" (EW1:227-249).

<sup>6</sup> Though see Jo Ann Boydston on periodization of the *Collected Works*: "Within the chronological framework, we divided the edition into early, middle, and late series; this division was based more on expediency than on intellectual considerations" (Boydston, 126).

<sup>7</sup> Dewey makes some mention of this himself. Early in *EN*, for example, he writes that "[s]uch an incident as the last war and preparations for a future war remind us that it is easy to overlook the extent to which, after all, our attainments are only devices for blurring the disagreeable recognition of a fact [the fundamental hazardous character of the world], instead of means of altering the fact itself" (45). See Westbrook; Good.

<sup>8</sup> What is now Ch 1 of *EN* was added as an introductory chapter after the first publication of the Carus lectures as *EN* 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 chronological argument I made in section 1.

<sup>9</sup> Compare *Art as Experience*, (LW10:19): "Life itself consists of phases in which the organism falls out of step with the march of surrounding things and then recovers unison with it—either through effort or by some happy chance. And, in a growing life, the recovery is never mere return to a prior state, for it is enriched by the state of disparity and resistance through which it has successfully passed."

<sup>10</sup> 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 Macarthur 2019, Godfrey-Smith 2010.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. contemporary literature on the various "placement problems"; see eg Blackburn 1993; Price 2010.

<sup>12</sup> 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" (LW4:79).

<sup>13</sup> Compare *Unmodern and Modern Philosophy*, 23: "excess, or passing beyond set bounds, was the one unforgivable sin of *hybris*, I need not remind you."

<sup>14</sup> 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 labor organising.

<sup>15</sup> Admittedly, Boisvert is careful to say that his interpretation of Dewey is an interpretation of *parts* of Dewey's corpus. It is also anachronistic to attribute to Bacon a "scientism", but I will let that pass.