Chapter 3
Dewey’s and Pirsig’s Aesthetics

The kind of naturalistic metaphysics that we explored in the previous two chapters views the human organism through the lens of emergent evolution. That is, it perceives this organism as a creative transformation of more elemental natural processes, processes with which it remains, following Dewey’s formulation, both ontologically and functionally continuous. Matter, life, and mind are thus inherently interrelated existences and so must be apprehended in their empirical relations with one another. Each connotes a consecutively more complex array of interactions with surrounding conditions, from simple blunt existence to the most sophisticated processes of growth and renewal. At the most general level, this means recognizing the myriad ways in which human beings and their body-minds are dependent for their flourishing upon their natural and sociocultural environments. It also means recognizing that they are innately susceptible to the periodic dissociations or disharmony that occur between any organism and its sustaining environment, such as those inducing hunger pangs, intellectual puzzlement, or other physical and mental discomforts, even death. The relationship between the human organism and its environment is an ecological one in the fullest sense of the word.

Additionally, however, this naturalistic metaphysics also sheds considerable light on the empirical conditions that make possible those singular events during which we experience an especially pronounced sense of harmony between ourselves and the world. These events, to reiterate, are conceived by Dewey and Pirsig in terms of aesthetic and high-quality experiences, respectively. “The uniquely distinguishing feature of esthetic experience,” Dewey offers, “is exactly the fact that no . . . distinction of self and [world] exists in it, since it is esthetic in the degree in which organism and environment cooperate to institute an experience in which the two [become] fully integrated.” Similarly, Pirsig tells us that high-quality experience results from the virtual “absence of any sense of separateness of subject and object” in one’s dealings with the world (ZMM 266). The characterizations are essentially homologous. But just what sort of cooperation between organism and environment is required to bring about an aesthetic experience? And how might this be best accomplished? Finally, in keeping with focal question number 2, What is the
general nature of aesthetic experience and how might it serve to nurture the human eros?

These and related questions are taken up at length in this chapter and in chapter 4. We do so primarily by considering how and why Dewey and Pirsig essay to alter the way we think and converse about art and artfulness. The “art of motorcycle maintenance” furnishes the recurring context for our deliberations. As the discussion proceeds, Dewey’s and Pirsig’s arguments for reconsidering the place and purpose of art in human life are seen to rest finally with the persuasiveness of their accounts of the continuity of art and everyday experience.

AN EXPERIENCE

The first thing that we need to explore is what it means to regard aesthetic experience as a function of the full lived situation. For when Dewey adverts to the integration of self and world, he does not want us to envision some completely spontaneous and narrowly circumscribed event. Rather, he insists that we interpret the felt continuity of self and world as a kind of achievement, one that can transpire somewhat serendipitously (as the issuance of happy circumstance), by way of our own conscious purpose, or as it often happens, through some combination of the two. Regardless of how we get there, Dewey tells us, this felt continuity is the direct concomitant of a unified experience. A unified experience is one that reaches the point of consummation or closure. It does not just stop or terminate at random, but fulfills “antecedent activities.” Here are some of Dewey’s examples from *Art as Experience*:

A piece of work is finished in a way that is satisfactory; a problem receives its solution; a game is played through; a situation, whether that of eating a meal, playing a game of chess, carrying on a conversation, writing a book, or taking part in a political campaign, is so rounded out that its close is a consummation and not a cessation. Such an experience is a whole and carries with it its own individualizing quality and self-sufficiency. (*LW 10:* 42)

Implicit here and elsewhere in *Art as Experience* is the idea that we must look to consummations of this sort to apprehend experience in its full flower and integrity.

Dewey refers to these and similar examples as instances of “an experience.” He chooses this idiomatic phrase as representative of the way we denote summatory experiences in casual conversation, particularly with regard to their individualizing quality and self-sufficiency. We come to learn instinctually that this unique quality cannot be directly described, that it is ineffable. Thus we might hear Pirsig proclaim of an especially satisfying motorcycle outing, “That was an experience!” Or in trying to recount that experience for us, he might eventually conclude that, “You just had to be there.” The more the meaning of an experience is carried through its immediate qualitative dimension, Dewey argues, the more conspicuous the limits of language become.