

## The Characteristics of Dewey's Theory of Art and Religion and Their Commonality as Experience

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In 1934, Dewey published two books, “Art as Experience” and “A Common Faith,” both of which are theories of art and religion, respectively <sup>1</sup>. In this presentation, I will capture the characteristics of the experience of this theory of art and theory of religion, and in the last section, I will describe the commonalities between the theory of religion and the theory of art as experience.

### I. Sources of Artistic Experience and the Experience of the Religious

Dewey's philosophy is “naturalistic empiricism,”<sup>2</sup> and his philosophical position is “monism,” which holds that there is continuity between nature and spirituality. Nature, according to Dewey, is what we touch and experience in our ordinary experience. Moreover, this ordinary experience is full of quality, and is the source of all meaning, including aesthetic and religious quality. Among these ordinary experiences, artistic expression uses as material the sensory quality of a sound, a color, a taste, a smell, and so on. Through artistic expression, artistic experience creates something which provides esthetic experience. The religious, as Dewey argues in his theory of religion, accompanies scientific, artistic, and moral experience as well. This is the attitude of human beings in creating a good adaptive relationship with the environment.

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<sup>1</sup> J. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, Capricorn Books, 1934. J. Dewey, *A Common Faith*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1934.

<sup>2</sup> J. Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, Dover Publications, 1929. p.1a.

## II. Characteristics of Artistic Experience

The purpose of Dewey's theory of art was to formulate a new philosophy of art, one in which art and ordinary experience are continuous and art is developed from ordinary experience. In his art theory, Dewey developed the concept of "experience" to describe art as a development of ordinary experience. Experience is the interaction between living beings and their environment. The organism acts on the environment and the environment affects the organism. Dewey calls the successful development of this interaction between an organism and its environment "an experience." An experience has a common structure based on the following characteristics. ① There is continuity in experience. ② Perception accompanies experience. ③ Experience is imaginative. ④ Emotional quality accompanies experience. When ordinary experience is equipped with the above characteristics through reflective thinking, it becomes an experience together with artistic experience, scientific experience, and so on.

What is the difference between "artistic experience" and "scientific experience"? It is the materials that make up artistic and scientific experience. The material of art consists of qualities such as color and sound, which we use to think. In contrast, the material of scientific experience, which has an intellectual conclusion, consists of signs and symbols such as H<sub>2</sub>O, and we think with this material<sup>3</sup>. Art is the union of material and spirit through the artistic experience resulted from interaction of the spirit with the qualitative media of sound, color, and the body, which are the materials of art. This is the main point of Dewey's theory of art. Art is the idealization of the "sensory quality" found in ordinary experience because of the interaction between the material and spirit. Sensory quality is the material of art. Sensory quality refers to the colors, sounds, tastes, smells, etc. that we perceive with our senses in relation to natural things. For example, we can distinguish between the blue of the sky and the blue of the ocean. Natural science has been silent on the qualitative, dividing nature into quantitative and qualitative. Dewey states that the scientific revolution of the 17th century began by ignoring the "immediate quality" ( "sensible quality" ) of nature<sup>4</sup>. Dewey's view is that modern science shunned and excluded "sensory quality." Dewey also states that the development of the sensory quality of nature should bring fruition in art<sup>5</sup>.

Sensory qualities are the materials and also medium of artistic expression. The noises and tones that accompany sensory qualities become the material and medium of music. The blue of the sea and the blue of the sky, with their sensory qualities, become the material and

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<sup>3</sup> J. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, Capricorn Books, 1958 (1934) p. 38.

<sup>4</sup> J. Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, p. 263.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.* p.120.

medium of painting. Art is the activity of expressing the meaning of the sensory qualities associated with these natural materials through the mediums of sound, color, body, and words. In the case of painting, the single medium of color expresses the meaning of sensory qualities experienced by the senses. When sensory qualities are expressed through a medium, materials are organized and composed, and the form and matter of art are generated to become artistic expression. Form refers to the external aspect of the work and content refers to the internal aspect, which are the organization and composition of the materials. In other words, content refers to the meaning of the sensory quality associated with the material, which is condensed by the form into a quality, for example, “massive quality.”

Next, Dewey says that in artistic experience, there is a rhythm of loss and recovery of the union between the self and the environment <sup>6</sup>. For example, when a sculptor uses a chisel and hammer to cut stone as an external material to create a work of art, the inner material of images, observations, memories, and emotions acts on the outer material, the inner material of images affects the outer material. As the material changes, the inner material changes as well <sup>7</sup>. In this way, artistic experience develops in the interaction between the inner material and the outer material. Dewey refers to this repeated process of interaction between internal and external materials as a rhythm, in which we regain unity and fusion with our environment. Dewey also says that the experience of the fusion and unification of internal and external materials through the function of rhythm has an “aesthetic quality” and becomes “an experience” <sup>8</sup>.

A work of art is a fusion and unification of natural material and spirit through the function of rhythm in artistic experience. A work of art is created through the fusion and unification of the meaning of “sensory qualities” received from the outside world with the artist’s spirit through materials. A work of art is achieved through the complete interpenetration of what the artist receives from the outside world and what the artist works on. Thus, the work of art is a fusion and unification of the material and spiritual of nature. Artistic experience as “an experience” is such an experience of self and the world, that is, an experience of the fusion and unification of natural matter and spirit.

What is Dewey’s view of “the beauty” ? As Dewey states in the following discourse, it is esthetic in the degree in which organism and environment cooperate to institute an experience in which the two are so fully integrated that each disappears <sup>9</sup>. In general, the beauty of art

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<sup>6</sup> J. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 15.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.* p.74.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.* pp.54-55.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.* p.249.

refers to the form of the subject work or the good feeling the subject receives from the work. Dewey's view of the esthetic is characterized by the fact that he recognizes the origin of aesthetic quality in our daily experience. Beauty is the fusion and unification of the material and the spiritual in artistic experience, which is a development of aesthetic quality. Artistic experience is a function of rhythm.

Artistic experience realizes the fusion and unification of natural matter and human spirit through the function of rhythm, and in this kind of artistic experience we can see the core of Dewey's philosophy, namely, the naturalistic empiricism that sees nature and spirituality as continuous.

### III. Characteristics of the Theory of Religion

Dewey's theory of religion is characterized by his distinction between "a religion" and "the religious," and by the religious he proposes a common faith, that is, an object of belief common to all mankind. A religion refers to a specific religion, such as Christianity, and the religious refers to "the religious quality" of experience, meaning "the religious elements of experience" <sup>10</sup>. In other words, while a religion refers to an organization with specific beliefs and doctrines, religious does not refer to any system or doctrine, but to "attitudes" that allow humans to "adjust" to external conditions in their interactions with the environment <sup>11</sup>.

Religious attitudes as "adjustments" are comprehensive, holistic changes in one's personality, and these changes are sustained throughout one's life. Such "religious attitudes" have the following functions. A person with a religious attitude strives for the harmonizing of the self through imagination. This harmonizing of the self extends not only to the world but also to the universe through imagination, creating a situation in which the self and the universe are in harmony. The human being with a religious attitude becomes a being that continuously changes entire existence with a holistic outlook in the environment, and grows as a person himself/herself <sup>12</sup>.

What, then, is the object of "a faith" of the "religious attitude" as "the religious" ? They are "ideal ends" and "ideal values." Dewey is not proposing a new "religion" through his theory of religion, but a new object of faith, ideal ends and ideal values <sup>13</sup>. This object of faith is not absolute, but a moral and practical one that can be realized through experience by reflective thought. Herein lies the distinctive feature of Dewey's theory of religion. Shinobu

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<sup>10</sup> J. Dewey, *A Common Faith*, L. W. vol.9. 1934. pp.8-9.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.* p.12.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.* p.14-15.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.* p.30.

Takatoku states, “The fact that he made these human ideal ends and ideal values, which are present in everyone, the object of faith is probably the reason why the title of this book is ‘A Common Faith’ ” <sup>14</sup>.

Dewey then lists the following as examples of “ideal ends” and “ideal values” that are objects of faith in religious attitudes. For example, he says,

locomotive did not exist before Stevenson...But the conditions for their existence were there in physical material and energies and in human capacity. Imagination seized hold upon the idea of a rearrangement of existing things that would evolve new objects <sup>15</sup>.

Dewey says that the same thing applies to a painter, a musician, a poet, a philanthropist, etc. <sup>16</sup>. This means that the experience of an artist, scientist, or educator, for example, in pursuit of an ideal, is accompanied by a “religious quality of experience,” or “religious attitude,” even if he or she is unaware of it. What Dewey hoped for in his proposal of “the religious” was to realize a democratic society and to change society through the activities of people in each position in society in pursuit of such ideal ends and ideal values. I believe this is what Dewey expected in his theory of religion, “A Common Faith.”

Finally, what was Dewey’s view of “God” ? Humans have changed reality by finding ideals in relation to real conditions through imagination, and by planning and realizing them. And humans and human society have a mission to promote the growth of the ideals created by imagination and to cooperate in realizing these ideals. Dewey says,

But the function of such a working union of the ideal and actual seems to me to be identical with the force that has in fact been attached to the conception of God in all the religions that have a spiritual content <sup>17</sup>.

Dewey uses the term “God” to “denote that uniting of the ideal and actual which has been spoken of” <sup>18</sup>. This concept of God is different from that of religions in the absolute sense, in the sense that it is connected to our ordinary experience of reality. Dewey’s theory of religion is characterized by three points: he removed the view of the supernatural from religion, he conceived of religion in terms of human’s ordinary experience, and the central function of religion is humans’ pursuit of ideal ends and ideal values.

<sup>14</sup> Shinobu, Takatoku. [*John Dewey A Common Faith*] *Komon Feisu* in Japanese, Takusyoku Syobou Shinsya, 2016, p.215.

<sup>15</sup> J. Dewey, *A Common Faith*, pp.33-34.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.* p.34.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.* p.35.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.* p.36.

#### IV. Commonalities as Experience between Art Theory and Religious Theory

Dewey's theory of art and his theory of religion have the following four points in common as experiences. First, they are both experiences of aesthetic and religious qualities. Second, they both develop our everyday experience and realize human ideals through imagination. Third, beauty and God do not exist in an absolute world separate from our daily experience but are idealized by our imagination through our daily experience, thus fusing and uniting reality or matter and the ideal. Fourth, by theorizing both art and religion in relation to our daily experiences, Dewey has created new theories of art and religion that have never existed before.

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