



One with nature

Description

“Architecture answers to the human need to become one with nature,” headlines a [blog post](#) reporting a speculative project featuring houses covered in foliage. To be “one with nature” still has currency in this high tech age. The phrase has several uses, e.g. to indicate:

1. an attitude and set of practices in which people recognise their co-dependence with the environment they live in;
2. an experience of immersion and engagement in which any sense of separateness evaporates (perhaps a psychological state when absorbed in a task, in a trance, while meditating, etc);
3. a stance that attaches value to what we think of as nature (opposed to being “at one” with something else, such as consumerism, technology, etc.);
4. a kind of Neoplatonism that sees unity with the cosmos as the highest goal of human being;
5. a Pragmatic and Phenomenological position that challenges the object/subject divide “to be addressed in what follows.

Object/subject



Advocates of “oneness with nature”•

commonly react against a position that separates: (1) the natural universe in all its vastness; and (2) our experience of it.

The universe has been around for a lot longer than there have been human beings to experience it, probe its depths and talk about it.

This object/subject split is a variant of Cartesian dualism: the objective world versus the subjective world of human experience. There’s nature on the one hand that is complex, and of massive scale and duration; on the other hand, there is human experience – recent, fleeting, and imperfect.

The Pragmatic philosopher John Dewey challenged the basic tenets of Cartesianism in his book *Experience and Nature*. He maintained that the object/subject divide is not the best place to begin developing an understanding of the world.

Control

As intellectual heirs of Rene Descartes and the Enlightenment, it’s easy for us to think of stuff in the world (objects), and how we (subjects) observe them as two separate entities (“things” for Descartes). This distinction has use in the exercise of control, the attribution of cause and effect, and arguably has contributed to developments in science, engineering, and design.

But it also raises problems, not least for philosophers: how do the mind and world interact? Dewey says that “the result is a picture of a world of things indifferent to human interests because it is wholly apart from experience” (11).

Dewey was writing at a time before the circulation of concepts such as “environmental crisis,” but we could expand the Cartesian problematic to various modern conceits about mastery over nature, arguably the source of many of today’s environmental problems.

Thicker experience

Dewey challenges the whole Enlightenment project: “Since the seventeenth century this conception of experience as the equivalent of subjective private consciousness set over against nature, which consists wholly of physical objects, has wrought havoc in philosophy. It is responsible for the feeling mentioned at the outset that ‘nature’ and ‘experience’ are names for things which have nothing to do with each other” (11-12).

Contrary to Descartes’ object/subject dualism, Dewey argues that experience is “no infinitesimally thin layer or foreground of nature.” He claims that experience “penetrates” into nature, “reaching down into its depths, and in such a way that its grasp is capable of expansion; it tunnels in all directions and in so doing brings to the surface things at first hidden as miners pile high on the surface of the earth treasures brought from below.” (3a).

As a strong advocate of empirical, evidence-based science he asserts, “The very existence of science is evidence that experience is such an occurrence that it penetrates into nature and expands without limit through it” (i). Experience has two integrated aspects: “It is ‘double-barrelled’ in that it recognizes in its primary integrity no division between act and material, subject and object, but contains them both in an unanalyzed totality” (8).

Practical use

Dewey’s is a pragmatic position. To put it crudely, a philosophy is right as long as it is useful: “Thus there is here supplied, I think, a first-rate test of the value of any philosophy which is offered us: Does it end in conclusions which, when they are referred back to ordinary life-experiences and their predicaments, render them more significant, more luminous to us, and make our dealings with them more fruitful?” (7)

Contrary to such positive use value, he rejects any philosophy that renders ordinary experience more opaque, where philosophic concepts exist “in separation in some technical realm of their own” (7).

Putting Dewey’s pragmatism into practice, there’s also scope for testing the various “one with nature” narratives. I don’t think Dewey supports a romantic return-to-nature narrative, nor a pie-in-the-sky Neoplatonism. In practical terms these could be charged with rendering “ordinary experience more opaque” as they imply disengagement from the everyday practical world of devices, equipment and technology “as well as nature.”

There’s obvious value in the idea of co-dependence in terms of recognising the consequences of our complex interactions. Perhaps there’s also value in dipping in and out of an experience of oneness as a therapeutic, recreational, shared and life affirming process.



References

- Dewey, John. 1958. *Experience and Nature*. New York: Dover
- Hickman, Larry A. 1992. *John Dewey's Pragmatic Technology*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press

Note

- The first image is Kol'nigssee, Germany; the second is dandelion seeds at Edale, England.

Category

1. Nature

Tags

1. design
2. experience
3. nature
4. unity

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