Anthropocentric Naturalism

Philosophers are very severe towards other philosophers.

George Santayana

An empirical philosophy is…a kind of intellectual disrobing.

John Dewey

One feature of the so-called 'new pragmatism' is its attempt to understand inquiry in terms of human practices while further emphasizing that this does not compromise the objectivity of such pursuits (Misak 2007, 1). The challenge here, as Stout emphasizes, is to make sense of this social, human side of inquiry and "our cognitive aspiration to get one's subject matter right" while resisting any attempt to tie objectivity to social consensus (Stout 2007, 7-8). Failure to do so would result in the anthropocentric dimensions of pragmatism turning narcissistic and eliminating any human concern with correctly describing objects distinct both from us and our epistemic practices.

This human, anthropocentric element of pragmatism appears in some recent formulations of naturalism as well. It plays an important role in Huw Price's subject naturalism, which emphasizes that philosophy should begin with what science tells us about us, rather than with an object naturalism that starts with nonhuman nature (Price 2004, 73). John McDowell's naturalism of second nature, which conceives of "thinking and knowing as belonging to our mode of living" is another prominent example (McDowell 2004, 94-5). Lastly, there is the recent call for a shift from nonhuman nature to human nature as a necessary supplement to our current conceptions of philosophical naturalism (see Macarthur and De Caro 2004, 1-17).

This interest in the connection between the anthropocentric dimensions of pragmatism and philosophical naturalism is also found John Dewey's mature philosophy of the 1920s, and

30s. And it was precisely the human pragmatic elements of Dewey's reconstruction of experience and nature that was forcefully attacked by critics. Here, the trouble was not seen as confined to making sense of the objective aspects of human inquiry, but to Dewey's entire conception of human experience and its place within nature. His critics highlight Dewey's use of 'experience' and 'nature' in broadly human terms as preventing the proper formulation of a consistent naturalism. These criticisms suggest that the difficulties for Dewey's view are greater than for those concerned with emphasizing the human elements of inquiry. Human experience is but one small element of nature, to then use it as the defining lense through which to understand nature in general distorts both the status of humanity and the natural world of which we are a part. Moreover, it is precisely when our conception of nature was stripped of human qualities, ends and purposes that progress in understanding the natural world was achieved. Focusing on Dewey's view helps us see that a worry about the objectivity of human practices can be seen as one illustration of a deeper suspicion concerning the anthropocentric side of pragmatism, which once coupled with naturalism, fails to capture the objective dimensions of nature itself. From our contemporary vantage point it may also seem that Dewey and his critics disagree over whether ontology rather than methodology should take precedence within a proper conception of naturalism.

However, Dewey's own remarks suggest a more complicated situation, one that remains of contemporary interest. Unlike the deflationary perspective often found in recent formulations of pragmatism, Dewey is attempting to do metaphysics, a project concerned with what he calls the "generic traits of existence" and he further argues for the use of 'empirical method' within philosophical inquiry (1925, 51). Given a proper appreciation for what are the leading concerns of philosophy, he further promotes a pragmatic, anthropological perspective as mandatory within

an empirical naturalism. How then does Dewey avoid a kind of narcissistic naturalism, a view with little emphasis on an objective nature distinct from human categories and endeavors? From the viewpoint of his critics, Dewey's approach simply cannot avoid being narcissistic; it remains unable to consistently formulate the objective dimensions of nature. I take it that Dewey's main motivations and overall conception of philosophy prevent him from answering his critics on their own terms. I will not then attempt to offer a direct reply to his critics, but seek to understand some central features of Dewey's attempt to develop an empirical metaphysics suitable to his own conception of anthropocentric naturalism. In doing so, I will mostly concentrate on his understanding of how empirical method helps philosophy.

From within this conception of anthropocentric naturalism, Dewey claims that in order to properly understand how humanity is part of nature, we need to develop philosophical conceptions of experience and nature that are responsive to empirical method. This further requires a rethinking of the concept of 'experience' in order to see how "experience is *of* as well as *in* nature" (Dewey 1925, 4a). In doing so, he looks to the example of empirical science and its methods, concluding that rather than suggesting a break or gulf between thought and nature, it supports a continuity between experience and nature. His anthropocentric naturalism thus claims to retain a kind of empirical objectivity by ensuring that philosophical dualisms retain their functional significance and not become hardened absolute divides. His emphasis is then on how the example of empirical method in science helps further the interests of philosophy. It is, I think, also useful to view this as preventing philosophy from setting limits on science. We can then see this has one example of how a proper philosophical naturalism should not impose arbitrary impositions and constraints on the empirical sciences.[1] I will briefly suggest that some other 'pragmatic' naturalists violate this requirement (my examples are McDowell and

Davidson). But first I will review some historical criticisms of Dewey's view and his responses. This will then set the stage for some discussion of relevant themes from his *Experience and Nature*.

1. Dewey and his Critics

In his 1925 review of *Experience and Nature*, George Santayana seeks to expose what he sees as the central inconsistency within Dewey's conception of naturalism, and he begins with brief account of his perspective on these issues. He tells us that:

> Naturalism is a primary system, or rather it is not a special system at all, but the spontaneous and inevitable body of beliefs involved in animal life, beliefs of which the various philosophical systems are either extensions (a supernatural environment, itself natural in its own way, being added to nature), or interpretations (as in Aristotle or Spinoza) or denials (as in idealism). (673-4)

This material framework or 'world of naturalism' is where we all live and work; it is the material elements of nature through which all actions take place. As he further indicates, philosophers in developing their respective systems attach or 'hang' various ideas, claims, words, and feelings onto this material framework or sphere of action. Naturalism can then accommodate psychology, logic and theology for Santayana, as long as these things are, as he writes "content with their natural places" (674). And, as we have just heard, their natural place is a secondary one, they are the narrative add-ons to the material framework that comprises our inevitable natural beliefs about our environment. Such additions are the products of what Santayana calls Spirit, which is his term for conscious awareness, and which he also thinks is epiphenomenal. Naturalism would then break down, for Santayana, if the mental or spiritual are "taken to be substantial on their own account, and powers at work prior to the existence of their organs, or

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[1] For a related but different use of this basic idea see Rouse 2002, 1-5.

independent of them" (674).[2]

Given this perspective, Santayana finds Dewey's naturalism ultimately inconsistent because of its commitment to the American "spirit of enterprise, of experiment, of modern industry" (675). Here, pragmatism is interpreted as the philosophical expression of American materialism and commercialism, where constant human action is seen as the source of all value and worth. This pragmatic impulse undermines the formulation of Dewey's naturalism. The basic issue is brought out in this passage:

> In nature there is no foreground or background, no here, no now, no moral cathedra, no centre so really central as to reduce all other things to mere margins and mere perspectives. A foreground is by definition relative to some chosen point of view, to the station assumed in the midst of nature by some creature tethered by fortune to a particular time and place. If such a foreground becomes dominant in a philosophy naturalism is abandoned. Some local perspective or some casual interest is set up in the place of universal nature or behind it, or before it, so that all the rest of nature is reputed to be intrinsically remote or dubious or merely ideal. This dominance of the foreground has always been the source of metaphysics… (678-9)

Dewey's attempt to capture the pragmatic spirit of American life within his naturalistic philosophy results in metaphysical interpretation of nature that for Santayana is antinaturalistic. This activist view of mind, or human foreground, described as 'experience', gives a primacy and power to human elements of nature not proper to a materialistic naturalism. The result is inconsistent since the material elements of nature are saddled with mental powers alien to their true nature. Santayana offers his conception of naturalism as immune to this fatal inconsistency, since it advocates a cosmic view of nature that is free of any specific standpoint or foreground

[2] This critical point need not be confined to Santayana's epiphenomenalism.

that deals with local human interests. In opposition to all other metaphysical philosophies that emphasize some kind of foreground, Santayana offers his own epiphenomenal materialism as the genuine form of naturalism.

Writing fifteen years later, Morris Cohen also emphasized the troublesome anthropocentric elements of Dewey's naturalism, by more explicitly linking them to the use of 'experience' and its human associations:

> It is undoubtedly a philosophy in which not physical cosmology but social anthropology or a doctrine of human experience plays the central role. It offers no vistas of nature beyond the human scene, and manifests no interest in such questions as the origin and future of our solar system or of life on our earth, or even in the natural conditions which are likely to bring about the disappearance of the human species. (1940, 198)

The key problem with Dewey's approach is not the emphasis on specific human concerns, although Cohen notes his "bewilderment" when basic cosmic issues are ignored, or given only partial treatment (198). What is more significant is that by attempting to show that all things human are natural, Dewey slides into the view that all of nature and existence can be described using the categories of human experience (200). But this is inadequate for several reasons. Since experience is something that happens to humans, it can only be a certain type of natural event, and cannot be used to describe all of nature. This seems clear from the fact that the universe existed before human beings and human experience. Moreover, within the vastness of time and space, the place of humanity is quite small, where the forces of nature that created us will also be our end. Lastly, Cohen emphasizes that if our understanding of the universe is not to remain completely subjective, but to be determined through objective consequences, then it cannot be exhausted within the thoughts, and emotions of human beings (199). Dewey's

anthropocentric naturalism then attaches too much significance to human categories when describing nature, and as a result fails to maintain the vital distinctions between human nature and non-human nature, and subjective human experience, and the objective nature of the things experienced. Without them, a proper conception of naturalism cannot be formulated.

Dewey's response to these critics takes the same general form and it provides a useful overview of some of his main commitments and motivations. His reply to Santayana indicates that for him, Santayana's cosmic naturalism implies a philosophical break or gulf between humanity and nature, one that isolates humanity from nature:

> …Santayana professes to operate without any metaphysics and is confident that a whole-hearted naturalism is inarticulate, a kneeling, before the unknowable and an adjuration of all that is human…the traits denied are those which are characteristic of human life, of the scene as it figures in human activities. Since they are found where man is, they are not, it would seem, attributable to anything but man; nature, whatever else it is or is not, is just something which does not have these traits. In short his presupposition is a break between nature and man; man in the sense of anything more than a physically extended body, man as institutions, culture, "experience."… To me, then, Santayana's naturalism appears as broken-backed as mine to him seems short-winded (57-8).

Dewey here emphasizes how Santayana's naturalism posits an ontological dualism of causally efficacious body and epiphenomenal mind, where the active material world is made sense of by the epiphenomenal mind or spirit. Not surprisingly, from the perspective of Dewey's naturalism this view looks quite 'unnatural' (58). Throughout *Experience and Nature*, Dewey argues that the human situation, perspective, or foreground falls completely within nature. Nature is then to be understood not only as the object of our experiencing, but the activity that is the union, or

coming together of experience and nature. He thus remarks, "To me human affairs, associative and personal, are projections, continuations, complications, of the nature which exists in the physical and pre-human world. There is no gulf, no two spheres of existence, no 'bifurcation'" (58). Using Santayana's terminology, nature contains both foregrounds and backgrounds, heres and theres, centers and perspectives. The only alternative to this, for Dewey, would be to claim that the presence of humanity leads to a complete break with nature. Human beings and their varied activities are seen as alien intrusions that cannot be accounted for in natural terms.[3] Importantly, this break of continuity between humanity and nature found in Santayana's view is, Dewey claims, rendered questionable because of advances in the natural sciences (58). So, the continuity of humanity and nature, or more specifically, experience and nature is he thinks indicated by the progress of science, and does not, as it had earlier, encourage a separation between thought and nature.

The issue here receives more explicit discussion in response to Cohen. Dewey emphasizes the difficulties with his use of the term 'experience'.[4] He concedes that his view relies on a circularity between experience and nature. From the side of nature, our understanding is based on results from the sciences, especially biology, which in turn is dependent on physics and chemistry. Not, he notes in the sense of ontological or semantic reduction, but in terms of the empirical methods of such areas of scientific study. From the side of experience, Dewey claims that experience, even everyday interaction with middle-sized objects, contains the materials, and processes that lead to the methods and results of the natural sciences. That is, to the very conclusions that he uses to develop his theory of experience. He further concludes:

> …this circle [between experience and nature]…is existential and historic. That is to say,

[3] Cf. Price's discussion of object naturalism and its corresponding placement problems (2004).
[4] He would later give up his attempt to rehabilitate the term, opting for 'culture' instead.

> if we look at human history and especially at the historic development of the natural sciences, we find progress made from a crude experience in which beliefs about nature and natural events were very different from those now scientifically authorized to the latter. At the same time we find the latter now enable us to frame a theory of experience by which we can tell *how* this development out of the gross experience into the highly refined conclusions of science has taken place. (1940, 246)

To Cohen's charge that Dewey's anthropocentric naturalism prevents any adequate formulation of a non-human theory of nature, Dewey's responds as he did to Santayana. He notes that this is a basic challenge that any philosophy must face. It begins with the fact that it is through our sensory equipment that we have access to a non-human world. If we deny that experience of things can lead us to further insights concerning the natural world, then we affirm a separation of experience and nature, of humanity and nature. The basic question then concerns the status of experience, is it natural or not? Seen from a more contemporary perspective, we might phrase the question more precisely in terms of exactly how experience is to be naturalized. It is the way in which Dewey reconstructs the notion of 'experience' in biological terms that allows him to affirm its natural status. His point is that it is only in such a way that basic features of human experience can find a place in the natural world in the face of a modern scientific understanding of nature.

2. Themes from *Experience and Nature*

It is with his ambitious and difficult *Experience and Nature* (1925) that Dewey further defends such claims. He attempts to locate a middle position between a mechanical materialism that makes problematic the locating of human elements in nature, and a subjective idealism that seems to remove thought from the natural world. The book itself can be roughly divided into

three main elements. There is a fairly detailed diagnostic historical narrative, which attempts to trace various philosophical dualisms back to their sources, and indicate why they continue to have a negative impact on current ways of thinking. A second element makes use of information from the current state of sciences at the time, most notably biology, psychology and even anthropology. Lastly, there is Dewey's attempt to offer a naturalistic reconstruction of metaphysics and epistemology, one that he thinks is needed to properly integrate human activities within nature (Godfrey-Smith, Forthcoming). I will touch briefly on each of these elements.

Probably the best entry point into Dewey's general outlook starts with his problem solving account of human inquiry (Campbell 1995, Godfrey-Smith Forthcoming). According to this view, thought emerges in response to troubling aspects of our local environment. The surrounding worldly conditions in which we live generate experiences that signal a problematic situation. This is a basic result of the fact that conditions change; they are subject to variability, and uncertainty. Human thought is then a response to such changes, seeking to reestablish a stable equilibrium between the agent and the environment. This is accomplished through action, where we try to transform the conditions that give rise to the problem. As one recent commentator explains, "In tracking the state of the world and arriving at effective forms of action, agents use stable features of the world as resources; these make it possible to get some purchase on the unstable features" (Godfrey-Smith, 4). Dewey thinks that while human life is not wholly about problem solving, it does largely consist of such ongoing attempts at achieving balance with our surrounding social and natural world.

It is should be clear that this view has a naturalistic basis in biology and psychology, and in *Experience and Nature* Dewey also draws on details from anthropology (see especially 40-77).

His evolutionary-biological account of experience is then tied to the interaction of human creatures with features of their local environment. His emphasis on 'continuity' between experience and nature finds no radical breaks between the activities associated with human inquiry and the sorts of adaptive responses seen in the animal world generally.[5] The target here is various dualisms that have negatively impacted our understanding of the relationship between experience and nature (and other dualisms such as mind and world, thought and nature, subject and object). Clearly, Dewey intends to show that there is no gap, gulf, or separation between human experience and nature. However, he is not simply denying that there is a problem or claiming that these distinctions are total philosophical confusions (see Godfrey-Smith, Forthcoming). Rather, they usually point to a real distinction that has a sort of functional significance (see Dewey 1925, 24; 72). Philosophers have historically distorted such functions, leading to a hard and fast separation between, for example, thought and world. However, if we refocus our attention on the functional importance of the distinction, by tracing its connection to experience, we can understand its import without committing what Dewey calls *the* philosophic fallacy: the conversion of eventual functions into antecedent existence (1925, 29). I interpret this move as a kind of philosophical loosening of the distinction in question, so that it becomes more responsive to experience, while no longer looking like a fixed philosophical constraint on empirical science. For Dewey, this emphasis on experience and empirical method, help us rethink the relation between experience and nature so that such distinctions retain their practical import for addressing moral problems. For us, I would suggest that this helps prevent philosophical distinctions from looking like arbitrary constraints on empirical science.

Dewey traces the source of this philosophical distortion to classic Greek thought and its

[5] Dewey also thinks that biological facts support the idea that our epistemic interaction with nature develops from forms of non-epistemic interaction (see 1925, 23). In chapter two of *Experience and Nature* he argues that this is

treatment of knowledge in isolation from our richer non-epistemic contact with our environment. This yielded further ontological divisions resulting in knowledge becoming the contemplation of a stable superior form of reality. Modern thought continued to be influenced by such ideas, while at the same time, our epistemic practices began to change. Scientific methods were viewed as more experimental and continuous with the arts. And this provided us with a highly successful mechanical view of nature. However, philosophical accounts of knowledge remained stagnant. The reality of the mechanical world was then taken as the proper object of knowledge. So, our everyday experience of the world with its values, colors and middle-sized dry goods now becomes problematic. It is unclear how human thought and experience is related to the natural world given its apparent composition and activities (for more on this narrative see Godfrey-Smith Forthcoming and Dewey 1925, 40-77, 1920).

Take the example of a general dualism between subjects and objects. Dewey emphasizes our natural bias towards the objective, where what we experience is taken to exist independently of our attitudes (12-13). This further encourages the drawing of a distinction between subjects and objects. Dewey notes that our ability to make such a distinction was a mark of a real intellectual progress:

> …the recognition of "subjects" as centres of experience together with the development of "subjectivism" marks a great advance. It is equivalent to the emergence of agencies equipped with special powers of observation and experiment, and with emotions and desires that are efficacious for production of chosen modifications of nature. For otherwise the agencies are submerged in nature and produce qualities of things which must be accepted and submitted to. It is no mere play on words to say that recognition of subjective minds having a special equipment of psychological abilities is a necessary

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supported by everyday facts about human experience (See Dewey 1925, 40-77; Godfrey-Smith Forthcoming).

> factor in subjecting the energies of nature to used as instrumentalities for ends. (Dewey 1925, 13)

Reflection on our everyday experience of things, what Dewey calls 'primary experience', has yielded a greater recognition of our subjective psychological abilities and how they interact with and manipulate aspects of nature. From this standpoint of primary experience there is no gap between subjects and objects, since our everyday experience of things is of them interacting in various ways. It is through reflection, what Dewey calls 'secondary experience', that we have become capable of marking this divide. The difference then between primary and secondary experience, is that primary experience concerns our pre-reflective interaction with things, while secondary experience is the product of reflective, systematic thinking on the content of primary experience. It is within reflective experience that we find the objects and theories of science and philosophy. Dewey further claims that science is importantly different from philosophy it that it not only takes its content from primary experience but returns to it through its emphasis on testing, verification and confirmation. His key criticism of philosophy is not its emphasis on 'abstract theorizing' but it conducting its reflective thinking without reestablishing any connection with primary experience.

Stated somewhat more specifically, the problem occurs when philosophy takes the results of this reflection as itself primary and then views the content and processes found in our everyday experience as dubious or unreal. But from the standpoint of an empirical philosophy that takes our experience of things as primary we get a different result: "To a truly naturalistic empiricism, the moot problem of the relation of subject and object is the problem of what consequences follow in and for primary experience from the distinction of the physical and the psychological or mental from each other" (10). The distinction between mental-physical or

subject-object is then a product of the kind of systematic reflection found in secondary experience. If we now take these distinctions and attempt to apply them to our primary experience of things, we are trying to achieve an improved understanding of the possible systematic relations found there. By noting in reflection the difference between the physical as opposed to the mental, we open up the possibility of the making of tools, instruments and technologies that, of course, lead to continued advances in the sciences. There is an improved understanding of the way subjects and objects systematically interact within our environment. The increased ability to control and manipulate features of our local surroundings then furthers our own interests by offering better ways to control the events that impact our daily lives.

For Dewey the empirical method of science then stands as an example of the way experience and nature are integrated and how the separation found in reflective experience is then further utilized through a return to this unity found in primary experience. It is, he thinks, only by philosophy adopting such an empirical methodology that we can do justice to our primary experience of things, and not promote dualisms that become fixed objects of reflection and of no practical consequence for our ongoing dealings with nature. From this perspective, such dualisms would also stand as arbitrary philosophical constraints on empirical science.

Is then Dewey committed to a narcissistic form of naturalism, with no emphasis on an objective nature distinct from human categories? The answer is not as straightforward as his critics would suggest. Within his version of anthropocentric naturalism, the usefulness of the philosophical dualisms he criticizes, is discovered through their ability to further our understanding of the interaction between us and nature. Dewey's philosophical concerns focus on the practical problems of life, but the philosophical tools used for addressing them are themselves a product of our experience with things, and they further prove their worth through

contact with experience. Because his conception of experience is depicted in terms of the interactive problem-solving context of agents in an unstable world, our understanding of nature is never up to us alone. To think otherwise, would be to reflective experience as primary, the basic problem that Dewey charges to the historical contributions of philosophy. This would, once again, isolate our philosophical distinctions from contact with what science has revealed about experience. It then prevents an adequate philosophical conception of our place in nature from being formulated and places sharp constraints on what empirical science may further reveal about ourselves.

3. Two Other Pragmatic Naturalists: Davidson and McDowell

Let me conclude by briefly sketching how two recent versions of pragmatic naturalism appear to violate this Deweyan requirement.[6] Donald Davidson's recent work argues that a triangular causal and social interaction between individuals and their environment indicates some of the needed conditions for the emergence of thought and language (2001). His basic idea is that the matching of shared responses to shared aspects of the world provides the framework within which error, and thus conceptualization, can apply to brute animal response. When this shared social and causal interaction is further recognized by its participants, we can note how these conditions make possible the application of intentional concepts. While such conditions are deemed necessary, Davidson is explicit that they fail to be sufficient, which is to be expected given is long time commitment to the irreducibility of the intentional to the non-intentional. At some point must introduce our own set of intentional concepts to characterize the causal and social dynamics as a transition from brute response to conceptual thought. But this would be to project our understanding of intentional vocabulary into the picture, and thus presuppose exactly

what is trying to be explained. Davidson concludes that while we can locate some of the conditions that generate thought and language a full account of the emergence of intentional discourse is unavailable. Here, the philosophical distinction between the intentional and the non-intentional has become fixed or hardened, where no empirical account can bridge the separation encouraged by this divide. Davidson is explicitly committed to there being no empirical account available that fully explains how the intentional emerges from the non-intentional. A discontinuity between features of our human life and physical nature is then preserved within his view. This further suggests that a philosophical constraint has been placed on empirical science and its ability to account for these elements of human experience.

This discontinuity is perhaps more starkingly put in John McDowell's work, when he notes that human knowledge and intentionality only come into view from within a Sellarsian 'space of reasons', and cannot be adequatedly placed within the realm of nature captured in the contrasting 'space of law' (1994, 2004). As McDowell notes, this makes human knowledge seem unnatural. However if we could expand our understanding of nature beyond the realm of law, and think of knowledge as a manifestation of our second nature, then these distinct human abilities can be conceived as fully natural. On this view, our 'second nature' is a distinctive type of human immersion into the varying cultural practices that sustain our ability to make evaluations, judgments and engage in rational, critical inquiry. McDowell further suggests that to cultivate this broader understanding of nature is all the philosophical work that needs to be done with regard to the reason-nature dualism. That is, no constructive philosophy is needed, and there is little philosophical value in wondering about the empirical underpinnings of such abilities. It appears, once again, that we have a fixed distinction between reason and nature that

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[6] For more detailed critical discussion of McDowell's view from a Deweyan perspective, see Godfrey Smith Forthcoming and Welchman 2008. For two commentators who interpret Davidson as a pragmatic naturalist see

has no contact with empirical information of any sort. The result in both of these cases, is a philosophical constrain on empirical science, which because of its 'armchair' quality seems quite arbitrary.

Dewey does not want the use of philosophical distinctions to fall prey to this isolation and separation from the empirical. He shares Davidson's and McDowell's commitment to a non-reductive naturalism. But because he draws on materials from a broader range of empirical science (such as biology and anthropology), he develops conceptions of experience and nature that are based on relevant empirical information and that attempt to prevent a sharp divide between human abilities and the rest of nature. Davidson's and McDowell's formulations of the mind-world distinction suggest that empirical science is limited in its ability to explain the relations between them. But if such views make it impossible to explain how our 'second nature' arises from our animal nature then we have, once again, introduced a troubling separation of humanity from nature. For Dewey this has the additional harmful consequence of obscuring our contact with nature, and our further ability to interact with and modify nature in order to address our ongoing problems. Contemporary pragmatic naturalists would do well to heed this Deweyan advice.

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