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Why sociocultural anthropology needs John Dewey’s evolutionary model of experience

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Abstract
This article identifies shortcomings in contemporary sociocultural anthropological theory, and proposes that John Dewey’s evolutionary model of experience can begin to rectify them. Dewey’s work foreshadowed many aspects of current critical realism, an alternative to both positivism and relativism/culturism, as laid out by philosopher Roy Bhaskar and utilized by social scientists such as Margaret Archer and Berth Danermark. Recent attention to experience in anthropology has largely overlooked Dewey’s great contribution, the keystone of which is his grounding of experience in the nature of humanness as evolved in nature. I augment Dewey’s model by explicating 12 trans-cultural features of experience.

Key Words
critical realism • culture • culturism • John Dewey • evolution • experience • realism • relativism

I. INTRODUCTION: THE NECESSITY OF EXPERIENCE
No concept could be more central to sociocultural anthropology than ‘experience’. It appears in nearly every work, often as though it were as unproblematic as ‘water’. ‘Knowledge by experience . . . deplores the essential inadequacy of words’ (Bourdieu, 1984: 68). ‘These expressions . . . do not represent and express an inner experience’ (Csordas, 1990: 22). ‘The experience of community is inevitably structured by sets of meanings that people bring with them to the experience’ (Rosenblatt, 2004: 465). ‘This membership is based on individual experiences in meditation’ (Jordt, 2006: 193). ‘Experience, of course, can be spatially, temporally, and materially situated’ (Kuijt, 2008: 173). Yet, precisely because our investigations of the human situation rely heavily on an
understanding of experience, it deserves theorization. Though the several sociocultural anthropologists, and relevant others, who have worked on theorizing experience have contributed to our understanding, none has captured its real centrality for humanness (e.g. Csordas, 1994; Dennett, 1977; Feneley-Harnik, 1989; Hallowell, 1955; Herr, 1981; Hiss, 1990; Jackson, 1996; Levy, 1973; Mattingly, 1998; Neisser, 1997; Obeyesekere, 1981; Peacock and Tyson, 1989; Platt, 1996; Steedly, 1993; Stewart and Cohen, 1997; Throop, 2002, 2003; Turner and Bruner, 1986). Since anthropology’s essential task is the description and explanation of humanness, and humanness is inextricably linked to experience in and of the social and natural world, it would be well for us to examine experience itself.

In particular, social anthropology has overlooked John Dewey’s perspicacious contribution to the subject (Dewey, 1910, 1958 [1934], 1971 [1925]). This is probably because Dewey was a realist, whereas, since Boas, American cultural anthropology has tried to give its notion of culture, in explicit contrast to reality, primacy in shaping human affairs (e.g. Bashkow, 2004). But the idea that culture preempts reality is doubly flawed.1 It dodges the question of whether culture itself is real, and fails to theorize the world in a way that makes culture consistent with what else is known by science about it.2 The culturist approach is therefore irrealist. Cultural anthropology displays irrealism, explicitly or implicitly, when it fails to theorize how culturalized views are structured by real properties and powers of the world, which world, and which powers, exist independently of those views. An approach such as culturism that would account for human affairs while maintaining, however tacitly, that there is no real humanness to account for is self-contradictory. Though culturists have tried to make their core concept more nuanced, complex, and malleable than the ‘bounded whole’ misconception (e.g. Handler, 2004), these efforts fall far short of the robust conception of human experience necessary to a discipline dedicated to researching and describing it.3 That this issue is important is demonstrated by the fact that departments have fragmented over it for lack of unifying theory (Shenk, 2006).

Dewey, by contrast, described experience as both an emergent feature of nature and a window into it. It is a sad irony that because Dewey’s name is linked to progressive education, and modern progressivism has been denigrated by postmodernists, his work has lately been ignored. In fact Dewey deserves special notice for the major reason that he took evolutionary theory into account (see also Cunningham, 1996). And he did so in a way thoroughly compatible with both anthropology and present day critical realism. Crucially, Dewey recognized that no description of humanness could suffice if it ignored or conflicted with what humans are by virtue of having evolved through natural and sexual selection.

The present article foregrounds and valorizes experience both as a phenomenon in its own right and as a conceptual tool in sociocultural anthropology. First it describes the centrality of experience in human adaptation and affairs. Then it uses this description to analyze experience into its elements, grouping them into three ‘levels’. These consist of the pre-human, the human social, and the personally subjective. This heuristic describes the multiplex nature of experience, highlighting it as the structured unity, the phenomenological whole, it is to us as we live our lives in the social and natural world. Finally, on behalf of a realist anthropology subject to neither the ills of culturism nor those of positivism, which culturism has tried unsuccessfully to rebut, I précis Dewey’s
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magnum opus, *Experience and Nature*. Dewey accounts for the possibility of experience, and builds a philosophy of humanness around it. *Experience and Nature* is not an easy book. But its great merit for anthropology lies in describing the experiential center necessary to any credible attempt to describe humanness. This, in turn, is a prerequisite for viable treatment of local or trans-local human situations and events.

Though a comparison with existing anthropological models of experience is called for, I beg not to engage in it here for I am attempting what others have not: the theorization of the very nature of experience. A further caveat is that I cannot fully explore such related concepts and phenomena, intrinsic to humanness, as consciousness, the self, meaning, symbols, and mind. Finally, it is worth noting that even perception is not as phenomenologically fundamental to humanness as experience. Perception integrates sensations, but does not place them in a processual context; perception per se does not recognize unfolding. (Merely to observe that events unfold is not to posit a teleological end toward which unfolding is pre-directed.) Only at the level of experience as fully humanized by consciousness is the world’s unfolding realized (Dewey, 1929, 1971 [1925]: 253).

So, experience is central to humanness; both experience and humanness must be viewed in evolutionary terms; culturism therefore fails; and Dewey, through his description of the nature and workings of experience, holds the key to a restoration of sociocultural anthropology as the investigation of humanness grounded in reality, not discourse.

When a leading culturist asserts that anthropology should be about the ‘genealogy of secondary explanations’, that is, only about the history of discourse, not about human experience per se, we have gone too close to pure textuality, the ungrounded reference, and too far from actual human experience, what the reference is about (Bunzl, 2004: 441). Neither will it do simply to shrug and abandon the quest for unifying theory (e.g. Knauf, 2006). Are there real people really living real lives and really holding real views with real consequences in a real world or not? If there are, that reality needs to be theorized before any description or analysis can be cogent. Culturism, along with its congener, cultural studies, programmatically provides no such theory (Nelson, et al., 1992: 7). But the fact that culturists expect their views to be taken seriously in a world they either ignore, construe as unreal, or relegate to the particularistic status of a ‘Euro-American’ construct displays their theory–practice inconsistency. Herb Lewis and others have pointed this out (Lewis, 1998). In short, either the world we refer to anthropologically is one, consequential world – albeit a world characterized by ontological stratification, *per* critical realism – or anthropology is impossible. The amalgam of history and political science that much sociocultural anthropology has become, notwithstanding the real merits of these approaches, is inherently particularistic. This stands in opposition to the true holistic mandate of anthropology: What is humanness, and how do we know?

II. RETRODUCTION AND THE CENTRALITY OF EXPERIENCE IN HUMAN ADAPTATION

Anthropology, at its fullest, is the comprehensive investigation of the human career. Like philosophy, it inquires into the very nature of humanness. But anthropology is grounded in the close observation of real humans and/or their real effects. And so anthropology since the scientific revolution amounts to philosophy by other than the traditional
speculative means. The life sciences, including anthropology, were made to cohere most notably by Charles Darwin in his harmonization of empirical evidence and retroductive explanation. Vast arrays of data in the life sciences are organized and explained by processes of natural and sexual selection.

A crucial implication of selection and its human product is that the capacity to retroductively learn about the world has evolved in us (e.g. Bhaskar, 1993: 108–9; Hartwig, 2007: 413). We usually call it inference. We are able to infer what the world must have been like for phenomena to have emerged as they have. That is, by attending to the features of phenomena, humans can infer structural truths about the nature of the reality that spawned them. Darwin made sense of his observations of doves, turtles, finches, worms, mollusks and so on, by positing a structuring force, the process of selection, operating throughout deep time. As a matter of principle, then, the ontological implication is that for things to turn out in the world as they do, or have, certain fundamental things must be true of it. Retroduction reveals that the world must have certain underlying characteristics, unobservable in themselves but known from their effects, that humans can discover and describe. Indeed, as Andrew Whiten points out, the capacity for retroduction is the very core of our zoological distinctiveness (Whiten, 1999: 175).

This logic is neither circular nor tautological. Rather, the relation between conditions and consequences in the world, human and otherwise, is dialectical. Conditions, including such forces as gravity and natural selection, at time one (T₁) – conditions that can be retroductively inferred from their later effects – create possibilities for continuity and change in the present, at T₂. Input at T₂, perhaps including human agency, brings about newly configured conditions that will obtain in the future, at T₃ (Archer, 1995: 76, and passim). Though preconditions exist, and are influential, they are not strictly determinative. This is because emergence and agency, too, are real. The emergence of novel aspects of reality characterizes the world’s processuality. Nor are processes of change exclusively additive. Just as new conditions can emerge, so once extant phenomena may disappear. When a predator becomes absent from a local ecosystem, this absence itself constitutes a force, or condition, that avails former prey species of new opportunities. Absence, therefore, is also a condition that has effects (Bhaskar, 1993: 38 ff.; Hartwig, 2007: 9 ff.).

Though this model describing the general, temporalized, dialectical relation between conditions and consequences is simple, it has implications of the largest sort for reality, including humanness. It accounts for the possibilities of both (1) the emergence of new phenomena, and (2) their evolution into forms transmuted from previous ones (Darwin, 1993 [1859]). For this reason it is called morphogenesis (Archer, 1995: 76, 1996 [1988]: xxii, 2000: 11, 2003: 70, all passim). Most important for my purposes, the process of morphogenesis underwrites the evolution of human consciousness, and consciousness supervenes on experience (Brereton, 2006). One dimension of morphogenesis is thoroughly material; it includes and describes things normally considered physical and concrete, like worms and dirt. But morphogenesis also accommodates the T₂ involvement of human concepts and agency. And, as in the present sense, it is also thoroughly metaphysical because it describes the structures and processes of physicality itself.

Consciousness is a third-order power: it is the awareness (3) of being aware (2) of having experience (1). The structural dynamic can be conveyed in one convoluted
Knowing that one not only has experience but is aware of having it opens up the possibility – formerly unavailable to creatures without consciousness – of trying to condition conditions so as to produce desired sorts of experience in the future, of which then to be (more contentedly, one hopes) aware. Paramecia have rudimentary, first-order experience, for they move to orient themselves to nutrients and light. Felines have both this rudimentary level of experience and also some second-order awareness of it. We know this, for example, because cats distinguish between true fighting and play-fighting. But only humans enjoy – or bear the curse of – full-blown, third-order experience, or consciousness. This allows not only the awareness of one’s own awareness but also the awareness that both conspecifics and some allospecifics also have their own awareness (e.g. Baron-Cohen, 1999; Dretske, 1997: 44 ff.). The first hominoid inklings of this third-order power would have conferred a selective advantage on those exhibiting it. Third-order consciousness is a precondition for human cognitive and practical structuring of the worldly conditions for second-order awareness, so as to yield such first-order experiences as may be desired. So, cultivation yields food to allay hunger, we hope. Consciousness has the retroductive power to fathom the underlying nature of reality – what must be true of the world for things to be as they are – and, through technology, the power to affect it. My first important point, therefore, is that consciousness has evolved in reality as a means to fathom the nature of reality (Dewey, 1971 [1925]: xvi, 74, 226, and passim; Hartwig, 2007: 129).

This point, the naturalness of consciousness, can be understood by analogy with the emergence, and naturalness, of life. Nature’s manifold has never been fixed. Emergence is a characteristic feature of it. Once the earth harbored no life; later it harbored millions of forms of it. Both phases, highly distinct in their constitutive features, are natural. The emergence of consciousness is also just such a natural phenomenon. Life consists of the power of certain systems to effect internal and external changes so as to conduce their own continuation. Consciousness is the power to comprehend such systems by inferring what must be true of them. ‘That track in this mud must have been left yesterday by a heavy, clawed animal traveling that way’. In this critically important sense, far from setting humankind apart from nature, consciousness turns out to be, among other things, nature’s emergent probe into itself.

So it is true to say that the nature of the world, evidently, is to evolve increasingly accurate models of itself. Elsewhere I have called this the ontic principle (Brereton, 2003: 281). As a leaf models, that is, incorporates and potentially reveals, within its own ontology the transcendental properties of light, atmosphere, hydraulics, seasonality and so on, so a bird wing models the transcendental properties of gravity, air, wind, time, space and metabolism. Wings evolved in response to, and to capitalize on, those features of the world. In doing so, wings lent creatures possessing them new powers. Just so, consciousness potentially models, by realizing virtually, all such worldly properties and powers: of leaves, wings, and much else besides. The ontic principle describes the fact that consciousness, as naturally evolved and part of nature, potentially models nature’s own totality.

My second important point, actually entailed by the first, is that consciousness evolved on the basis of experience. One power conferred by the awareness of awareness is that of virtual modeling, the creation not only of neurophenomenological representations of one’s social and natural surround, but also of intrinsically evaluative appraisals.
of those models. Such evaluations are merely the recognition that within conditions reside indications – the track in the mud, the slope of the land – pertinent to survival and procreation. This reduces to a binary behavioral code grounded in real, natural, spatial relations: draw nearer to resources, withdraw farther from threats; approach or avoid. To grasp this simple phenomenological fact is to recognize the value inhering in a spatially structured relation between self and resources, self and danger. The naturalness of consciousness is most easily appreciated when we observe that in the environment of evolutionary adaptation (EEA) it was experience in and of the world that provided the phenomenological grounding of and for conscious modeling. And experience still provides the condition of possibility for consciousness.

However, at least three problems accompany the structure of conceptual morphogenesis. First, concepts purportedly ‘about’ real phenomena are not at all like them phenomenologically. The word and concept ‘book’ is nothing like the object of ink and paper. There almost certainly is always ‘slippage’ between the one and the other, representation and reality. However, for the evolving creature nature poses no requirement that models of it be absolutely ‘perfect’, that they perfectly correspond. A model only has to be (1) adequate to the dictates of reality, and (2) less manifestly erroneous than those of competitors, and the underlying genetic affordance that made the model possible, as well as, perhaps, the model itself through cultural transmission, will spread differentially.

Second, and consequent to the first problem, is that concepts are referentially detached; they exist independently of their referents. Indeed, they are not wholly dependent on the properties and powers of any ostensible referent at all. We can discuss unicorns. This means that concepts easily assume a life of their own, with all the real hazards attendant on inaccuracy. Third, and again consequent on the first two problems, is that we conscious creatures can make mistakes. We sometimes act on the basis of models, be they innate, tacit, or overt, which subsequent results may reveal as having been erroneous. ‘We thought the dam would hold, but it didn’t’. Despite these limitations, consciousness allows the retroductive inference of what experience must have been – and been of – in the past for consciousness itself to have evolved. Thus it allows us to decipher fundamental principles obtaining in reality. Here follow a few such basal inferences as are germane to experience, consciousness and anthropology.

III. ANTHROPOLOGICAL ONTOLOGY

First, if humans comprise one species there must be a basal, species level mode of human adaptation. This must underlie and transcend cultural particularities. And it must still be a major factor in human relations with the surrounding, external, social and natural world, no matter how that world may have been historically and variously shaped at T₃ by humans. At T₁, the real environmental surround still provides the morphogenetic matrix for ongoing attempts at adaptation.

This leads to the second retroductive, morphogenic inference about the world. At least to the extent necessary for survival and procreation, the basal human mode of adaptation reflects the real conditions that must have obtained in the EEA (Cosmides and Tooby, 1992; Cosmides, et al., 1992; Tooby and Cosmides, 1990, 1992; Tooby and DeVore, 1987). Therefore, present modes of (attempted) adaptation reflect the characteristics of the once extant world in which those modes evolved, in so far as those
characteristics operated selectively on phenotypical traits. Quite simply, selection worked against individuals who evinced behaviors less suited to real conditions than those of their EEA contemporaries. In keeping with the ontic principle, therefore, to say that adaptations reflect the real conditions that spawned them is to acknowledge that those conditions are, in effect, incorporated in the adaptation itself as manifest in the present. It involves them.

This is a retroductive inference about the nature of reality based on the observable facts of human adaptation. The important morphogenic and metaphysical point is that adaptation both reflects and contributes to the world. Humans could not have an evolved need for water if species from which we are descended had had no water in their environment. This observation is far from banal, yet culturists appear not to recognize how crucial it is. Nature does have a reality; that reality is not, in the first instance, culturally constructed; consciousness evolved to fathom pre-cultural reality; therefore, basal human consciousness itself is natural. The many evident local human variations on this theme of experience, consciousness, and adaptation neither replace nor obviate it any more than species variation obviates the underlying force of adaptation. Indeed, species variations constitute the very evidence for adaptation. Likewise, sociocultural variations evidence an underlying mode of human adaptation based on the evolution of consciousness grounded in experience.

This point has implications that are central for anthropological ontology. It demonstrates several metaphysical, trans-cultural aspects of the world: the world is real, mutable, consequential, and ontologically stratified into four principle layers that are chemical, physical, biological, and conscious. The biological and conscious layers are derived from the prior chemical and physical ones, but are not reducible to them. All these features of the world are the case regardless of what particular schools of local knowledge may or may not say about them. Onta (things that have reality) do not depend for their existence on being known. There was a physical world and, using redundancy to drive the point home, it was ontically real before there were any possible knowers – humans – who could have known about it. Conversely, if the world were not real, it could not have real effects. That both the world and its effects are real is demonstrated by the possibility of making consequential mistakes.

**Culturism fails**

Though I have foregrounded adaptation, it is true that by itself adaptation is not adequate to explain many human phenomena. Consciousness permits not only the conceptualization of virtual worlds, but also behavior in the posited light of them. These models and behaviors may or may not accord with pre-conscious aspects of reality. Nonetheless, it remains true that no model of humanness that ignores or conflicts with what is known about the morphogenics of adaptation can be socioculturally persuasive. So, for one of many examples in this vein, the anti-evolutionary and typically culturist assertion that there is no inherited, biological *bauplan* for human feet, that the shapes of feet in various present human communities result only from culturally conditioned, personal life-course experience, and not at all from genetic inheritance, can be dismissed out of hand (Ingold, 2004: 336). That many of sociocultural anthropology’s chief exponents make such absurd culturistic claims is a serious problem for anthropology, as Steven Reyna has pointed out (Reyna, 2002).
In another sort of culturist ethnography, the underlying model, the metaphysical substrate implied by the surficial rhetoric, vacillates between full-bore constructionism and a model that is morphogenically apt. If the world is a certain way – as it must be for some things to be true of it – and yet we insist on describing it as though it were otherwise, our presentations will necessarily be conflicted. An example may be found in a work describing the western Apache (Basso, 1996). Places are repeatedly said to be human constructs. Places are constructed – not merely construed – by people. It may be that ‘constructed’ is intended to be interpreted as ‘construed’, in which case it is merely, but not trivially, an unsuitable word choice. But the locution is consistent, and the implicit totalizing effect of the culturist premise seems not at all accidental. The clear implication is that places do not even exist for the western Apache in any way other than as culturally constructed by them; that, for the Apache, landscape places have no reality independent of their being social constructs. However, since the existence of the landscape at T₁ does not depend on its being known, construed, or described, this is false. Whether or not any or all Apache believe it is true that landscape is only, ever, a construct of theirs, it isn’t. At T₁, the reality of the landscape does not depend on its being either constructed or construed by humans.

On the other hand, in the same work the author acknowledges that the Apache usage ‘wisdom sits in places’ is appropriately metaphorical – both for him and the western Apache. He also rightly recognizes that the subject–object distinction is analytically indispensable (Basso, 1996: 108). So which is it? Is, as this author says, ‘place-making a way of constructing history’ (Basso, 1996: 6)? This locution presupposes, falsely, that both places and history are exclusively human constructs. Without humans to construct them, places would not exist and nothing, ostensibly, would happen. Or is it, on the other hand, that members of the Apache community speak about the landscape; that they verbally represent and physically occupy it; that the landscape is, indeed, morphogenically distinct from its human representers (Basso, 1996: 74)? This locution presupposes, accurately but contrary to the first, the real temporal morphogenic of people and the places they inhabit.

Failure to resolve this underlying theoretical problem renders ethnography inconsistent and, ultimately, incoherent. As Dewey once said of idealism, of which culturism is a latter day avatar:

idealism, while it has had an intimation of the constructively instrumental office of intelligence, has mistranslated the discovery. Following the old tradition, in its exclusive identification of the object of knowledge with reality, equating truth and Being, it was forced to take the work of thought absolutely and wholesale, instead of relatively and in detail. That is, it took re-constitution to be constitution; re-construction to be construction. (Dewey, 1971 [1925]: 131)

This observation points to a profound error in culturism. In making the conceptualized coextensive with the real, without theorizing the real itself or applying morphogenesis to disarticulate the two, it programmatically commits the epistemic fallacy. In its underlying theory culturism ignores or rejects the possibility of any description of the ontic world, thus leaving the entire field to socially constructed knowledge. But it matters, on the one hand, whether people actually construct the landscape; or, on the other, whether at T₂ they try to adapt to an independently real, T₁ landscape partly by means of variable
understandings and technologies. The fact of being able to alter the landscape at one point in time neither creates it de novo nor obviates the landscape's own properties and powers. Be it especially noted that this truth does not discount the value of understanding others' conceptions of the world.

As important as local knowledge is, the sociocultural strategy of focusing exclusively on it; of catapulting the study of local knowledge to the status of a complete anthropology (Geertz, 1983); of ignoring what can be known about reality via more thorough, retroductive investigation geared to reveal what must be true of the world for particular conditions to obtain; this popular strategy can only lead to the demise of sociocultural anthropology as the methodologically defensible investigation of real dimensions of humanness. Culturism supposes that the properties and powers of the world itself can be safely denied or disregarded; that to fully understand humanness we need only attend to what particular people say, not the intransitive world they say it in. If some people assert that stones can talk, we ought to accept that in their particular world there are such stones (Brereton, 2005a, 2005b; Ingold, 2000: 95–100, 2005). Similarly, in the prestigious Tanner Lecture at the University of Michigan in the fall of 2005, Marshall Sahlins asserted that because some South American Indians believe jaguars live in human-like villages, and there speak to each other in human languages, we, like the Indians, ought to regard jaguars as people. Sahlins emphasized, at one and the same time, that there is no human nature – a phrase he repeated – and that jaguars are to be considered persons. Culturism sees no need for the skepticism suggested by attention to the evident properties and powers of stones themselves, as they exist outside any sociocultural context. So, although much sociocultural anthropology holds that culture is the central concept describing humanness, the fact is that experience-reflexively-informed-by-consciousness better serves that function. Experience has implicit, incontrovertible links to the real world. Consciousness allows the proleptic, anticipatory constraint of it.9

IV. THE ELEMENTS AND NATURE OF EXPERIENCE

The structures of experience exist on three interconnected ontological levels.

Level one consists of those features of experience derived most directly from the prehuman environment, in other words, that which existed prior to the emergence of humanness and has never disappeared. Level two consists of the chief structuring principles of sociocultural reality: externalized culture, social structure, agency, and the environmental milieu. Level three is the evolved and varied aspects of the psychic unity of humankind, exhibited through its structuring of human thought, feeling, and behavior, for example, the ability to investigate, plan, dissimulate and so on, as developed below. In this model personhood per se appears as an element of the first, pre-social level because, though all animals are experiencers, without persons no human experience is possible. In turn, the several subjective properties and powers of experience are enumerated as level three, subjective reality. Though it is of course true that there must first be an environment, and one with a person in it, before it makes sense to say the person needs shelter – while true, in other words, that space existed before plans to exploit it – nonetheless, in the phenomenological sense to imagine these interconnected features of experience as ‘levels’ does not imply that level one is more necessary to humanness than levels two or three. In the experiential moment, all arrive to the experiencer of a piece; all are entailed by the occurrence of any experience at all.
Regarding level one, then, here follows a brief itemization of the obvious aspects of experience, as grounded in pre-social reality (cf. Rappaport, 1979). It may be thought of as the ontology of experience, and the central contribution of this essay. It is grounded, on the one hand, in the philosophy of critical realism as informed by evolutionary theory, and on the other by John Dewey’s experiential naturalism, summarized later by way of demonstrating the coherence of a model placing evolved experiencing capabilities at the center of a cogent anthropology of humanness. The basic point is that if experience is real, it must have attributes pertaining to itself, at the pre-cultural level, that can be described. It will be seen that this description of the ontology of experience fills gaps in critical realism, anthropology, and Dewey’s own articulation of the nature of experience in *Experience and Nature*. To look ahead, briefly, Dewey tells us how experience arises, what it does, and what it relates to in terms of qualities and values. But it takes some digging to ascertain what Dewey believes experience is in terms of its own ontic attributes. I will be explicit about this in ways I believe are faithful to Dewey’s lead.

What if we were to say, for example, ‘experience is temporal’? This would mean not merely that experience occurs in a world characterized by temporality; that experience is of time as the object being experienced. Rather, it would mean that, arising in a world of temporality, experience itself is temporal; ‘timed’, as it were; constituted, in part, by time. Time is an attribute of experience. Time is not brought into being by experience; instead, when experience arises, that is, emerges in nature, it does so in a state that is inherently, intrinsically, already completely temporal. Thus there is no experience, nor can there be, that is not, in important respects, in and of time. So it is correct to say, though Dewey himself is not quite so direct, that experience itself is temporal. In a similar light I’m going to say that experience bears each of the 12 attributes below.

1. **Temporalization:** Experience is temporalized; it occurs in time and is of time as an ontic feature of the natural world. Though some cultural models of time are not strictly linear, and may conceive of time as, say, cyclical, all peoples recognize the ineluctability of sequentiality. It remains incontrovertible, and universally recognized, that one must first draw the bow before it will propel the arrow; put on a hat before it will provide shade. Sequences are experientially crucial, later occurrences usually depending heavily on the presence or absence of former ones.

   Because this point concerning the nature of experience is not generally recognized, it bears reiteration. To say that experience necessarily (metaphysically and transcendentally) occurs in time, that without the dimension of temporality as an intrinsic part of it there can be no experience, is to recognize ontic temporality itself as a necessary attribute of experience. That is, experience itself has a nature, an ontology, one aspect of which is its temporality. This is true regardless of how or whether a given community conceives of people, experience, or time. That is, the observation that human experience is intrinsically temporalized is anthropological in the fundamental sense.

   2. **Location:** Experience is placial. It is emplaced; it must occur somewhere; it cannot occur ‘a-placially’. And the same experience can neither occur in two different places nor in the same place twice. Even intentional attempts to reproduce experience, such as in strict ritual, cannot overcome the differences in person and time that any two social events must exhibit. Where things ‘take place’ is central to human cognitive and emotional mapping, recollection, and negotiation of the social and natural world (see Brereton, 2000a, for the social mapping hypothesis).
3. **Matter**: Experience is materialized. This is true both internally, in neuronal connections and patterns, and externally as the ontic link with the environmental surround. Sensorial experience is predicated on the existence of sensible matter organized chemically, physically, biologically, and perhaps consciously. These are the four basic ontic layers of reality, each dependent on, but not reducible to, prior layers (Bhaskar, 1975).

4. **Energy**: Experience is energized. The occurrence of experience is predicated on the energetic properties of the pre-human world. Energy is necessarily implicated in, and constituent of, experience as the morphogenic interface of person and surround.

5. **Personhood**: Experience is personalized. In terms of humanness, experience manifests only in and through persons. The life course development of personhood depends partly on the type and quality of experiences actually participated in. (Pre-cultural, essentially non-cultural phenomena such as puberty and ageing take place regardless of cultural milieu.) Though some communities downplay individuality, stressing instead a network of roles, it remains true, for example, that a person either has or has not experienced the death of his mother. The meaning of such experiences varies somewhat, but not entirely, by community. For example, a significant, universally recognized aspect of mother’s death is that one will never visit her again, in the ordinary sense. Everyone recognizes this, and no community supposes, say, that even its own postulated afterworld obviates its validity.

6. **Sensation**: Experience is sensorial. It is informed via the five senses, in connection with the external world. But experience is not synonymous with ‘raw’ sensation because (1) there are cerebral integrative functions that occur spontaneously and almost instantaneously before experience becomes phenomenologically available to the individual; (2) memory and intentions also condition how things are experienced. Culturist ethnographers positing ostensible locally recognized senses additional to the normal five as provided by evolution have nothing but conjecture to support their claims. They are not able to theorize, in a way compatible with evolutionary theory, the existence of senses that vary by community. Thus when Uni Wikan posits a Balinese sixth sense enabling them to perceive ghosts, whereas her ‘western’ sensorium, limited to the usual five, does not so enable her, it is because she does not consider that she is human in essentially the same way the Balinese are, and that the referent ‘ghost’ exists only on the $T_2$ conceptual level, its morphogenic $T_3$ consequences in Balinese society notwithstanding (Wikan, 1990: 84).

7. **Affect**: Experience is affective. It is intrinsically inflected with desire-for, aversion-to, or some ambivalent combination of the two. This is because approach and avoidance behaviors, grounded in existential spatial relations of nearer and farther from the experiencer, are crucial to, and implicated by, adaptation. And there is no sort of experience that is not at least potentially relevant to adaptation. Individuals in the EEA whose experiences were inadequately imbued with appropriate affect, indicating real threats or resources, passed genes on at comparatively lower rates.

8. **Events**: Experience is eventualized. It takes place amid highly complex constellations of phenomena summarized as events. These can be primarily natural, like droughts; social, like going to school; or a combination of natural and social, like desertification. A marriage/wedding is an event that may take years to complete; dropping a pot is quicker. But experience is never isolated or unitary. The ‘eventualized’ experience of dropping the pot took place in the context of, say, meal preparation, another larger event.
9. **Rhythmicity**: Dewey describes the key feature of time, both as time is and as it is experienced, as ‘seriality’. This is tantamount to what I have called ‘sequentiality’. Human beings have unique personal histories because consciousness renders them aware of the possibility that the past and the future can affect the present. Though many groups of people downplay or even suppress individuality, the presence of consciousness in individuals ensures that such efforts can never be more than partially effective. People know that their pain is theirs, not anyone else’s. They know at T2 that hypothetically altered conditions at T1 might have averted the pain, or, on the other hand, with certain possible interventions at T2, might alleviate it in the T3 future.

But change itself is not homogeneous. Flux is not uniform. Rather, periodicity, punctuation, alternating intensifications and dissipations, in short, rhythmicity, characterize the flow of natural and social tendencies. A syllogism here leads us to Dewey’s overall model of experience. Reality is characterized by rhythmicity; human adaptation perforce is related to reality; therefore, human adaptation also bears the mark of rhythmicity. Because what takes place over time happens rhythmically; happens in terms of more or less discrete events; happens with beginnings and endings that are actual even if amorphous in their boundaries; so human adaptation is finely keyed to the occurrence of events, of periodicity, of startings and finishings, comings and goings, arisings and dissolutions, growing and decaying, concentration and relaxation.

10. **Prolepsis**: Experience is proleptic. Because experience is not only beholden to extant conditions, but also appeals to hypothetically possible ones; because experience is the transformation of past into future in light of meaning; because experience is the personalized unfolding of potential into realization; for these reasons experience is properly said to exhibit dramatic structure. This was a key point of Dewey’s, as I shall shortly make clear. Experience has a beginning, middle and end. However momentary, its role as transformer of reality imbues it with plot. Because of this, because of its inherent trajectory toward some outcome or other, experience is able to reach into the future in an attempt to fashion the as yet unrealized future as potentially amenable.

11. **Absence**: Experience is absential. At any given moment, whatever is experienced implies much that is not. Absence of certain conditions is itself a condition for experience. Absence per se is thus formative and powerful (Bhaskar, 1998). If snow does not fall in the mountains this winter, there will not be floods in the spring. Absence of flooding is a condition for many sorts of experiences that the occurrence of flooding precludes, and vice-versa. It is true to say that any and every possible human endeavor is an attempt to absent an absence. Storing food seeks to absent the threat of hunger due to the absence of food. Moving camp seeks to absent the threat of overexploitation, or the absence of resources. Getting a formal education seeks to absent helplessness and destitution.

12. **Culture**: To the list of attributes of experience I would cautiously add that experience is cultural, both because it is and because Dewey described it so. Culture has both internalized and externalized modes, as well laid out by Brad Shore in *Culture in Mind* (1996). But culturists should not leap upon that recognition as negating every other attribute of experience. The fact that experience is cultural does not mean that it is only cultural, or that culture preempts all its other features, that is, rhythmicity, prolepsis, and the rest. Experience for humans, whatever their cultural background happens to be, has all the qualities I have enumerated. To observe that experience is cultural just...
highlights the fact that humans not only can learn from each other, but that, alone among all sentient beings, humans by nature expect to be taught and to teach. The exponential increases in cognitive power effected by intentional and expected teaching and learning – what we call mind – create an understanding of such potential depth and expansiveness that, for all we know, they may be capable of describing the entire reality in which they have evolved and to which they are adapted.

V. REDUCTION OF THE CONTENTS OF DEWEY’S 10 CHAPTERS
Some of these 12 features of experience were highlighted by Dewey in various ways; others are my contribution to the list in ways I believe fully consonant with what Dewey both said and intended in *Experience and Nature*. Next, by way of summary, the better to grasp the book’s import and flow, I reduce each of its 10 chapters to a single sentence. There is no question but that this reduction fails to do justice to Dewey’s astounding grasp of the history of ideas, and how our philosophical and anthropological ideas must come to terms with science and evolution. But every useful model is a reduction. I present this summary hoping that it proves helpful to those moved to read Dewey for themselves.

1. Because experience has evolved, nature discloses itself through it.
2. Experience incorporates both pattern and change, security and peril.
3. Experience is preoccupied with enjoyment; it’s what humans seek, so much so that we characteristically devise rites with dramatic structure to echo the structure of natural events, as apprehended in experience, for our immediate appreciation.
4. Experience, because it has evolved in keeping with the nature of reality, reveals its nature as felt qualities; as such, the value inherent in nature is brought forth in human affective recognition.
5. Experience is partly communicable; linguistic communication links mind and nature, ideas and material, leaving open the intrinsic possibility of adequate correspondence between them.
6. Nonetheless, there is an irreducible subjectivity to the self, for it is only in and through the agentive self that the socially formed mind exerts its force and sway; as it is, and always was, possible for the individual self to oppose the sociopolitical status quo, the individual self was long seen as threatening; individualism was held to be the source of chaos and evil.
7. Thought, through agency, has practical effects, and so experience and nature are bound up monistically and processually.
8. We become conscious of meanings when somehow they become dubious. We become aware of resistance; objects object; and we are forced to recalibrate our models and understandings.
9. Art is the consummation of nature in experience.
10. If it were true that experience and nature were separate and incommensurable, we would have no basis for any critique of values. Philosophy would be impossible; value per se must in some sense be natural, intimately bound up with nature, or we would have no solid basis for adhering to any particular values.

It is the misunderstanding of this last of Dewey’s chapters and points that leads some to brand him as a reactionary. But Dewey is not saying that tyrant nature decrees
particular values, and we must adhere to them or else. He is saying, because experience
is shaped dramatically and so holds intrinsic enjoyment for humans evolved to be
experiencers of the third order, that value and nature are co-implicated and mutually
integrated. In the barest terms, nature and experience both have shape. Art recognizes
the 'shapedness' inherent in both; art and experience are enjoyable because shape appeals
to a creature evolved to adapt in terms of the shapes and patterns, eventualized and other-
wise, of the lived-in world; enjoyment intrinsic to the nature of experience implies value.
This is not a particular value invented and attached to experience by an arbitrary cultural
predilection. It is value apprehended as a function of evolved consciousness, capable
disclosing the reality of value, and the value of reality.

As I noted prior to offering this reduction of Dewey’s chapter contents, experience
per se is amply structured in at least 12 ways. Its features include time, place, matter,
energy, person, sensation, affect, event, rhythmicity, prolepsis, absence and culture. As
experience takes place in the milieu of a local community it is affected, in addition, by
the four dimensions that constitute level two: agency, cultural predispositions, social
structure, and present contingencies of the social and natural environment. I assume that
the conditioning effects on experience of these elements of level two, which are pillars
of anthropological theory (and to which much of it is mistakenly limited), are accepted.
The point here is that they constitute real conditions for the phenomenology of
experience, and so are rightly regarded as elements of it. This reinforces the important
ontological and phenomenological principle adumbrated earlier: conditions intrinsic to
a phenomenon are tantamount to dimensions of it; without them it ceases to exist as
that phenomenon. So, whereas it is possible for a pot that isn’t blue to exist, it is not
possible for an experience that isn't emplaced, or pertinent to agency and so on, to exist.

Level three comprises pan-human properties and powers the actualization of which
is subjective. Planning, for example, occurs internally, regardless of instances of it requir-
ing the participation of other people. That is, while some (or all) plans may be devised
socially, they either exist as subjective phenomena or not at all. So level three includes,
but is not limited to, the facts that humans – all of them, just because they are human
– do things such as perceive, cognize, select, anticipate, consider, infer, learn, interpret,
recall, plan, share, intend, impute, initiate, investigate, emote, communicate, agree,
resist, indicate, concur, temporize, deceive, solve, wonder, forget, seek, invent, declare,
object and create. These are a few of the features of the oft invoked, seldom honored,

It is largely because these basal modes of apprehension, those of level three, do not
vary by community that people of different backgrounds do share a psychic unity and
can effectively interact. We know intuitively what planning is, and are largely aware of
the general sorts of occasion in which it will be deployed, in the social and natural world,
by anyone. People, just because they are human experiencers, plan to get food, mates,
security, enjoyment and respect. This takes nothing away from the myriad local vari-
ations on the merits and meanings of these needs, or the means of meeting them as may
be considered legitimate. But local particularities, on which culturism and relativism
focus, are not the only important part of the picture. Whereas linguists of North
American Indian languages often remark on the extraordinary variety of families,
languages and dialects spoken at the time of contact, they seldom remark that over most
of North America mutually intelligible and effective sign languages existed that enabled
people from disparate groups to communicate with little trouble, even to the extent of
telling and understanding complex stories. Effective sign language, founded in bodily
practice in relation to mundane reality, is a good example of the primacy of practice, as
opposed to verbal discourse, in human adaptation and interaction.

Furthermore, that misunderstandings occur, not only between communities but also
very frequently within them, demonstrates (1) that there is an underlying reality about
which mistakes and disagreements are possible, and (2) that our subjective modes of
apprehension do largely coincide. Otherwise we would not even be able to know that a
disagreement existed. Sociality would not be possible (Danermark, 1997). But sociality,
including cross-cultural sociality between communities, is possible because, although
individuals do not precisely share particular experiences, they, as humans, do share all
the 12 elements of which experience is composed.

VI. DEWEY’S DISCUSSION OF EXPERIENCE AS THE GROUND OF
HUMANNESS AND PHILOSOPHY

In preparation for an expanded consideration of Dewey’s treatment of experience, the
foregoing discussion argues that experience is the evolutionary, existential, and phenom-
enological ground of humanness as realized in any and all human communities. Dewey
paved the way for this approach nearly a century ago. As noted in his preface to
Experience and Nature (1971 [1925]), he believed it philosophy’s task to describe human
being-in-the-world from within the world. Legitimate philosophy must invoke no sort
of supernatural agency (p. 102; page reference alone refers to Dewey, 1971 [1925]). This
made Dewey a naturalist. And he faulted not only theology but also both materialism
and idealism for their inherently biased accounts (pp. 50 ff., p. 214). But Dewey was
also a naturalist in another way as well. He accepted that philosophy and science could
not in principle be at odds (p. 128). Both seek to describe reality. Dewey welcomed the
method of empiricism, experimentation, and validation through evidence. But his
empirical bent did not make him a superficial actualist, as though he were claiming that
the real is only that which is actualized. He understood that a depth ontology involves
unseen causal powers, like natural selection, known only from their effects. Darwin
showed (1) that in the presence of variety, competition, and heritability, selection will
operate, and (2) it is retrodiction from close comparison of extant life forms by which
we can infer the evolutionary direction that has been effected. So the third way in which
Dewey was a naturalist was that he recognized the indispensability of evolutionary
theory in explaining the structure of life (p. 7). Taken together these premises allow us
to expect that Dewey would present humanness not as separate from nature but as an
incorporated, imbricated, intrinsic part of it, as well he did (p. xv).

Dewey sees mind, consciousness, values and art all as emergent features of the natural
world (pp. 51, 59 ff., 247, 299, 309). Since culturism typically sees art, for example, as
quintessentially cultural, it is worth repeating: art is natural. This is because art is an
aspect of humanness, and humanness is natural. We never were divorced from nature in
an Edenic expulsion, and mind was never severed from body. Rather, art and mind and
the rest of humanness emerged in nature as novel dimensions of it. In this regard Dewey
reminds us that nature is neither static nor something which people create extraneous
things ‘out of’. Architecture does not add to stone and wood something which does not
belong to them, but it does add to them properties which they did not possess in their
earlier state’ (p. 309). In other words, roof timbers impart the property of sheltering to wood, which it did not have, at least in the strict sense of ‘roof’, when the wood was still in a living tree. And to put this morphogenically, T₂ knowledge ferrets out latent possibilities in T₁ reality, potentially reconfiguring them so as to perform novel functions at T₃. It therefore becomes evident that humanness, grounded by evolution in on-going experience of the natural world, would retrodictively reveal the structures of nature responsible for the structures of humanness. The crux to both humanness and philosophy, therefore, is experience. Dewey called his method ‘empirical naturalism’ (p. xiv).

But experience is no simple mirror of nature. Not only are mistakes possible, but also the emergence of both consciousness and material agency has made humanness, through humans, a formidable player in the natural game (e.g. pp. xvi, 74, 103). We transform nature as we participate in it via our naturally evolved powers. So, as Thomas Alexander makes clear, for Dewey experience becomes, and is properly recognized as, an explorer, transformer and liberator of nature (Alexander, 1987: 95). Consider exploration. Humans are exploratory, information-seeking creatures. ‘Exploratoriness’ is an essential trait of ours that brought about the Pleistocene and Holocene Homo sapiens colonization of the globe. And it is through such experience that nature facilitates the exploration and comprehension of itself. Our Nemian access to the structural underpinnings of nature is provided by experience – experience evolved in and by nature itself as a mechanism of adaptation.¹³

Experience, therefore, not only allows the intentional exploration of nature but, through supervenient consciousness, also provides the means for transforming it. Such transformation of nature happens from within nature. So to acknowledge intentional transformation is not to attempt to account for humanness apart from nature. One of the many untoward implications of culturism is that culture is said to obviate the priority of nature, is said to wholly supersede nature in the shaping of human affairs. But either we follow the likes of Dewey, Bhaskar, and Archer in recognizing and explaining culture as a part of nature, or we must be supernaturalists. Culturists are supernaturalists. Indeed, it is a common and egregious error among culturists to explicitly fault science for not taking account of, exploring and explaining the supernatural (e.g. Schroll, 2005).¹⁴

Finally, experience allows not only the exploration and transformation of nature, but also its liberation. Through experience-based consciousness nature reveals the truth about itself (Dewey, 1971[1925]: xv, xix, 3, 60, and passim). This is what I have called the ontic principle. This truth may not be simple, obvious, fixed, or causatively proximate. But again, either experience is in and of nature or we experiencing humans, duly evolved though we may be, have somehow ended up in an abject and inexplicable state of expulsion from the world/garden. As Dewey notes, one characteristic property of the natural world is its predisposition to be apperceived by humans. A property the world has is that it can be understood, the would-be understanders having evolved in it according to its own transcendental characteristics.¹⁵

Expanded highlights of Dewey’s argument
Where appropriate, this summary notes both Dewey’s prefiguration of critical realism in Experience and Nature and the corresponding implicit critique of culturism.

He opens with an indictment of philosophical idealism, which posits a fundamental separation of experience from nature. This amounts to a corresponding indictment of
culturism, itself a form of idealism. Both err in supposing that experience veils nature rather than reveals it. Culturism claims that nature per se, if it exists, is unknowable because of the thoroughly pre-culturalized aspect of all possible knowing. This means both that there are many possible kinds or ways of knowing, which is true, and that these culturalizations are the only possible ways of knowing, which is not true. If it were, humans as a species could not have evolved. But for culturism, since there are multiple cultures, there must also be multiple ontological realities – and no nature. The world that actually underwrites pan-human knowing as an adaptive function is thus summarily effaced. In this way culturists create for themselves a theory–practice inconsistency: On the one hand there is no reason for anyone to heed culturistic descriptions unless they are somehow at least potentially consequential, unless they matter somehow; yet if they are consequential it must be in a world that bears consequences, that is real, that exists apart from anyone’s descriptions of it; and this reality stands contrary to culturism’s own particularist, constructivist, irrealist premise.

For Dewey, because experience is ‘double barreled’; because it is both subject and object; because we experience experiences; for this reason experience is properly seen as the crux of the human–world relation. As such it is the Archimedean point, albeit a constantly moving one, for philosophy. And experience itself is eventful. It occurs in rapid phases. Pre-reflective experience becomes reflection on what was experienced, and this in turn becomes meaning – all in an instant (p. 7). I noted earlier that hominids that were able to instantly and accurately assess the import of experience in light of approach/avoid strategies fared better than their EEA compeers who exhibited less experiential acuity. This dynamic constitutes a selective force favoring experience as validity. The rock about to fall on one’s head really is one. Hypothetical predecessors who acted as though it were more a matter of how the rock might be variously construed, or ‘constructed’, to use the jargon, than there being a rock at all had the chance to pass on whatever genes underwrote this impoverished mentality rapidly foreclosed.

In his second chapter Dewey reveals that the human impulse to philosophize lies in the vicissitudes of fortune. Just as Margaret Archer shows the primacy of practice, the business of acting in the world, to be the confluence of structure and agency, of laws and free will, of regularity and caprice (Archer, 1996[1988]: xii; Brereton, 2005c), so Dewey grounds philosophy in the world’s maddening exhibition of predictability and accident. ‘Man finds himself living in an aleatory world’, and so is driven to devise philosophies to explain what he can (p. 38). ‘Aleatory’ comes from the Latin word for ‘dice’, and life is dicey. So animism, like all philosophy, derives from the fact of humans’ existential vulnerability (cf. Radin, 1957). More complex religious proclivities such as mono theism play on the same theme. ‘We long, amid a troubled world, for perfect being. We forget that what gives meaning to the notion of perfection is the events that create longing’ (p. 55). The force of retroduction being what it is, the world must be such as to generate thought, inquiry, knowledge, ignorance, and belief (p. 60). It is structure that makes construction possible; matter and mind are but different characters of natural events.

In such a world of contingency – the world we have – enjoyment assumes vaunted prominence, the subject of Chapter Two. Enjoyment allays angst. ‘It was not conscience that kept men loyal to cults and rites, and faithful to tribal myths. So far as it was not routine, it was enjoyment of the drama of life without the latter’s liabilities that kept piety from decay’ (p. 68). The human ability to symbolize grows out of such dramas.
But, *contra* culturism, it does not do so merely semiotically, discursively, as a pointer to something outside the symbol itself. Rather, the symbol is a condensation of experience. Symbols ‘embody actual things and events with more direct and enhanced import than do the things themselves with their distractions, imposition, and irrelevancies’ (p. 71). Symbols boil experience down, and then perhaps also elaborate it in patterned, comprehensible ways. Symbols are manipulable reductions of experience as structured by the three levels of experience – pre-human, social, and individual – outlined earlier. To consider this is to appreciate the existential continuum Dewey traces, starting from a world of vicissitude; then comes experience of that world; thence to the emergence of rites and drama to assuage human fear and provide enjoyment; and finally to the role of symbols to emblazon fortune’s shield with regularity.

But labor, too, is human. This is Chapter Three. The evidence for causation most palpable to humans is that of their own endeavor in the world. Labor, practice, is experienced as efficacious. Dig a trench and water will flow through it. Experience of causation engenders desire to control the contingent. Thence to magic, religion and science, all evidence of consciousness, the natural role of which is to imagine and virtually re-enact the vicissitudes of life under conditions that deprive them of their overt dangers (p. 76). Form, most palpably evident to humans in their own managed forms of art, conveys a sense of the transcendentally imperishable and timeless. To offer an example on Dewey’s behalf, the bison painted on the cave wall at Altamira is still sleeping, or dying, or charging, no less for us today than it was for the Magdalenians 30,000 years ago. Philosophy, itself a form of art because of its concern with pattern and coherence, retroductively apprehends causal mechanisms and so reveals structure and regularity in nature. However, what pre-scientific minds see as causal termini in nature, science opens up as endless causal chains (p. 87). Science vastly expands the comprehensibility of linkages in nature. Trained thought penetrates reality and, by no means incidentally for Dewey, justifies universal education (p. 101).

The conceptual grasp which humankind has of natural, practical causal relations is embodied in our tools. For the ancient Greeks, the very fact that things like tools could be instrumental, that instrumentality itself was possible, was due to a presumed incompleteness in nature (pp. 103 ff.). Nature’s own ends had not been reached, were still imperfect, still unperfected. If Being is by definition perfect, then such imperfection is tantamount to Non-Being. And so Greek philosophy turned on the (false) dualism of Non-Being and Being, imperfect and perfect, the sensuous and the rational, matter and mind, experience and science. Dewey dispels this dualistic illusion by considering tools. Tools respond not merely to what qualities some aspect of the world might possess immediately, but more importantly to the possible qualities that something may acquire in the future. Thus even more significant than what the tool is here and now, say, a sharp stone, is what it makes possible, say, access to nutritious marrow. Tools, therefore, are proleptic. They embody a world that is spatialized, temporalized, materialized and so on – and causative. Giving a stone an edge for cutting is an art, and it was thus through art, a form of practice, that the spatial and temporal aspects of nature and their import were gradually revealed.

So, though the Greeks opposed experience and science, today’s science and philosophy both appreciate the fundamental unity they share. Science realizes that a key value of any possible object lies in what it indicates, what it points to as an additional possible...
object of investigation. Science merely capitalizes on the fact that such indications are part of nature. Dark clouds indicate the increased chance of rain, regardless of whether anyone is there to see or comment on them. Though it is indeed humanness that brings linguistic signs into being, anthropology must consider that the very possibility of humanness emerging at all was because nature exhibits its own indications in their millions. These indications are not linguistic, for their existence does not depend on there being any humans or any language. They are pre-linguistic – and very real. Dried brown leaves on the ground under a tree strongly indicate that there were previously green ones on it. Language ‘merely’ exploits the realization that natural indications exist and are comprehensible. Proto-humans certainly were aware of this before they could articulate it, else we have to assume that fully 2.5 million years ago *Homo habilis* not only devised chopping tools but fully complex language too. Indeed, it would require the incongruous assumption that nature’s independently existing features bore no relation to the emergence of language; that language did not evolve as an adaptation.

Nonetheless, it is social communication, with its feature of referential detachment, which presently lends humans their vast power. This is Chapter Five, and referential detachment is also a key to critical realism. Things can be referred to even when they are not immediately present in time or space, or may even exist only virtually, as mental objects. Through discourse we can articulate what must be true of the world for things to be as they existentially are. For this reason it is practical discourse that bridges the gap between existence and referentially detachable essences. Thus it is also practice that further gives the lie to ontological dualism (but not valuable analytical dualism, see Archer, 1995: 15 and *passim*), be it of the mind–body, nature–culture, or subject–object sort. Social life puts on the robes of drama (p. 141). At this stage in the development of society natural events not only evince their own indications; they are additionally thought to convey discursive messages (p. 144). Now the whirlwind does not just indicate clouded vision due to blowing sand; God is said to speak in it. Language is, and becomes, the tool of tools.

On the heels of sociality, communication, and roles comes the notion of personhood or self. Chapter Six. Throughout these chapters Dewey is philosophically reconstructing the social world from first principles, starting from pre-existent nature, and retaining its ontic necessity. ‘Primitive’ communities tend to be conformist, the emphasis being on roles much more than on individuality. Individualism emerged when medieval natural law, which was thought to govern both social institutions and natural conditions, both being divinely ordained, was forced to give way to sociopolitical reform (Brereton, 2000b, 2001, in press). But this presented a dilemma. How can humankind reform institutions that are in fact the work and will of God? How alter what has been divinely ordained? To resolve this dilemma, the notion of the individual as agent arose. Philosophy gave itself a renegade, the individual, to press through the barriers of tradition (pp. 183–4). So, to offer another example on Dewey’s behalf, Leonardo painted his astonishing self-portrait, a physiognomy of awakening to realization of consciousness. This agentive move had its price, however, for now everyone was not only a nexus of roles but also a unique self. And the collection of individuated selves appeared to stand outside natural existence governed by natural law (p. 185). The false dichotomy contained in this shift led to the further error that humanness was now thought somehow to have become opposed to nature. Culturism is part of the legacy of this split.
But Dewey notes that the self, properly considered, is an experiential event, and events transpire in nature, not apart from it.

Chapter Seven argues that the feeling human being, aware of feelings, realizes that feelings are indicators of significant objective differences in the world (p. 211). Feelings become indicators of indications. They are an evolved means of attention and intentionality. In what amounts to a rebuttal of culturism and its constant companion, the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis, Dewey says:

This ‘objectification’ is not a miraculous ejection from the organism or soul into external things, not an illusory attribution of psychical entities to physical things. The qualities never were ‘in’ the organism; they always were qualities of interactions in which both extra-organic things and organisms partake. When named, they enable identification and discrimination of things to take place as means in a further course of inclusive interaction. (pp. 211–12)

In full concert with critical realism, Dewey says that since experience and persons are events, and natural and social systems are larger events, the proper objects of knowledge are the relations between events (p. 216). Relations, by definition, are metaphysical. They cannot be perceived. Nevertheless, they are known to be real by their effects (Bhaskar, 1989: 92 ff., 1998 [1979]: 25, 28–9, 45, and passim). Humans come to realize the ongoing reality of events, and with them the ontic status of the future. In foresight, the future possible end of a series is presented; is brought virtually into the present; is made, in effect, a distant immediacy. In this way, through imagination, ‘organic activity is liberated from subjection to what is closest at hand in space and time. Man is led or drawn rather than pushed’ (p. 221). ‘Since mind cannot evolve except where there is an organized process in which the fulfillments of the past are conserved and employed, it is not surprising that mind when it evolves should be mindful of the past and future’ (p. 226).

In his last three chapters, Dewey holds that consciousness is that phase of a system of meanings which at a given time is undergoing redirection (p. 251). Change makes attention possible, and draws it. The chief function of mind consists in the awareness that events have meanings, and this function is the creature of language, the virtual link between people and their apprehensions (p. 211). A shift in meaning draws attention, and that shift itself is realized as consciousness. Dewey has already moved from pre-conscious nature to the emergence of consciousness in and by nature. He now observes that both common sense and science are modes of experience which, having evolved in the world, are part of it, and so are duly informed to probe its real relations.

Finally, typical, non-Deweyan philosophies of value tend to isolate humankind from nature. They make of humans the denatured creators of value, which thus becomes arbitrary and, finally, inexplicable. This is another of culturism’s mistakes. It asserts that value is and can only be culturally, particularistically brought about. Value is an arbitrary cultural add-on, like a bumper sticker. Each ‘culture’ is said to have its own value system – within which, and only within which, does value exist at all. Culturism thus fails to recognize that for conscious, experiencing creatures, value inheres in nature’s indications. In this regard, culturism’s twofold depredation is (1) that the world becomes untheorizable because communities with varying values are utterly incommensurate, and (2) value becomes not part of the natural world but an arbitrary embellishment.
VII. CONCLUSION: THE NECESSITY OF DEWEY’S EXPERIENTIAL NATURALISM

Dewey’s solution is to recognize that consciousness and experience do not divorce humankind from nature. Rather, they honor and enhance our embeddedness within it. There is value residing in natural indications. Consciousness, when it evolves, becomes aware of such valorized indications. There is no denial here of the role of variable cultural values in human communities. There is simply denial that all value, the only possible value, is culturally derived; denial that the fundament of value lies in culture; denial that nature per se evinces no value. Instead, the fundament of value is in nature, and consciousness has emerged as an adaptive response to it.

Natural value can be experienced. This happens, for example, when a cave is experienced as (intrinsically valuable) shelter. Existentially there is no difference between the reality of a certain cave and its intrinsic capacity to shelter. This property of the cave does not depend on there being anyone who is presently sheltered. The capacity to shelter is a real, latent, not necessarily actualized, power of the cave itself. If and when a human being experiences shelter in the cave, that experience is dependent on the ontologically prior property of the cave in its own right. The human does not, by his happening to be present, add the capacity to shelter to the cave. But the human can be aware of being aware of being sheltered, and may indeed seek such shelter the better to condition his own future awareness and enjoyment/survival. Properly theorized, therefore, experience exploits the ontic continuum of nature and humankind through evolved consciousness, an emergent, morphogenic, third-order adaptation to reality. The explicit theorization of experience, the description of its ontic features, thus fills a gap in critical realism, anthropology, and Dewey’s empirical naturalism. And it is only in a fully theorized reality that sociocultural anthropology can even survive, let alone prove its disciplinary mettle (Brereton, 2004).

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Notes

1 As I have said elsewhere (Brereton, 2006), culturism’s other shortcomings include: excluding biology; nearly excluding psychology; excluding general evolutionary theory; excluding the possibility of cultural evolution; textualizing the human subject; confusing the real with the positive, empirical, or actual; obfuscating the culture concept via personification, passivization, and mystification; not responding to (valid) critiques; tying its own (false) subdisciplinary autonomy to (false) ontological relativism; theory–practice inconsistency; lacking any theoretical model tying it to other anthropological subdisciplines or the other social and natural sciences; covert totalitarianism; the epistemic fallacy; and misconstruing basal moral issues (like human rights).
2 There is a strong but erroneous tendency in cultural anthropology to equate realism with positivism, empiricism, and/or actualism. This issue is clarified, and a viable alternative for social science outlined, in the early works of critical realist Roy Bhaskar – *A Realist Theory of Science* (1975) and *The Possibility of Naturalism* (1998 [1979]). Briefly, critical realism notes that the ‘laws’ of neither nature nor society consist of Humean constant conjunctions. Instead, they are tendencies discernible from their effects. Despite the value of Bhaskar’s early work, however, I must distance myself from his recent ‘spiritual turn’.

3 Another recent attempt to salvage relativism is by Michael F. Brown in his piece ‘Cultural Relativism’ (2008). This piece is flawed in many ways typical of culturism, none of which is recognized by any of the several commentators. Brown ignores ontology – either as the reality of the world or as descriptions of it – as the foundation for knowing; presupposes, without discussion, that ontological relativism is possible (it’s not, for evolutionary reasons, as I have shown); offers no model of humanness, let alone any description of the freedom he (rightly) claims is the ultimate human goal; ignores the practical and emotional dimensions of human universals, in favor of cognitive universals only; misconstrues the meaning of ‘natural law’, which he uses as though it were simply positive laws considered to be universal, rather than any transfactual, transcendental reality; discusses ‘human rights’, again, without any model of the trans-cultural humans to whom such species-level rights pertain; and offers no general theory for anthropology. That the several commentators all missed the essential shortcomings of the piece testifies to the hypnotic hold relativism has over elements of the current sociocultural anthropological mind.

4 Having mistakenly come to equate realism with positivism, empiricism, and/or actualism, sociocultural anthropologists seem caught between three unsatisfactory alternatives: defending a moribund relativism, resorting to irrealist discourse theory without considering the very reality of discourse itself, and/or soldiering on in the absence of any high level theory at all. The very fact that they can soldier on in this way is tacit testimony to the reality of the world, of them, and of their soldiering. And, as critical realism explains, positivism ignores the reality of absence; empiricism ignores the reality of non-empirical matters such as relationships, known only from their effects; and actualism ignores the reality and influence of latent, presently unactualized powers.

5 Since I have favorably compared Dewey’s views with contemporary critical realism, and that approach is explicitly dialectical, I should note that Dewey’s objection to the dialectical method took it to be that of scholasticism. For the scholastics, truth was to be arrived at by a-temporal, logically driven argumentation, given certain presuppositions such as that of a creator God. For critical realism, by contrast, the dialectic is basically the Marxist one involving the temporalized interaction of matter and idea, structure and agency.

6 Through this shorthand reference to the passage of time, Archer conveniently organizes our understanding of the morphogenic process from any point in it. \( T_1 \) references the intransitive realm of completed events which constitute structures available to and impinging on human agents. These agents act in the \( T_2 \) present, in accord with multiple constraints on agency. Completed interventions become manifest at \( T_3 \), the future, and so duly become intransitive themselves, at a new \( T_1 \). Like any shorthand, this scheme saves words and clarifies meaning.
This view of consciousness differs from much of the literature on consciousness. Other approaches typically construe consciousness either simply as second-order awareness; focus on altered states of consciousness; or try to discern the neurological correlates of cognitively mediated responses to involvement with the world.

Like all of the ethnographic examples critiqued here, Basso's is a work with many merits, and which I admire in many ways.

That culturism's abandonment of questions concerning humanness is leading to cultural anthropology's demise is further demonstrated by the French government's withdrawal of support for it in favor of history (Courau, 2006).

The foregoing line of thought is only one way the indictment of culturism can be achieved. There are many, mutually consistent, others. One such is the following. There is such as thing as humanness. Humanness has a nature. Our human nature is part of nature as a whole. The natural world can be described because we and our descriptive capacities have evolved in it. This evolution took place, and takes place, in the relation between ontic conditions and provisional adaptations to them. Such adaptations, once they are effected — and even the attempts at affecting them — also become ontic; they are 'realized' — made real — in the sense that they either become part of humanness, or influence what becomes part of humanness. Humanness, being an aspect of the world, can be described. The best description of humanness is the most adequate one. Adequacy is to be corrugibly achieved and tested against the evidence provided by human beings, past and present, in and about themselves, in all their circumstances (that's why we do anthropology). Some descriptions are demonstrably wrong, in other words, mistakes are possible because reality is a certain way and not otherwise. The 'culturally' conditioned accounts by other people of what is true about the world can be wrong, just as ours can be. The matter of how to learn about, and appreciate the merits of, cultural propositions about the nature of the world that are demonstrably inaccurate, without giving undue offense, and without hegemonic imposition of an alien worldview, is thus a problem to be solved by means other than the defense of those erroneous propositions (e.g. Ingold's 'Stones can talk'; Sahlins' 'Jaguars are people'). The ostensible respect we accord a people by accepting, or posing as though we accept, their wrong views as legitimate, as justified, as unassailable merely because attributable to the sacrosanct workings of 'culture', ringed about with taboos, is a false respect (respect for a demonstrably false view is itself false). This theatrical display of (false) respect is just the obverse of the erstwhile disrespect that characterized colonialism. The culturist premise, therefore, that all worldviews have prima facie equal merit, a premise intended to be the corrective to the colonial attitude, is triply flawed: ontically, axiologically, and deontologically (i.e. in terms of reality, its value, and our duty to it). Being so fatally flawed, culturism should be replaced. It is therefore incumbent on anthropology to devise alternatives to culturism that bid fair to overcome some or all of its known defects.

The ethnographic reflexivity so valued by current culturism exhibits the very ethnocentrism it purports to supersede. Wikan's book exemplifies this contradiction. The story is in many ways about her own experience in Bali. The drama is cast as the heroine wrestling with the angel of otherness, not through objectivity but through humility, compassion, openness, vulnerability, and her own capacity to change. It is the Christian story of personal redemption — and the surreptitious conquest from
below – through the power of love. In such respects the culturists are almost more Christian than the born-again, for they are beholden to the archetype of the humble savior without even recognizing their own appropriation of it.

11 ‘time as “seriality”’ (Dewey, 1960 [1940]).

12 The full explanation for the interesting case of the Amazonian Pirahã, whose language apparently lacks many features considered intrinsic to language, awaits further investigation and discussion (Everett, 2005).

13 Lake Nemi outside Rome, from which I derive the term ‘Nemian’, was the site of the archetypal legend of the golden bough, used by Sir James G. Frazer as the key to explaining elements of culture such as magic, ritual, mythology and drama. Those wishing both to access the underworld and to return from it unharmed had to obtain the golden bough from the priest-king who guarded it in the sacred grove.

14 Mark Schroll says, ‘Euro-American science’s failure to construct an epistemology capable of reconciling the divorce between matter and spirit continues to plague our efforts to understand mystical or transpersonal states of consciousness’ (2005: 1). Because this one culturist formulation is founded on several philosophical and scientific errors, it repays close critique. (1) The author misconstrues science by assuming it can investigate phenomena such as mystical experiences for which the evidence is by nature unfalsifiable. (2) To appeal to the legitimizing force of science undercuts the very culturist, particularist premise the author begins with, making his approach self-contradictory. (3) Science grew up in the West, but is not ‘Euro-American’ in the culturistic sense implied; science transcends particularistic worldviews and attends to reality, which is why and how its power is so often verified, and so widely appreciated, among the world’s educated peoples. The usual rejoinder here is to cite the Heisenberg principle. But the Heisenberg principle does not demonstrate the absence of real forces and structures from the world. It demonstrates their especial pertinence. (4) The matter of ‘constructing an epistemology’, when left dangling without any notion that ontology – either as reality per se or as the description of it – might pertain to an issue, is characteristic of the one-sided culturist approach, and shows why culturism is inadequate as an anthropology. (5) If culturism would indeed reconcile the ostensible divorce between matter and spirit, its method must consist of more than the mere invocation of non-western worldviews wherein ghostly spirits are considered real. The fact that mystics see certain things in trance is not evidence of the independent existence of those things apart from that experience, let alone evidence for the existence of Castenadian ‘other realities’. (6) That culturists (Schroll cites several) do not see that science is other than, more than, just another ethnocentric view; that its methodology is designed to uncover real properties and powers of the world; that natural selection, for example, is a real force that has shaped humanness; these failures constitute the best demonstration that it is their view, not science, that is ethnocentric. They cannot get outside their own culturist box. But the evident power of science to interact with and explain real properties and powers of the world is founded on a methodology designed precisely to transcend particularistic, culturistic views. This is not a trumpet call for the unbridled charge of science, which, because the world is real, is capable of consequential errors, and which in any case needs (serious) ethics to guide its investigations and applications (Brereton, 2006).

15 Two divergent usages of the term ‘transcendental’ should not be confused. The erroneous view that humans can transcend the world in the sense of stepping outside
it should not be confused with the transcendental qualities of the world itself, namely, that its structures are not peculiar to particular times or places. They apply trans-factually, that is, across spatially and temporally diverse situations.

16 I said earlier in the article that the subject–object distinction is real. It is, and it is analytically indispensable. But to acknowledge distinctions is not to posit unconnected worlds.

References


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