

ART AND OUR EARTHLY ABODE:  
DEWEY ON THE AMELIORATIVE POTENTIAL OF  
AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

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Throughout the history of aesthetics, many thinkers have not only inquired into what distinguishes art from other types of human work, but have also explored what, if any, specific *work* a work of art might do for those immersed in an aesthetic experience.<sup>1</sup> Many of these inquiries focus on art's seeming ability to offer us some form of consolation. This focus often goes hand-in-hand with descriptions attempting to account for the sense that an artwork allows us to steal a glimpse into the 'ideal,' 'spiritual,' or 'ineffable' side of reality. So, one of the interpretations of art's work is that through it, some of humanity's most primordial existential anxieties might be ameliorated, thus transforming the very way the beholder comports herself towards the world.

Two important theorists of art subscribing to such a view, Immanuel Kant and John Dewey, can both plausibly be read as supporting the view that art can indeed combat the existential *Unheimlichkeit* engendered by the finitude and contingency of our earthly being,

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<sup>1</sup> While an aesthetic experience can certainly be elicited by nature itself, here it is simply meant to connote the type of experience evoked by a work of art considered to possess 'aesthetic value.'

and thus help us to feel more at home in the world.<sup>2</sup> But, although both agree that any sense of alienation one might feel within her phenomenal existence can be transformed through the work of art, the explanation each gives for this transformative capacity betrays some important differences. Indeed, Dewey sees the contrast between himself and Kant as having to do primarily with the latter's appeal to the infinite and non-contingent in the development of his account. In this paper, I aim to illuminate how – by taking this difference as his point of departure in explaining art's transformative capacity – Dewey presents an equally compelling, and perhaps even more inclusive, account of how art is capable of helping us feel more at home in the world, and is one that actually places the transformative locus of the work of art within our phenomenal, contingent, and finite existence.

Though there are many competing interpretations of Kant's aesthetics, as well as of his position in the realism-idealism debate, the popular legacy of Kant which paints him as the transcendental metaphysician *par excellence* is the version inherited and employed by Dewey. To cut incredibly short the aesthetic portion of this relatively standard Kantian story, one of the most crucial aspects of the work that an artwork does rests in its gesture towards the supersensible substrate of our phenomenal existence.<sup>3</sup> In his introduction to the *Critique of Judgment*, Werner Pluhar argues that the Third *Critique* is the keystone of Kant's entire transcendental enterprise, in that the conception of the supersensible that emerges out of it brings together the two other conceptions of the supersensible (i.e., the

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<sup>2</sup> Translated from German, *Unheimlichkeit* roughly means 'un-homely-ness,' or a sense of the uncanny. Though neither Kant nor Dewey treats this or its English equivalent in a sustained manner, the sense of the 'uncanny' discussed in depth by, for example, Freud and Heidegger, is one that is elicited by the contingency, finitude, and overall lack of amenability to human ideals evinced by nature experienced in our lives. Kant's attempts to relegate the contingency of experience to a merely apparent status can certainly be read as betraying the belief that these 'phenomenal' issues are problematic and, as such, might prompt us to search for a 'home' that transcends time and chance. As discussed later, Dewey likewise contends that our finitude and especially our subjection to the caprice of chance can quite readily make our experience in the world *unheimlich*.

<sup>3</sup> This is an appropriate place to emphasize that this interpretation, as 'standard' as it might be (and certainly was before the detailed scholarship and imaginative readings of Kant offered by thinkers such as Christine Korsgaard), is but one possible reading of Kant, and specifically his aesthetic theory. My present purpose, however, is not to argue for its validity, but rather to showcase the merits of Dewey's successful evasion of what might at first appear to be an inevitable solution to *Unheimlichkeit*. For places where Kant strongly makes the connection between an encounter with the beautiful and the supersensible see, for instance, Sections 57 and 59 (i.e., "Solution of the Antinomy of Taste and "On Beauty as the Symbol of Morality") of the *Critique of Judgment*.

supersensible substrate of nature and the supersensible realm of freedom), as laid out in the first two *Critiques*, under the idea of an intelligent cause: a “moral author” behind our experience.<sup>4</sup> In other words, the experience of the beautiful supposedly buoys our rational faith in an extra-natural realm which houses the Ideas of God, moral freedom, and immortality. With Kant, then, we get an account of art’s transformative capacity that could be construed as rather exclusionary. As Julian Young has argued in regards to Kant’s theory of the sublime, Kant’s reliance on the noumenal to account for the redeeming quality of such an experience seems to imply that those who do not subscribe to some version of Kantian Christianity are precluded from experiencing genuine sublimity.<sup>5</sup> I would add only that Kant’s theory of art, in relying on the *supersensible* basis of nature’s subjective purposiveness,<sup>6</sup> also seems to exclude those lacking the belief in the panoply of Kantian moral ideas, specifically in the existence of a moral author behind our phenomenal reality, from having a genuinely transformative aesthetic experience, complete with all of the artwork’s ameliorative potential. But regardless of whether or not Kant’s understanding of aesthetic experience’s transformative capacity is in this way theologically exclusive, it seems undeniable that, on this account of Kant’s aesthetics, in order for one to genuinely have her orientation towards the world transformed by a work of art, she needs to at least be willing to make the metaphysical leap of faith involved in positing a supersensible, noumenal substrate beyond our natural, phenomenal existence.

This raises an important question though. If art is, in fact, capable of making us feel more at home in the world, is it even possible to give an account of such a function that does not appeal to something supersensible and beyond our empirical existence? If our existential *Unheimlichkeit* can be seen as a primary result of our confrontation with the

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<sup>4</sup> Pluhar (1987), p. cii. From the “Translator’s Introduction” in the *Critique of Judgment* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing).

<sup>5</sup> As Young puts it, on Kant’s terms, one cannot experience the sublime without also accepting the Kantian “panoply of moral ideas” – God, freedom, and immortality. Yet, if we take Kant’s claim to its conclusion, atheists or even those with beliefs contradictory to the Christian faith behind Kant’s philosophy would be lacking a crucial capacity for the sublime impression. This would, however, preclude cultures such as the ancient Greeks from experiencing the sublime – an utterly ridiculous conclusion considering the quintessential sublimity of the Greeks’ tragic art form. Young (2005), p. 134.

<sup>6</sup> I do not have the space here to articulate in detail what Kant means by this, but in short, it points to the idea that there is an extra-natural source for the feeling that beauty provides: the feeling that this world was created for us under the aegis of a supernatural authority, and, as such, is amenable to our ideas.

finitude and contingency of our lives, there is a seeming inevitability about Kant's appeal to something infinite and non-contingent.<sup>7</sup> Kant's seminal and rather compelling treatment of the sublime highlights the idea that if our most primordial anxieties stem from our empirical existence, one would be wise to look beyond the empirical to something extra-natural for redemption. Without a supersensible bastion to offer us solace, the onus of *Unheimlichkeit* appears to be an inescapable and unrelenting reality. As noted, however, Dewey also believes art is capable of assuaging our existential un-homeliness; yet, in articulating how he thinks aesthetic experience performs this work, we get an equally compelling account that, in fact, steers clear of any transcendental metaphysics. Although Kant's formalism made important strides in advancing the moral significance of non-representational and non-religious art, Dewey takes the Kantian anti-speculative charge one step further in presenting a view of the transformative potential of art that remains grounded in a naturalistic understanding of reality.

But before looking at Dewey's description of aesthetic experience to see how he believes it can possibly transform our orientation towards the world, it is first necessary to elucidate why he might think it needs transforming in the first place. While Dewey's project is certainly engaged in articulating the transactional relationship between individuals and their environment, he does not think that our habitat always presents itself in the most hospitable fashion.<sup>8</sup> Of the sense of alienation often experienced *vis-à-vis* our environment, Dewey writes, "Man finds himself living in an aleatory world; his existence involves, to put it baldly, a gamble. The world is a scene of risk, it is uncertain, uncannily unstable. Its dangers are irregular, inconstant, not to be counted upon as to their times and seasons ... Man fears because he exists in a fearful, an awful world."<sup>9</sup> Again, as it was with

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<sup>7</sup> Again, this is not to say that there are not other possible reasons for feeling down and perhaps 'alienated' from life, reasons which art may also be able to assuage, but it seems undeniable that the various ways contingency and finitude manifest themselves in our consciousness (e.g., in reflections on the seeming inevitability of fate and the certain inevitability of death) are sources of *Unheimlichkeit*. Moreover, it seems these are the anxieties both Kant and Dewey are interested in looking at in regards to art's transformative and ameliorative potential.

<sup>8</sup> Dewey's use of 'transaction' is simply meant to work against representationalist models of experience, whereby it is assumed that an isolated, autonomous subject stands against an independent, objective world. Much of Dewey's philosophical project is aimed at articulating the more intimate entwinement between the self and the world underlying any rigid subject-object distinction.

<sup>9</sup> Dewey (1925-53), v10. pp. 43-44.

Kant, our sense of estrangement from the world is the result of being confronted with the contingency and finitude inherent in our existence.

Yet this is not to say that we are totally alienated from our worldly environment, and art itself is proof of this. Dewey contends that “the fact that civilization endures and culture (as reflected in art) continues – and sometimes advances – is evidence that human hopes and purposes find a basis and support in nature.” Thus he has no reservations in proclaiming that: “Nature is the mother and the habitat of man, even if sometimes a stepmother and an unfriendly home”. It is this un-homely-ness, though, that is problematic for Dewey, for when an individual succumbs to the opinion that the world is “aleatory,” “fearful,” and “awful,” it is typically the result of the very type of discontinuous and meaningless experience Dewey so often decries. In this mode of experience, the world may be the ‘house’ in which we reside, but it is certainly not our *home*; Dewey likens such an existence to that of a stone rolling haphazardly down a hill.<sup>10</sup> And yet, while Dewey acknowledges that art does offer us some release from the deep anxieties of life, he sums up the fundamental difference between himself and Kant in contesting rhetorically that “[t]he matter at stake is whether (this) release comes ... by transfer to a radically different realm of things, or whether it is accomplished by manifesting what actual existence actually becomes when its possibilities are fully expressed.”<sup>11</sup>

In order to see how art performs this ameliorative task, however, we must first explicate some of the basic features of Dewey’s understanding of aesthetic experience. Now, while Dewey is certainly a staunch critic of formalist theories of art such as Kant’s, it is worth noting that he does place a great amount of emphasis on an artwork’s organization.<sup>12</sup> But as with any account of art that locates some or all of its aesthetic value in its organization, it is only fair to inquire into what it is about the music’s arrangement, the sculpture’s and

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<sup>10</sup> Dewey (1925-53), v10. p. 46. This mode of experience and Dewey’s disparagement of it seems analogous to how Kant understands our empirical existence in the phenomenal world – rigidly over-determined by the causal law. Unlike the stone, however, we can be either too consumed by our conscious awareness of this, or be too ready to acquiesce to such a mechanized understanding of experience.

<sup>11</sup> Dewey (1925-53), v10. p. 285.

<sup>12</sup> This is not, however, merely the play of shapes in space or intuitions in time. For Dewey, the organization of any work of art has to do with the temporal unfolding of the qualitative relations involved in the creation/perception of the work. See chapters such as “Having an Experience” and “The Organization of Energies” from *Art as Experience* for sustained discussions of the dynamic temporal organization of works of art.

painting's compositions, or the narrative structure of the novel that creates such aesthetic enjoyment – in other words, why does the work of art do the work it does? And, in complicating this task, Dewey reminds us that “there is a difference between the art product, and the *work* of art” and that while “the first is physical and potential; the latter is active and experienced.”<sup>13</sup>

According to Dewey, the active and experiential work of art works by drawing us into the temporal unfolding of a consummatory experience. In contrast to more contemplative theories of aesthetic appreciation (again, such as Kant's), Dewey plainly states that “receptivity is not passivity.”<sup>14</sup> Dewey thus makes an important distinction between the type of perception that occurs in a consummatory aesthetic experience and what he calls *mere* recognition. The latter, Dewey notes, is “perception arrested before it has a chance to develop freely,” and involves us falling back “upon some previously formed scheme.”<sup>15</sup> This is akin to what Dewey calls “*the* philosophical fallacy,” whereby experience (or our descriptions of experience) becomes overly determined by our established conceptual frameworks. Yet genuine perception, on the other hand, while it does involve receptivity, “is an act of the going-out of energy in order to receive”<sup>16</sup> and is much more open and flexible to the ever-changing dynamics of experience.

In arts such as music, drama, and poetry it is clear that our experience of them involves a temporal unfolding. These temporal media have a clear beginning, middle, and culmination in our appreciation of them. But as Bertram Morris notes, “Perception (for Dewey) ... is not an instantaneous event but a complicated process come to fulfillment” and hence “perception contains antecedents which ... make experience far richer than we can ever quite realise.”<sup>17</sup> Therefore even when appreciating one of Georgia O'Keefe's flowers, for instance, there is that initial moment of seizure, where something about the painting's organic unity strikes me and lures me into the artwork. As I tour the painting (or sculpture, or architectural design, etc.), the colours, lines, shapes, and shades all take turns in the

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<sup>13</sup> Dewey (1925-53), v10. p. 167.

<sup>14</sup> Dewey (1925-53), v10. p. 58.

<sup>15</sup> Dewey (1925-53), v10. p. 59.

<sup>16</sup> Dewey (1925-53), v10. P. 60.

<sup>17</sup> Morris (1971), p.192.

foreground of my embodied experience, yet they are not forgotten as they are replaced as the focus of my appreciation by other forms and relations. Rather, each element of the work and the qualitative content it carries with it are played off one another, intensified and vivified within the persistent and pervasive whole that is the work.

The ideal mode of reality that Dewey thinks art helps us become more aware of is directly related to his view of aesthetic perception as something that unfolds over time and yet is pervaded by a persistent recollection of the whole that is in form.<sup>18</sup> As mentioned earlier, Dewey laments that experience can all-too-easily lapse into a state comparable to that of a stone rolling aimlessly down a hill. That is, “in much of our experience we are not concerned with the connection of one incident with what went before and what comes after” and thus “we drift” and “yield according to external pressure, or evade, and compromise.”<sup>19</sup> In working out his general conception of the *aesthetic* and how it is inextricably bound to his notion of consummation, however, Dewey asks us to hypothetically reconsider the tumbling stone, albeit with a few imaginative additions to the story. So, added to the bare facts that “the stone starts from somewhere and moves ... toward a place and state where it will be at rest – toward an end,” Dewey suggests we add:

The ideas that it looks forward with *desire* to the final outcome; that it is interested in the things it meets on its way, conditions that accelerate and retard its movement with respect to their bearing on the end; that it *acts* and *feels* toward them according to the hindering or helping function it attributes to them; *and that the final coming to rest is related to all that went before as the culmination of a continuous movement.*<sup>20</sup>

Now, according to Dewey, such an experience is what art is capable of eliciting, and it is the glue holding such an experience together that gets at the heart of how he thinks art can transform our very orientation towards the world and liberate us from the sense of

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<sup>18</sup> It is important here to note that Dewey is not averse to the ‘ideal’ *per se*, but merely to what we might consider ‘top-down’ theories of the ideal (such as Kant’s). For Dewey, the ideal mode of reality is something that must always have a grounding in our material existence (and thus could be considered a ‘bottom-up’ approach to the ideal).

<sup>19</sup> Dewey (1925-53), v10, p. 46. In other words, time because a completely linear sequence of events whereby the dynamic interplay of the past, present, and future is neglected.

<sup>20</sup> Dewey, (1925-53), v10. p. 46 (emphasis added).

*Unheimlichkeit* and pessimism that constantly threatens our existence. In this mode, there is a *felt* sense of an underlying purposiveness, a narrative thread tying together the various contingencies comprising the experience. For Dewey, it is the *pervasive quality* of aesthetic experience, or any consummatory experience for that matter, which binds together in an organic unity its various aspects. But, as Kenneth McClelland notes, “Pervasive quality is a very difficult concept to tease out, because its ineffable features are not easily amenable to description. For any description or attempt at definition is already a step removed from the essential ‘*isness*’ of qualitative experience.”<sup>21</sup> In other words, the immediacy of the pervasive quality makes it “wholly pre-reflective and thus pre-discursive.”<sup>22</sup> Dewey is painfully aware, however, that much of our everyday experience is disconnected entirely from this pre-discursive side of existence, which, for him, is the antecedent ground of all reflection and feeling, and that instead of basing our secondary, discursive understanding of the world on that ground, we typically “are tugged and pulled by bloodless abstractions which step in with false promises of meaning and fulfillment.”<sup>23</sup> Hence, according to Dewey, the transformative capacity of art lies in its ability to put us in touch with this pre-discursive mode of experience through cultivating our receptivity to the pervasive qualitative dimension of our fundamental transaction with the environment.

However, Dewey never fails to remind us that this primary context of experience is “inexpressible not because it is so remote and transcendent, but because it is so immediately engrossing and matter of course.”<sup>24</sup> In other words, the redeeming purposiveness brought into relief by the work of art is itself rooted in our contingent, embodied, and pre-reflective existence. In direct contrast with Kant’s conception of the ideal and *supersensible* side of reality, the one capable of alleviating the feeling of *Unheimlichkeit*, Dewey locates his conception of the ideal within the natural, material world. While it might seem like a preposterous comparison on the surface, Bertram Morris contends that the rather traditional, mimetic theory of art espoused by Plato is actually also shared to some degree by Dewey. But, as Plato “was probably thinking about the kind of

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<sup>21</sup> McClelland (1971), p. 46.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Dewey (1899-1924), v10, p. 326.

fore-shortening that Apollodorus discovered in making a two-dimensional bunch of grapes look like a three-dimensional bunch,” Morris proposes that “what Dewey actually means is that art sets up rhythms in man, rhythms which are also found in nature.”<sup>25</sup> These rhythms are what underlie our consummatory aesthetic experience and an awareness of them cultivates a sense of harmonious comfort in regards to our phenomenal existence through a sort of ecstatic movement, whereby the “quality of being a whole and of belonging to the larger, all-inclusive, whole which is the universe in which we live” is elicited and accentuated by the work of art.<sup>26</sup>

Recall that the allure of Kant’s account is that an experience of the beautiful indirectly leads us to his noumenal realm – and, so, redeems our sense of *Unheimlichkeit* by putting us in touch with something that transcends time and chance. It is difficult to deny the *prima facie* appeal of such a solution, but there also remains a certain allure to Dewey’s own account of art’s ameliorative potential. Remember that, for Dewey, aesthetic experience is a concentrated version of what he calls *an* experience – a consummatory way of inhabiting the world which proffers many more meaningful interpretive possibilities than what he considers slack or even overly-reflective ways of interacting with one’s environment. And, while Dewey does not come right out and say that everyone has had a consummatory experience at some moment in his or her lifetime, in using examples such as *that* meal, *that* storm, and even *that* job interview to illustrate what such an experience is, he presents a theory of art that highlights the emergence of aesthetic experience out of the context of our everyday lives.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Morris (1971), p. 190.

<sup>26</sup> Dewey (1925-53), v10. p. 200. It is crucial to note, however, that this comfort, this feeling at home in the world, is not some idyllic tranquility or a feeling of total mastery, but is a confidence that the individual and society can flexibly adapt to the ever-changing contingencies of existence. Strangely enough, Dewey’s view here is somewhat similar to what Kant has to say regarding an encounter with beauty, whereby we feel as though the world is fitted for our means of cognition and sense-making – but again, what is at stake in this discussion is how exactly this harmony is accounted for.

<sup>27</sup> Dewey (1925-53), v10. pp. 44, 50-51. It is significant that Dewey’s example of a consummatory job interview does not necessarily mean that one gets the job. That a genuine aesthetic experience need not lead to an ideally pleasant outcome allows for Dewey’s theory to be employed in discussions of more contemporary art movements which purposely distance themselves from something like the Kantian experience of the beautiful. Moreover, in Dewey’s view, even art that is meant to be unsettling or disjointed can still be thought of as hanging together temporally in a certain way so as to elicit the richness of an aesthetic experience.

So what is so special about art, then, if other areas of life can grant us the same gift of consummatory experience? Besides its particular qualitative intensity, it is also that art is meant to be purposive towards such an experience. Art shows how such a meaningful orientation towards the world can be *created* through tapping into the wealth of possibilities for meaning-making inherent in primary experience. According to Dewey, and to some extent Kant, our sense of *Unheimlichkeit* arises out of an over-reliance on conceptual frameworks: systems of interpretation which might not always work too well in our attempts to cope with experience – a failure that brings into focus the finitude and contingency underlying our lives. The conceptual framework of Newton, for instance, led Kant into a rather gloomy view of the world as determined, fatalistic, and often indifferent to our pursuits and values; thus he presented the noumenal realm, which art helps us cognize, if only vaguely, that can serve as the redemptive ‘True’ world beyond our empirical existence. For Dewey, however, it is an overreach of conceptual frameworks in general which can stir up a feeling of the uncanny; a feeling that the world is not our *Heim* because how we inhabit it is over-determined by pre-conceived and hyper-abstracted systems for interpreting experience.

This over-reliance on concepts and abstractions for coping with experience is one of the biggest spurs motivating Dewey’s entire philosophical project.<sup>28</sup> In discussing this project, Richard Rorty writes that Dewey “insist(s) on the goal of philosophy as the reattainment of innocence.”<sup>29</sup> This innocence, though, is not some unintelligent naiveté, but rather reflects a heightened sensitivity to the possibilities for meaning-making extant in our transactional relationship with our environment. One can therefore see why someone like Rorty admires Dewey for his attempt to reconcile the feud between poetry and philosophy that Plato initiated. For art, Dewey believes, might even be better suited than philosophy to break the crust of convention generated by conceptual entrenchment. Art can do this because its work

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<sup>28</sup> In many ways, the germs of Dewey’s project can actually be seen in Kant. Kant’s critique of dogmatic rationalism appears motivated in part by this same concern about the over-reliance on conceptualization. Moreover, it is in his aesthetics where Kant makes the case for a mode of sense-making not dependent on concepts (i.e., through *aesthetic ideas*). Thus, again, it could be said that the main point of divergence between the two concerning art’s ameliorative potential rests in the question of naturalism and Kant’s appeal to the *supersensible*, noumenal realm.

<sup>29</sup> Rorty (2008), p. 45.

brings us into a more intimate relationship with the world by setting up the rhythms of primary experience in us and making us more attuned to the pre-reflective ground of our existence. Art, therefore, suggests that while our conceptualizations arise out of primary experience, such experience is not exhausted by those conceptualizations.

Similar to Kant, then, Dewey thinks art can make us feel more at home in the world by helping us realize that there is more than just meets-the-eye in regards to our normal, everyday way of being-in-the-world. The wealth of unforeseen possibilities contained within our direct experience is Dewey's sense of the ideal side of reality, yet this ideal is something that can actually become partially manifest in our phenomenal existence.<sup>30</sup> This is why Dewey laments, in a way that unavoidably makes one think of Kant, that "the elevation of the ideal above and beyond immediate sense has operated not only to make it pallid and bloodless, but it has acted, like a conspirator with the sensual mind, to impoverish and degrade all things of direct experience."<sup>31</sup> Instead of leading us to the highest concepts and abstractions of Kant's noumenal, art actually lessens the prescription on our 'conceptual lenses,' thus making us more aware of our "deep continuity with nature" and the world, according to Dewey.<sup>32</sup> As Tom Alexander puts it, Dewey's conception of aesthetic experience is the "process of coming to inhabit the world."<sup>33</sup> In cultivating habits forged out of this intimate intercourse with the world, Dewey avers that the world "becomes a home and the home is part of our every experience."<sup>34</sup> According to Dewey, art's work therefore significantly involves this task of making us feel more at home in the world, though not by transporting us to a realm beyond the world of sense, but by illuminating for us the possibilities for coping with experience and meaning-making hidden underneath our conceptual reality. And the awareness of this robust palette of possibilities can only help us feel ourselves to be, to whatever small extent possible, the moral authors

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<sup>30</sup> I say 'partially' here to emphasize the idea that our ways of making sense of the world must always remain partial, if we are to maintain an openness and sense of wonder regarding our reality – preconditions, I believe, of Dewey's pragmatist commitment to meliorism.

<sup>31</sup> Dewey (1925-53), v10. p. 38.

<sup>32</sup> Gilmore (2002), p. 279. 'Nature' and 'world' here include not only our physical surroundings, but our social ones as well.

<sup>33</sup> Alexander (1987), p. 232.

<sup>34</sup> Dewey (1925-53), v10. p. 109.

of our own existence and capable of transforming, to some degree, the transactional reality we inhabit.

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