

Scott Stroud

John Dewey and the Artful life.

University Park, PA: Penn State Press 2011.

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\$69.95 (cloth ISBN 978-0-271-05007-2); \$34.95 (paper ISBN 978-0-271-05008-9)

Scott Stroud's book revisits John Dewey's account of aesthetic experience, arguing that such experiences are foundational for the task of moral cultivation. According to Stroud, Dewey's chief project was to invest life with more meaning and value, which in turn he sought to accomplish by advancing the aesthetic character of experience, or as Stroud says, by making life more 'artful'. Drawing from Dewey's challenging but compelling critique of aesthetic theory and moral inquiry, Stroud contests some of the ways in which we have traditionally pursued questions of morality and aesthetics. In so doing, Stroud argues that the key to a life well lived can be found in Dewey's revisioning of activity – a revisioning which emphasizes an attentive orientation to the present, the unification of means and ends in our everyday practices, and an emphasis on meliorist projects which culminate in growth.

Though the book's argument and analysis is clear, straightforward, and highly accessible to readers who might be new to the work of John Dewey, its refined focus and attempt to redress Dewey's aesthetics by incorporating it into a moral project probably excludes it from being a good candidate as an introduction to Dewey's philosophy of art. However, given the quality of Stroud's historical treatment of Dewey and the manner in which he expands Dewey's aesthetics, this book will certainly be of interest to seasoned Dewey scholars and has great value for those working in the pragmatist tradition. Further, the book also powerfully contests a variety of aesthetic theories from prominent 20th-century scholars working within the analytic tradition. Combined with Stroud's thoughtful interpretation of aesthetic experience, this book is a rewarding read for any scholar working in the philosophy of art. As far as moral philosophy is concerned, it is a little more difficult to pinpoint the book's appeal. First, while Stroud wants to establish a continuity between the spheres of morality and aesthetics (along Deweyan lines), his emphasis appears to be far more on matters pertaining to aesthetics than morality. Specifically, it appears as though Stroud's primary project is to establish the inherent moral value of aesthetic experience, a project that does radically rethink the relevance and role of art in life, but only takes as secondary the impact Dewey's aesthetics had on reconstructing the nature of moral inquiry. Second, Stroud's approach to morality largely avoids normative issues and seems limited in its insight into questions of right and wrong. In fact, Stroud explicitly states that he is less interested in providing criteria through which we can validate moral judgments and more concerned with the pursuit of enriching lived experience. Obviously, Dewey shared this outlook, insofar as he was harshly critical of abstract ethical theories that are blind to the realities of the actual processes involved in moral deliberation. However, Stroud does not invest much time discussing Dewey's critique of traditional ethics, touching only briefly on the character of good communication. Again, the emphasis is more on making such communication more artful, rather than establishing terms for making it more just. While it may be the case that these pursuits go hand in hand, Stroud does not endeavor to demonstrate how. Similarly, while Stroud addresses questions concerning the evaluation of values in the later chapters, these questions are not taken

up with any serious rigor. However, Stroud's pragmatic assessment of how value is experienced, instantiated and even generated is convincing and worthy of the attention of specialists in ethics.

Stroud's book begins by arguing that there is not merely a kinship between moral and aesthetic value, but that both exist on a continuum. This discussion is grounded in an ongoing debate within the philosophy of art that examines whether or not the value of art is internal to the work (that is, a work of art is valuable for its own sake, which separates the value of art from all other spheres of practice), or if the value is external to the work (the work of art is merely a means to the realization of some other value, meaning the work of art is replaceable, given that the end it realizes might be achieved through alternative means). Stroud attempts to resolve this problem by turning to Dewey's examination of aesthetic experience. It is Stroud's exceptional analysis of aesthetic experience which constitutes the real cornerstone and strength of the book. Through this analysis, Stroud first effectively demonstrates the flawed and shortsighted dualisms that betray so much of 20th-century discourse in aesthetics. The problem, according to Stroud, is that not enough appreciation is given to the true nature of aesthetic experience, a concept which cannot ultimately be severed from other forms of experience but instead harbors a deep and abiding continuity with the rest of our lives. In his treatment Stroud takes up, explicates, and expands upon such crucial Deweyan concepts as primary and secondary (reflective) experience, the continuity between intrinsic and instrumental value as well as means and ends, and the nature of value as grounded in 'ends-in-view'. All of this is done in a manner that is accurate, at times even innovative, and in a way that truly clarifies Dewey's unusual but fecund approach to the nature of experience. The one shortcoming of this otherwise outstanding and enlightening account – one that will come back to haunt him in later chapters – is that Stroud does not pay enough heed to the embodied dimension of aesthetic experience, leading him at times to fail to uncover the full strength of Dewey's challenge to mind-body dualism and to over-emphasize the role of mind to the detriment of the felt dimension that is essential to any experience of meaning.

Throughout the rest of the book, Stroud builds on his reading of Dewey by drawing a link between aesthetic experience and Dewey's corresponding projects of meliorism and growth. It is here that Stroud begins to establish a link between Dewey's philosophy of art and his novel approach to moral philosophy – an approach which eschews traditional attempts to determine ultimate and/or foundational moral principles. In these later chapters Stroud strives to defend the claim that aesthetic experience is not merely an experience of valuing but, more fundamentally, is *constitutive* of value. For some, this may sound like a banal claim, until one examines the character and implications of Dewey's account of such experience, a task deftly undertaken by Stroud. Through Stroud's explication we get a glimpse into how the history of philosophy has deified ends while diminishing the value of means, and how this outlook has led to an increasingly alienated existence which has detached us from the present. In the process, Stroud provides great insight into the communicative nature of art as well as arguing that both personal and communal growth is grounded upon a meliorist orientation to the present. The book concludes by briefly addressing a number of potential criticisms of the author's position.

As mentioned above, the real strength of this book is found in Stroud's treatment of aesthetic experience. First, the book serves as a powerful reminder not only of how far-reaching the impact of Dewey's treatment of experience was, but perhaps more importantly, of how much Dewey just plain had right. Second, Stroud does an excellent job following through on Dewey's

endeavor to make experience more significant and the everyday more worthwhile in an original and persuasive manner. Third, Stroud's Deweyan approach to the philosophy of art successfully changes the channel on a number of significant issues in this discipline, helping us to approach both art theory and criticism in a manner that does not fall victim to the rigid dualisms that segregate the art-world from the life-world. However, there are also some limitations to Stroud's argument, largely on the moral side of the ledger, though most of these are more a product of his narrow approach to matters of moral cultivation than any misunderstanding of Dewey. The major concern is that Stroud's account of moral cultivation fails to take seriously enough questions of justice and the various conditions that are either detrimental or constitutive of any meaningful pursuit of growth. Put simply, Stroud's emphasis appears to be more on how to change the way we see our activities rather than to change the very nature of these activities, or perhaps more importantly, to change the conditions that produce these activities. Though a Deweyan perspective would argue that all three go hand in hand, Stroud, either for reasons of interest or oversight, does not take advantage of all the resources Dewey makes available to construct such an argument. As such, at times his argument might appear dangerously akin to those new-age self-help books that entreat us to 'live in the now'. This is unfortunate, because Stroud's reading of Dewey is certainly deserving of more than any such sort of superficial dismissal. However, what makes these limitations to his argument all the more frustrating is the fact that Stroud is clearly aware of them given that many are raised in the final chapter of the book, yet his various responses are far too truncated and fall seriously short of any satisfactory resolution.

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