

Deweyan Aesthetics for Connection, Continuity, and Liberation

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As Kevin Gary tells us, boredom seems to be a part of the human condition, and schools are particularly effective in ensuring that students will be bored. Further, as he notes, a critical analysis of educational practices and settings would argue that neither the sterility and tedium, nor its consequences, are unintentional. The educational system not only fails to prepare students to deal with boredom; it renders them desperate for diversion — perfect consumers for the entertainment market. Such a consumer is doomed to live “at the mercy of interests and external stimuli, blind to the fickle nature of interests that motivate learning, and thereby far from being a liberated self.” Drawing upon Simone Weil, among others, Gary concludes that we must come to appreciate the possibilities of education for teaching students to endure boredom well, a skill essential to the cultivation of a deeply contemplative and patient life filled with meaning.

While I would affirm the concerns Gary expresses so well, I find it interesting that he discards John Dewey’s solution, contemplative undergoing, on the grounds that it is excessively “busy, crowded with fancies and impressions,” too much a matter of “flitting around.” I believe that this characterization overlooks Dewey’s actual aesthetic perspective. As an illustrative example, while discussing the writings of British naturalist W.H. Hudson, Dewey refers to “[t]he mystic aspect of acute esthetic surrender, that renders it so akin as an experience to what religionists term ecstatic communion.” He proposes that, during such a moment, “there are stirred into activity resonances of dispositions acquired in primitive relationships of the living being to its surroundings, and *irrecoverable in distinct or intellectual consciousness*.” Absorption of these kinds of experience, he notes, rather than demanding intellectual processing, involves a “natural continuity.”¹

One might argue that the aesthetic experience available through deep connection with nature is far different from any “undergoing” possible in the midst of the mind-numbing routine of the average school day. As I hope to show here, however, Dewey’s entire point is that aesthetic experience is equally available in both of these circumstances. The heart of the issue is found in Gary’s opening line: “Boredom is an unavoidable part of the human condition.” From the Deweyan perspective, the phenomenon of boredom is certainly real, but not entirely unavoidable. Clearly, we cannot possibly hope to engage every student at every moment, so I believe my advocacy on some levels is quite similar to Gary’s; students must become prepared to manage their own experience during those “down” times. My sense of what that might look like is somewhat different, though, and is grounded in an aesthetic alternative. Failure to question boredom in the classroom, from this perspective, is a failure to creatively work to address the lack of continuity in our students’ environments, and to continue the alienation of human society from a vital aspect of existence.

Dewey thought the construction of routine work (“productive activity”) as an inherently unsatisfying means to some distant and ever-unrealized goal is just the opposite face of a vision of happiness that “signifies surrender of mind to the thrills and excitations of the body.” Both are products of the separation of activity from its larger meaning.² In large part, the tedium of ordinary daily tasks comes because, while they were once “useful arts,” they have been degraded to the status of “not arts but routines.” Meanwhile, objects and entertainments labeled as fine arts consist of “passive amusements and distractions, different from other indulgent dissipations only in dependence upon a certain acquired refinement or ‘cultivation.’” This separation, he argues, is entirely artificial, and has led to degradation for both: the means to the end, and its end, “fail to sustain and inform each other in a productive activity possessed of immanent and directly enjoyed meaning.” In other words, in the natural, unified state, the experience of the routine aspects of a task, and the novel and enjoyable aspects of the product that will result from it, interact, renewing and sustaining the process through ongoing change and new insights.³

Dewey further argues that the separation mirrors the class society: it is “a reflection of the insulated existence of working and leisure classes, of production that is not also consummatory, and consummation that is not productive.”⁴ In other words, the productive class has been sentenced to engage continually in the labor of production, alienated from the enjoyment of the results of their own labor. Products that are “consummatory” in that they provide pleasure and satisfaction — not only in their final form, but throughout the process of production — have become the exclusive property of the leisured classes. Dewey thus speaks to the commodification of the arts, and of aesthetic experience generally, when he observes that this separation of the producer and consumer “create[s] also a chasm between ordinary and esthetic experience” (*AE*, 8).

Dewey’s fundamental proposition is that as living beings we are always experiencing our environment through our interactions with it. The mass of experiences is “often inchoate ... there is distraction and dispersion; what we observe and what we think, what we desire and what we get, are at odds with each other” (*AE*, 38). This, to me, echoes the restlessness of the boredom that, as Gary notes, can drive individuals to seek distraction. As an alternative, he espouses T.S. Eliot’s notion of suffering, which, “involves solitude, letting go of our itch for stimulation and distraction, facing a seeming abyss that lurks beneath the trivial.” This, Gary suggests, is an approach that would make Dewey shudder.

To some degree, I would concur. Dewey certainly deplored experiences that simply drifted, bereft of larger connection and meaning, since “Needless to say, such experiences are anesthetic” (*AE*, 41). Interestingly, too, I think Dewey might agree with Weil’s perspective that boredom is, as Gary says, “spiritually significant,” and that “students [should] be made aware of the underlying metaphysical struggle for meaning and liberation that boredom occasions.” For Dewey, though, the answer is to go a step further — to understand boredom as a symptom of an existential wound, the rift between the two halves of a whole experience, and the resulting absence of any sense of continuity and consummation. What we see in Dewey’s aesthetic theory

is a model for human existence that involves continual movement between the pain and disruption of separation, and the consummation of renewed connection and harmony with the environment, while retaining some sense that the two are a part of an ongoing cycle (*AE*, 13–14).

Aesthetic experience is central to all of lived experience, for Dewey, and education has typically functioned to strip it away. Education “has been concerned with intellectual analysis and formularized information” — a technicist approach that has infused even the arts and humanities. The results are “disastrous because civilization built upon these principles cannot supply the demand of the soul for joy, or freshness of experience; only attention through art to the vivid but transient values of things can effect such refreshment.” As he makes clear, the joy and refreshment of aesthetic experience, even though it is not continuous, creates the conditions for the patient endurance of the more tedious aspects of the productive process: “Such refreshments, themselves transient, yet discipline the inmost being of man, a discipline ‘not distinct from enjoyment, but by reason of it,’ since they shape the soul to a permanent appreciation of values beyond its former self.”⁵

In other words, the patient and contemplative attitude Gary aspires to seems to me to be achieved through Dewey’s formulation, which adds to it a sense of renewal and refreshment gained along the way. It becomes a perseverance built not only of endurance, but of the broader experience of connection and continuity with one’s larger environment. Through this, per Dewey, we can gain the tenacity to see us through the inevitable challenges, and the inherent tedium, of life’s tasks. We do this, in Dewey’s construction of experience, not simply through endurance, but through the creation of a larger wholeness to our existence. We become the liberated, patient, and contemplative self through the cultivation of a deeply aesthetic experience of life.

1. John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: The Berkeley Publishing Group, 1934), 29 (emphasis added). This work will be cited in the text as *AE* for all subsequent references.

2. John Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (1925), in *John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925–1953*, vol. 1, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1981), 271.

3. *Ibid.*, 271–272. Note here that the useful arts that have become mere routines include essentially all means of producing the commodities of everyday existence: “shoes, houses, motor cars, money, and other things which *may* then be put to use” (emphasis in original).

4. *Ibid.*, 276.

5. John Dewey, “Art in Education — and Education in Art (1926),” in *John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925–1953*, vol. 2, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), 112.