

JILL'S ESTHETIC EXPERIENCE OF HER DOG: WHY IS IT SO SPECIAL?

While Harry Stottlemeier keeps busy pondering the processes of thinking, his friends Lisa and Jill are discussing *thoughts* in chapter three. Lisa finds it strange that her father says the very thought of peanut butter and jelly makes him sick. Jill, on the other hand, asserts that her thoughts make her happy. Lisa agrees, "it's a nice warm feeling to have a thought you like, and to sort of cuddle it the way you would a doll," she says.(1) Jill adds, "When I leave Sandy (her dog), the thought of him goes with me to school, and I can almost feel it jump up in my lap to be petted."(2)

The thoughts the girls refer to are of experiences with things that have a special ring to them. This sense of joy from things, or the preciousness of things, could be labeled the esthetic kind of experience. What is it about this kind of experience, about this type of thought, that makes it special, separating it from more mundane experiences? Is it a psychological phenomenon? A spiritual one? Many have ascribed this type of experience to purely metaphysical sources. There is considerable hostility towards simply trying to analyze such phenomena, as though the experience is above rational description. Perhaps, it is claimed, we may even taint such experiences by any investigation into them.

Let's go back, then, to something else the girls bring up in the chapter. They compare their topic, thoughts, to what Harry has been concerned with, namely, *how* we think. "Just having thoughts is different from really thinking," says Fran.(3) But are the two investigations really that separate? Not according to John Dewey, who discusses why certain things and experiences are more pleasureable and vivid for us in Democracy and Education and Art as Experience.

Central to Dewey's analysis of those experiences which are so special to us (our esthetic experiences) is his concept of our thinking process in general. Our experiences are the result of our interaction with the world, in which we encounter a problem, form an idea for solution, and act on this idea. Changes, then, in the course of a true experience, occur in both the environment *and* in us. When we act upon the environment, and then reflect upon those changes that take place so as to make needed changes in ourselves, we learn, and the change is "loaded with significance."(4)

It is this constant "doing" and "undergoing" that brings us into a closer and closer relationship with our environment. In such a relationship, we are creating, in a sense, both the environment and ourselves, and assuming control and responsibility for them. Such interaction is both mental and physical, and both elements are necessary for such "vital experiences" to occur.(5)

This analysis brings together the 'thinking process' and 'thoughts' separation. The 'problem' referred to above which initiates the process of inquiry shows itself in us as certain feelings of discord and uneasiness. When our interaction with something in our environment leads to the alleviation of such discord, we approach a state of balance, or harmony. The realization of the joint responsibility for the resolution of our problem in both ourselves *and* the environment leads to a special sense of contentment. When we experience this, we realize a certain oneness or unity with the environment.(6)

Dewey gives a good example for this in terms of someone cleaning their room. If such a task is taken on as a "matter of routine," there is nothing special for us in the experience. We are not engaged in the "doing/undergoing" vital to a rich experience. "But if his original emotion of impatient irritation has been ordered and tranquilized by what he has done, the orderly room reflects back to him the change that has taken place in himself. He feels not that he has accomplished a needed chore but has done something emotionally fulfilling."(7)

How might the girls' special thoughts relate to this? Jill experiences her dog in the type of relation described above. The dog responds to her actions in positive ways, thus creating a change within her. Her actions create changes in the dog. Their interaction is one of harmonious doing and undergoing, leading Jill to feel a oneness with her pet. Ergo, her sense of special joy at the thought of him.

Dewey shows that there can be a link between our thinking processes and our analysis of our thoughts. While quite ordered and logical, his description of our potential doing/undergoing relationship with our environment is quite as inspiring, in its way, as the similar ideas of Martin Buber.

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Footnotes

1. Matthew Lipman. Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery. Montclair, New Jersey: First Mountain Foundation, 1985, p. 9.
2. Ibid, p. 9.
3. Ibid, p. 10.
4. John Dewey. Democracy and Education. New York: The Free Press, 1944, p. 139.
5. Ibid, p. 161.
6. John Dewey. Art as Experience. New York: Capricorn Books, 1958, p. 38.
7. Ibid, p. 78.