

## **IS DEWEY DECONSTRUCTED?**

**By Paul R. Shockley**

### **I. Introduction:**

In this paper I will compare and contrast postmodern aesthetics with John Dewey's qualitative aesthetic. Since Dewey, like postmodernists Hans-George Gadamer and Paul Ricouer, (a) rejected the philosophical mindset of modernism that advocated autonomy, certainty, and transparency, (b) the distinction between reality and experience whereby the intellect is able to theoretically rationalize, draw inferences, make conclusions, divorced from the interaction of the world, surroundings, environment, and everyday life, (c) and advocated contextualization, Dewey has been accused of being a latent postmodernist. I contend that this claim to identify Dewey with the postmodern mindset or worldview is mistaken. Therefore, in order to demonstrate that this is a false representation of Dewey, I will first describe postmodern aesthetics, (II) then proceed to summarize Dewey's approach with a concluding synopsis of their differences (III). I will then offer a conclusion (IV). My thesis is that while postmodernism and Dewey share specific sentiments against both modernism and the classic analytic tradition, his qualitative aesthetic approach clearly distinguishes him from both the outlook and outcome of deconstructive postmodern aesthetics because he places authority, reason, meaning, truth, and values within the context of both personal and social transformative experience.

## II. DESCRIPTIONS:

In order to differentiate Dewey from postmodernism I will describe the aesthetic theories of postmodernism as a way of thinking, then Dewey's as a philosopher. To be sure, conceptualizing both postmodernism and Dewey's aesthetic perspective is complicated if not difficult. To begin our characterizations, we should suspect that postmodernism would reject our totalizing effort, suspicious of any essentialist definition we propose since postmodernists are anti-essentialists; they will even question why we even think we could have a "privilege position" to make this assessment. On the other hand, Dewey too may resist our effort because experience, the content of consciousness (not the objectivity-subjectivity dichotomy of classic philosophy) is the starting point for any analysis. In fact, there are always relations, i.e., connections and disjunctions, which may certainly be overlooked. Thus, any analysis will be incomplete, esp. if we do it from a position that does not consider either the "the whole and the parts" or moves away from any position that is not democratically inclusive. Notwithstanding these objections, we realize deconstructionists will have to be tolerant in virtue of our interpretation even if our assessment is from a "biased, sub-cultural, scripted perspective". Thus, their perspective is no more valuable than ours for we realize that any analysis, critique, or proposition we offer that may even appear "Archimedean", objective, over-arching, or culturally, philosophically, socially, transcendent or universal would be held suspiciously, if not rejected whole heartily; surely, that would apply to their viewpoints as well-their position too is not "privileged." On the other hand, I believe Dewey would ask that we proceed with our inquiry since experience is an objective-transactional process of doing and undergoing in the context of a situation; there is the possibility that

this analysis will be transformative, creative, resolve problematic indeterminacies, doubts, or tensions, or/and (maybe both) produce other pressures that may inform our past, impact our present circumstance, and foster potentialities in our future. Therefore, we shall strive to first describe postmodern aesthetics, then on to compare postmodern aesthetics with Dewey's qualitative approach before we offer a conclusion.

*A description of postmodern aesthetics:* As a movement, postmodernism is purposely ambiguous in what it actually affirms but not in what it rejects. Thus, based upon what they rebuff and refuse, we are able to offer the following framework of beliefs:<sup>1</sup>

1. The rejection of absolute objective universal transcendent truth; Archimedean, totalizing reasoning does not exist. As a result, reality is the mind of the beholder for every human is molded or scripted by his/her own subculture (community). Thus, there is a rejection of the subjective/objective view of reality as a starting point, correspondence of truth, and foundational epistemologies.
2. The rejection of the modernistic philosophical mindset that arose out the Enlightenment: reason alone is able to examine and comprehend all aspects of life; the laws of human existence and nature can be discovered; and the scientific method can create progressively better societies and better people. Modernism as a philosophical mindset is an empty promise; it failed to produce better civilizations (e.g., Nazi Germany; biological, chemical, and nuclear threats; failure to achieve world peace even among civilized nations).
3. Rejection of the concept of absolute or objective authority. No one is able to see the whole of the situation with objectivity because of fixed biases (beliefs that do not change unless placed under extreme duress), preunderstandings (moldable influences such as peer pressure, tradition, figures we admire or follow, subcultural beliefs, etc), and perhaps "genetic, bio-chemical" oddities or personality traits; we are scripted by our subculture.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul R. Shockley, "Postmodernism as a Basis for Society?" in *God of the Bible and other Gods* by Robert P. Lightner (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998), 197-209.

From these negative critiques, postmodernism includes the following four to five major presuppositions: anti-essentialism, pluralistic openness, deconstructionism, structuralism, and perhaps post-structuralism.

*Anti-essentialism.* Postmodern aesthetics is anti-essential, meaning, a rejection of the most basic element or features of value theory by any and all authoritarian sources whether it is a figure (s) (e.g., George Dickie; Clive Bell), movement (s) (e.g., formalism), or tradition (s) (e.g., Idealism). They reject any attempt that presupposes a “bird’s eye view”; we cannot stand outside our culture and make objective universal observations. Therefore, if we are to adopt a postmodern aesthetic mindset, then the following value theories must be rejected:

1. X is whatever is good (aesthetically) is aesthetically valuable (e.g., Plato in view of good being virtue).
2. X which produces an aesthetic experience has quality-value.
3. X is beautiful (it was the main category in defining aesthetic quality prior to 20th Century; e.g., Lord Shaftsbury).
4. X has significant form (beauty is not enough; it is not the main category; rather it is form that which has ultimate significant value (e.g., Clive Bell). Clive Bell reduces beauty to form (reductionism).
5. X is that which has unity, intensity, & complexity is aesthetically valuable (e.g., Beardsley).
6. X is that which is deemed by authority as having aesthetic value (e.g., George Dickie, minimal ontology).
7. X is that which is valuable if it is autonomous “pure” or “independently original”; i.e., undefiled from any other artistic expression (modernist Clement Greenberg).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Clement Greenberg, “Modernist Painting” in *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Francis Frascina and Charles Harrison (London: Harper & Row and Open University Press, 1982), pp. 5-6.

*Pluralistic openness.* Pluralistic openness bears a threefold description: (a) the promotion of appropriation without labeling, fragmentation without definition, union without demarcation, and contextualization; (b) there is no over-arching demand, expectation, goal, or objective that must be met in order to be considered cogent or valid; (c) all expressions, goals, and styles are celebratory opportunities for further aesthetic expressions, relationships, and styles. Stated another way, there is resistance and cynicism to any aesthetic theory that categorizes, characterizes, classifies, critiques, corrects, differentiates, discriminates, and distinguishes from a “privileged position” between subject vs. object, use vs. value, truth vs. ideology, exchange vs. value, and reality vs. image. Rather, all aesthetics notions are applicable, apt, and legitimate. For example, postmodern aesthetics rejects opposites such as “good” from “bad art” or “poor” from “better art”, or classifications such “high” from “low art” and focuses on the relatedness between object X and its relative context, appreciating the multi-dimensional complexities and convoluted, fragmented, hybrid multiplication of expressions and styles between artist, audience, medium, and context; value is found in the “right” to express. Thus, the upshot is that there is *no value* distinction between those pieces of art produced by the famous Italian artists like Da Vinci, Michelangelo, and Rafael and those produced by the members of the infamous “Sensations” exhibit in New York City of the nineties, mass markets, or pop-culture.

*Deconstructionism.* Aesthetic deconstructionism is a form of literary hermeneutics applied to aesthetics. As such it can be distinguished from other interpretive approaches or value theories because deconstructionism includes the following ideas.

- a. *Conventionalism*: All meaning is relative to a culture and situation; there is no meaning prior to language;
- b. *Perspectivalism*: All truth is conditioned by one's perspective.
- c. *Referentialism*: There is no perfect reference or one-to-one correspondence between words/art and the meaning they confer. Meaning, therefore, is ultimately un-transferable between artist and audience.
- d. *Differentialism*: All rational structures leave something out whereby the deconstructionist approaches the art with suspicion, looking for the "difference," the "ambiguous," or the unknown something that is overlooked.
- e. *Solipsism*: Outside of personal existence, true knowledge of anything else is impossible because meaning is inherently unstable and shifting.
- f. *Semantic progressivism*: One will never exhaust all possible meanings. An object can always be deconstructed.

Postmodern aesthetics is not interested in destroying or negating meaning, but reconstructing it. Since meaning is contextual, a postmodernist always looks for the "difference" without offering any definition, description, characterization, or label. In reaction to the objectivist approach who uses either fixed universal rules (e.g., T. Aquinas) or established rules (e.g, George Dickie, Clement Greenberg) created by authoritarianism that determines that X is objectively beautiful, postmodernists reject any Archimedean perspective, value judgment, or prescriptive claim that is condemnatory, exclusive, or totalizing. Rather, they stress and celebrate ambiguity, uncertainties, complexities, expression, fragmentation and the unrepresentable, without demarcation, definition, and categorical distinctions. Therefore, the upshot of using a postmodern aesthetic is rejection, suspicion, and cynicism of any expression that emphasizes form, unity, symmetry, a-historical representation, transcendent metaphysics, authority,

universal rules, or absolute ethics in favor of a “Heidegger type” emphasis on temporality, partiality, incompleteness, and contextualization.

*Structuralism and Poststructuralism.* Related to the above discussion is both structuralism and post-structuralism. *Structuralism* is an approach that sees meaning as defined relationally (synchronic outlook); it is opposed to any theoretical approach in the analytic tradition. This approach emphasizes “*semiology*” whereby there is *no natural connection* between the signified (what the sign represents) and the signifier (the word that represents the signified). Thus, *meaning is assigned by the community*. Each signifying concept is produced in the context of a system of differences. To be sure, meaning has less to do with its referent than with its relations to others meanings. In other words, meaning is both “*self-defining*” and “*self-contained*.” This is illustrated quite well by Saussure’s analogy with Chess (whereby the notion of check is defined internally).

In chess, what is external can be separated relatively easily from what is internal...everything having to do with its system and rules is internal.

But just as the game of chess is entirely in the combination of the different chess pieces, language is characterized as a system based entirely on the opposition of its concrete units.<sup>3</sup>

However, structuralism’s critique of modernism led to its own set of definitions, ideas, and judgments whereby it established an identity with a privileged position or special vantage point (which is ironic since structuralism is the critique of all structures); it became another structure with an essentialist type agenda i.e., the critique of structure. Therefore, in response to structuralism’s “*identity crisis*” post-structuralism arose.

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<sup>3</sup> Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, edited by Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, tr. Wade Baskin. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), 20, 107.

*Post-structuralism* is an even more radical movement for it denies the following: (1) any meaning and truth, (2) *any distinction* between rational inquiry and context, literal and metaphorical meaning, and (3) any identification that leads to any definition, description, or representation.

Applied to aesthetics, postmodern approach to aesthetics applauds that which promotes both contextualization and synchronic emphases. Thus, postmodern aesthetics may not only critique any universal rule, depiction, or metaphysical property but may be taken to a fanatical level whereby there are claims which assert no distinction between the literal and metaphorical. It appears that they are only able to observe but not identify (describe) without adopting some descriptive, defining, or essentialist agenda or title.

### **III. Why John Dewey is Deweyan, not Postmodern:**

Having described postmodern aesthetics which involves a rejection of objective universal truth, modernism, and legitimate authority with assumptions that include anti-essentialism, pluralistic openness, deconstructionism, structuralism and perhaps post-structural presuppositions, we will now proceed to summarize Dewey's qualitative aesthetic in order to demonstrate why Dewey should not be considered postmodern. The following seven summary points should suffice to show the differences between Dewey's aesthetic and the postmodern mindset.

A. *Dewey is both Subjective-Objective.* John Dewey's qualitative method is both subjective and objective. Dewey combines both subject and object together qualitatively into an inclusive democratic (social-individual) process or system that involves perception, analysis, and synthesis. Thus, while we can only start where we are (contextualization), the more we inquire and investigate our environment the more

informed we become; thus Dewey may be pluralistic (plurality of values), but he is not relativistic (all values are relative).

To be sure, Dewey rejects the theoretical starting point of classical philosophy whereby there is a knowable distinction between the objective and subjective, the old and the new, and the actuality and potential, whereby people are able to observe and analyze from an Archimedean, absolutist, and passive point of view. Though he attacks this distinction between reality and experience whereby the intellect is able to theoretically rationalize, draw inferences, make conclusions, divorced from the interaction of the world, surroundings, environment, and everyday life (from a passive posture), he argues not for a relativistic position but one of transformative experience that involves the continual activities of “*doing*” (which gives variety and movement) and “*undergoing*” (which supplies unity), integration within, demarcation from others, completing at every stage, retaining, and summing up what has gone before.<sup>4</sup>

B. *Dewey is both Conventional-Informative.* John Dewey’s qualitative method is both conventional and informative about our environment. One of the reasons why Dewey appears to be postmodern is that he embraces contextualization. However, those who accuse him of being postmodern fail to understand that while Dewey would acknowledge that our starting point cannot be a-historical, he contends that meaning is both objective and subjective, for it involves both an objective-transactional process of doing and undergoing in the context of a situation *because* there is no separation between reality and experience. Thus, the more we strive, the more informed we become about our environment and our particular and collective situation; it is a transformative inclusive activity of both the world and those who live in it. This is vastly different from

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<sup>4</sup> John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Penguin Group, 1934), 45.

that of a deconstructionist who would never include the objective element into their approach; Dewey is a contextualist from a Deweyan perspective of sorts.

C. *Pluralism, not Relativism.* For postmodernists, all values are relative. There is no difference if we behave like Adolf Hitler or Mother Theresa. However, for Dewey it matters very much how we behave for there are degrees of values; experience informs us of the value of moral decisions, past, present, and future. In fact, Dewey's qualitative method allows us to both invent and pursue values. We are able to create standards via pragmatic situationalism. And we are able to determine what is better and worse by considering cultural context (ultimate), habits and sentiments, personal and social experimentation, and coherency. However, we can't begin outside of our environment or explore or critique from a bird's eye view. Rather, we must begin where we are and allow the transformative experience to inform our past, impact our present circumstances (involving both tension and resolution), and be open to future potentialities.

D. *Naturalistic Referentialism.* Dewey's qualitative method embraces referentialism of a Deweyan sort. While there may not be a perfect reference, there is indeed a naturalistic correspondence of the particular; it is not a universal timeless reference or a quest for a certainty whereby we can leave our biases aside. Rather, we start where we are, acknowledging our biases. This is different than postmodern referentialism whereby meaning is ultimately un-transferable between the artist and interpreter.

E. *Informed Differentialism:* For Dewey, while we cannot escape the limits of our biases we can acknowledge what they are. This is different from postmodernists who say that we are scripted by our subculture, and thus blinded by our biases (both

unconsciously and consciously; Freudian undertones). Rather, the doing and undergoing, always returning to our original primary experience, will expose out biases. Thus, discovery of our biases is “*a conversion within.*” Thus, while our starting point cannot be a-historical, the more we strive the more informed we become about us and our environment, both personally and socially.

F. *Meaningful meanings.* For Dewey, while he may acknowledge that we will never exhaust all possible meanings (*semantic progressivism*), we do differentiate (make value judgments), determining which meaning (s) is better or worse than others-for not all views are equal. This is evident in that there is a tendency to immediately start with a meaning that we believe is better (for not all possible meanings are equally good) and thus, we find guidance within. Stated a different way, while we may acknowledge that there is no outside perspective that is a-historical and we may never exhaust all possible meanings, we are able to and do make value judgments, depending upon context/situation because of our past experiences. A postmodernist, if consistent, would never make this claim. Therefore, for Dewey, we are able to and do make value judgments.

G. *And Pro-Authority and Optimistic.* Whereas postmodernists, especially those who embrace structuralism and post-structuralism, are anti-authoritative and cynical towards any form of authority on the basis that authority prides itself in seeing circumstances objectively (vantage viewpoint), Dewey is not. Rather than being anti-authoritative, Dewey advocates democratic inclusivism (social and personal, the one and the many). It would be inappropriate for Dewey to be anti-authoritative since he knows that this is not useful. Rather, democratic inclusivism offers possibilities since it is not negligent towards outsiders, the misfortunate, or ill-respected and opens doors for

progress that is not bound to the abuses of fascist type personalities, elitism, imperialism, communism, or objective, fixed rules. Thus, we are able to be optimistic regarding the future we create; we are free.

Therefore, in synopsis form, if we compare and contrast these seven major qualities of Dewey's aesthetics: subjective-objective, conventional-informative, plurality of values, naturalistic referentialism, informed differentialism, meaningful meanings, pro-authority, and optimism, and compare them to the features of postmodern aesthetics: rejection of truth, modernism, and authority (cynicism) with presuppositions that take in anti-essentialism, pluralistic openness, deconstructionism, structuralism and perhaps post-structural presuppositions, we are aptly able assume that John Dewey is not a latent postmodernist. While they share certain opinions, Dewey does not reject authority, reason, meaning, or values. Rather, he places them within the context of personal and social experience.

#### **IV. Conclusion:**

In this paper I took issue with the misconception that John Dewey was a latent postmodernist. This false misunderstanding is likely due to the fact that Dewey, like Gadamer and Ricoeur, rejected the passive posture whereby an individual can emphasize discontinuity between theory and reality, the subjective and objective. I argued that this claim to identify Dewey with the postmodern mindset or worldview is fallacious. Therefore, in order to demonstrate that this is a false representation of Dewey, I described the major aspects of postmodern aesthetics which involves rejection of absolute objective universal truth, modernism, and authority with assumptions that include anti-essentialism, pluralistic openness, deconstructionism, structuralism and perhaps post-structural

presuppositions. I then proceeded to sum up seven major features of Dewey's qualitative aesthetics in order to demonstrate why Dewey was not a latent postmodernist, and offered a synoptic overview. My thesis is that while postmodernism and John Dewey share certain sentiments against the philosophical mindset of modernism, Dewey's qualitative aesthetic is clearly unique because he places authority, reason, meaning, truth, and values within the context of both personal and social transformative experience.

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