John Dewey and the Question of Artful Communication

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The American pragmatist John Dewey included tantalizing sections of praise of the power of communication in his important work on community, experience, and their improvement, noting in 1925 that “of all affairs, communication is the most wonderful” (1988a, LW 1:132) and in 1927 that communication plays an important part in the individual’s attempt “to learn to become human” (1984, LW 2:332). Some in the field of communication have sensed the important, but undeveloped, role that communication plays in his thought and have attempted to use Dewey’s work in analyzing rhetorical practice, cultural studies, and the role of journalism in society. While such studies strive to clarify the value and process of communication in Dewey’s thought, they fall short of explaining one seemingly simple thing that is implied in these passages—that communication can be experienced as aesthetic or artful. Nathan Crick identifies such a lacuna in the literature and notes that “beyond its utility as an argument against elite forms of academic criticism, the value of Dewey’s aesthetic theory for communication studies remained underdeveloped” (2004, 303). Although he does an admirable job of tracing the relation of aesthetics to communication in Dewey’s evolving thought, Crick comes no closer than others in answering the fundamental question of how communication can be artful or aesthetic—he merely argues for the general point that “communication,
whether it occurs in an oration, a conversation, or a television, is best understood as a form of art that has the potential to bring about aesthetic experience in its participants and open their eyes to the world of possibility embodied within each of us” (2004, 314). How exactly does this aestheticization of communication occur? Crick ends his article with the interesting claim that “in its aesthetic form communication becomes rhetorical. It turns communication into an art whose goal is a presentation that unites form and rhythm in a manner that can reach down into the experiences of the audience and literally transform them into something new” (2004, 317).

How exactly does communication meet such standards? Does such a “high” art of communication as rhetoric fit everyday communication, the vast majority of human communicative practices? Although Crick’s study is an important inquiry into the overall role of communication in Dewey’s aesthetics, it still leaves open the fundamental question—How exactly can any given act of communication (beyond the eloquent and poetic oration) be rendered aesthetic or artful?

This question was vitally important for Dewey, as he places artistic and aesthetic aspects of communicative practice at the very heart of his social and political philosophy. In describing the “Great Community,” he announces that it will take place when two conditions hold: “The highest and most difficult kind of inquiry and a subtle, delicate, vivid and responsive art of communication must take possession of the physical machinery of transmission and circulation and breathe life into it. . . . Democracy will come into its own, for democracy is a name for a life of free and enriching communion. . . . It will have its consummation when free social inquiry is indissolubly wedded to the art of full and moving communication” (1984, LW 2:350). This is a vital passage for understanding Dewey’s aims, as it clearly links a scientific method of thinking (his preferred method of “inquiry”) with a form of communication that can be taken as an art.

Yet scholars of communication systematically miss this part of the Deweyan equation. For instance, take Lary Belman’s early study of Dewey’s view of communication. He concludes by analyzing this same passage from Dewey on the two conditions of the Great Community and states, “The basic conditions for the creation of a Great Community . . . were, Dewey postulated, the presence of (a) vigorous, systematic, and continuous social inquiry to reveal the influential agencies at work in society and their mode of operation, and (b) widespread and rapid distribution of the findings of this inquiry in a form readily understood by those for whom these findings
have significance” (1977, 36–37). It is remarkable that the “full and moving art of communication” seems to be reduced by Belman to effective forms of “distribution.” Again, the question of how communication can be artful fails to receive a clear answer.

I believe that such a state of affairs is unfortunate, as Dewey’s cryptic exclamations about the value of communication as art beg for a thorough explanation. Art and the aesthetic obviously play a vital role in the sort of quality that communication ought to have in our everyday lives for Dewey, yet studies of Dewey’s view of communication do not gain much traction in explaining what exactly it means for everyday communication to be pursued as an art. In this present study, I propose an answer to this vexing and underexamined question. I will ultimately argue that what can make everyday, mundane instances of communication aesthetic or artful is the orientation of the individual communicator. A specific sort of orientation or mental habit that focuses one’s attention on the present communicative situation is what will make that instance of communication have the quality denoted by Dewey’s term aesthetic or will be what makes it an instance of what Dewey calls “expression.” Not all of what is usually taken to be art is expressive, but at its highest point, it is connected to aesthetic experience; in the same way, not all communicative activity is inherently aesthetic in Dewey’s terms, but it can reach this height if certain conditions are met.

To build such a case, I will first examine what Dewey means by the aesthetic or, in terms of art objects, what he means by something being “expressive” and therefore connected to the production of a unified, aesthetic experience. This will illuminate the hurdles that one needs to overcome to argue that everyday communication can reach the qualitative heights of the aesthetic or artful. I will then build a case, however, for the capability of communication becoming aesthetic or artful by examining the role of subjective “orientation” in aesthetic experience, as well as in what Dewey calls “artistic media.” Ultimately, it is the attitude the subject brings into the communicative experience that will render it aesthetic. Finally, I will discuss how this serves as a component of a program of improving experience that I call orientational meliorism, and I will consider a likely objection to this account and defend my reading of communication as potentially artful as an advance in a Deweyan conception of communication. Extending the melioristic project of Dewey, I conclude with three practical strategies that can contribute to the goal of making communication more aesthetic or artful.
I. DEWEY ON THE AESTHETIC AND THE EXPRESSIVE

In his 1934 *Art as Experience (AE)*, Dewey (see 1989a) provides a wide account of “aesthetic experience.” Such aesthetic experience is called by Dewey “an experience,” the interaction of a subject and its environment such that “the material experienced runs its course to fulfillment” (1989a, LW 10:42). Notice that Dewey does not start such an account by closely tethering it to art; instead, his first three chapters focus on the “live creature” and the qualitative ways it can interact with its environment. Certain ways of interacting can reach this high point “with its own individuating quality and self-sufficiency” (1989a, LW 10:42). Such vivid, live, and qualitatively enhanced experience is aesthetic experience. One can identify three characteristics of such experience in Dewey’s account. In chapter 3 of *AE*, Dewey argues that aesthetic experience is both integrated with and demarcated from surrounding experiences, has a unique individualizing quality, and possesses a sort of meaningful unity among its parts.4 To expand on one of Dewey’s (1989a, LW 10:43) own examples, one’s experience of a certain meal in Paris can possess such characteristics, and these can be used analytically to explain why it is aesthetic. The meal had a beginning and end, yet there was a certain connection to one’s other experiences in Paris. The meal had a certain quality to its parts that was different from those of other meals or experiences had in Paris; perhaps this one was romantic, exciting, uncertain, or so forth. At any rate, it was felt as qualitatively distinct from other experiences, and this is labeled by Dewey as an “individualizing quality” of the lived experience. There was also a certain sort of unity among the parts as well; the experience was not a hodgepodge of impressions but, instead, featured a sort of “build” toward the meal, toward the following museum visit, and so on. Dewey’s point is that much of life is disjointed and not connected in a meaningful fashion; however, in such a case as this, one’s lived experience of the meal has a certain sort of unity and rhythm among its parts such that one experiences this sequence of individual occurrences (the cab ride to the restaurant, the ordering of the meal, the consuming of the meal, and so on) as a whole, complete experience. Extending on this analogy, one can see how the experience of the subject in Paris was not simply to “be full.” Instead, they attentively enjoyed each step leading to the “ending” of that meal. The journey toward gustatory satisfaction was an integral part of the destination or end of the process of eating in this sort of experience.
Dewey believed that this qualitative unity and integration was able to be realized in any type of experience in life. He did believe that art, when done well, has an increased chance of fostering the subjective absorption and attention to present detail that makes such an experience unified in meaning and value. Dewey’s use of art is notoriously imprecise and prone to lead one to confusion. Many individuals in aesthetics and communication take art in a descriptive, classificatory fashion—in other words, as covering the extension of a certain concept (viz., identifying all those objects called “art”). In AE, Dewey sometimes refers to art in this “typical” fashion and at other points in a more evaluative fashion—as indicative of human processes and activities at a certain pitch of experiential quality. Dewey did not care much if this failed to account for bad art; instead of a “wrapper definition” of the class of “art,” he was pursuing a conception of art that would help us maximize those sorts of (aesthetic) experiences in our production and reception of art objects. Specifically, Dewey shifts the focus of his definition from objects to certain processes; he indicates that “art denotes a process of doing or making. . . . Every art does something with some physical material, the body or something outside the body, with or without the use of intervening tools, and with a view to production of something visible, audible, or tangible” (1989a, LW 10:53). Notice that the product is derivative from what Dewey really emphasizes—the process. At a later point in AE, he gives this expansive reading of art, noting that “art is a quality of doing and of what is done. . . . When we say that tennis-playing, singing, acting, and a multitude of other activities are arts, we engage in an elliptical way of saying that there is art in the conduct of these activities and that this art so qualifies what is done and made as to induce activities in those who perceive them in which there is also art” (1989a, LW 10:218). The important point here is not so much the objective features of some object (what Dewey calls the “art object” or “product of art”) but, instead, the sort of experience that object required in its production and the sort of experience it engenders in its reception by some audience. Art denotes a certain quality surrounding those processes of creation (or execution) and reception.

One can see a potential confusion arising here because of Dewey’s various uses of art. He often uses it to refer to the practices we naively would refer to as “art,” and he also uses it in a normative, reconstructive sense of how we usefully ought to think about “art.” Take the example of painting—a child rubbing paint on a canvas employs some minimal amount of skill and
somatic habituation, but this process (and its product) differs in the artistry of production and reception from the case of Monet rubbing paint on canvas. The second case is art in Dewey’s favored sense because it involves a unity of experience in the production and reception that is at a particular height of absorption, integration, and unity. In the case of the true artist, the process of production is one of ordering materials, thoughts, and emotions through and in a material; this will be further identified by Dewey as the process of expression (1989a, LW 10:108). The case of the child “painter” does not reach this height of unity (hence expressivity) and most likely would not evoke such a response in the audience as well.

In terms of communication, one can see the same confusion arising when I refer to the “art of communication.” Is all communication already aesthetic, or is this an achievement of skill and artistry? The answer that I will give is the latter—the process of communication, like rubbing paint on canvas, can be routine, mechanical, or disjointed or can be characterized by the qualities of aesthetic, integral experience that are the hallmark of absorbing works of art. For instance, Dewey uses the example of an interview to illustrate the aesthetic—the discourse between two individuals can be “mechanical, consisting of set questions, the replies to which perfunctorily settle the matter” (1989a, LW 10:49). Or the interaction could truly be alive and charged, moving toward “its own consummation through a connected series of varied incidents” (1989a, LW 10:49). Unfortunately, Dewey did not follow this example with an extended discussion of communicative activity, but one can see the point he implies in his general discussion of the aesthetic—communication (as in this example) can be either aesthetic or nonaesthetic. The question that this leads one to, of course, is, How can one make the activity of communication possess more of the former quality?

Artworks, taken in the evaluative sense of true works of art, are integrally connected to aesthetic or integral experience—“art, in its form, unites the very same relation of doing and undergoing, outgoing, and incoming energy, that makes an experience to be an experience [viz., aesthetic experience]” (1989a, LW 10:54). Aesthetic experience can be evoked by nonart objects (say, a sunset), but good art (art that does work in Dewey’s sense) will be good insofar as it is connected to aesthetic experience. In AE, Dewey (1989a, LW 10:53) argues that art has a twofold connection to aesthetic experience. The artist purposively works through ideas, emotions, and the material he or she is dealing with, all the while imaginatively anticipating what sort of reactions will take place to certain manipulations of the
artistic media. These connections to aesthetic experience are also captured by Dewey’s talk of an art object’s expressiveness—its embodying of meaning and emotion in a unified sense through the experience of its creation, as well as in its reception by an audience. This experience of creative expression or production on the part of the artist can reach levels of unity and integration that would make it an aesthetic experience; alternatively, the attentive audience in perceiving or receiving the art object and its qualities can go through a similarly progressive and unified experience that renders their experience aesthetic. As Dewey notes, “In both [the experience of the artist and the experience of the auditor], there is a comprehension in its literal signification—that is, a gathering together of details and particulars physically scattered into an experienced whole” (1989a, LW 10:60). Thus, aesthetic experience is a parallel phenomenon, occurring in the interaction in the artist–art object relationship, as well as in the audience–art object relationship.

The interesting point for my project of providing a reading of the “full and moving art of communication” in Dewey comes in his analysis of the process of artistic creation. This is what he labels as “expression,” a term that can be used to denote both the process of creation and the art object received by an audience. This is important insofar as expressive objects (an “expression” as a created object) are implicated by Dewey in the evoking of aesthetic experience on the part of the auditor. Thus, if the process of communication and its utterances are to be aesthetically experienced in any significant degree by their conversational producers or receivers, they must match with what Dewey calls “expressions.” These are the public, objective actions or objects of art (for instance, a novel, play, or sculpture) that are causally connected to aesthetic experience. Can an instance of everyday, mundane communication (say, a conversation at the supermarket) be expressive in this sense?

Initially, one would think not. Dewey’s account of expression in chapter 5 of _AE_ distinguishes the sorts of meanings in actions that can or cannot render them aesthetic in the way that art objects are “expressive.” The key to art’s creation and reception imbuing experience with the quality of the aesthetic is that they are closely connected to experience in its unified sense; commenting on how art is so absorbing for an audience, Dewey notes that “it [art] presents the world in a new experience which they [the audience] undergo.” Thus, art does not mirror reality or experience as much as it re-presents some sort of experience the artist underwent and wishes to convey to the audience in a certain fashion. There is a close connection between the experience of attending to the art object and the meaning of
the art object. Dewey speaks of “words,” such as those used in instances of everyday communication, as having a “purely external reference” much like a signboard along a highway does—“it stands for something by pointing to it. Meaning does not belong to the word and signboard by its own intrinsic right” (1989a, LW 10:89). These are what Dewey calls “statements,” which “directs one’s course to a place, say a city. It does not in any way supply experience of that city even in a vicarious way. What it does do is to set forth some of the conditions that must be fulfilled in order to procure that experience” (1989a, LW 10:90). Scientific statements and claims are examples of such “signboards” in linguistic practice; they point toward the experience of certain things (say, through experiments) and provide the “recipes” for confirmation of such claims in replicative actions. Discussing the general nature of such statements, Dewey states that “statement sets forth the conditions under which an experience of an object or situation may be had. It is a good, that is, effective, statement in the degree in which these conditions are stated in such a way that they can be used as directions by which one may arrive at the experience. It is a bad statement, confused and false, if it sets forth these conditions in such a way that when they are used as directions, they mislead or take one to the object in a wasteful way” (1989a, LW 10:90).

This seems to adequately capture everyday linguistic utterances as non-expressive and therefore as not integrally connected to the production of aesthetic experiences in either the producer of the communicative message or its receiver. They seem to serve as instrumental, routinized shortcuts to coordinating activity. Furthermore, Dewey characterizes “expression” in such a way as to connect it to experience and “traditional” art and remove it from everyday instances of linguistic performance—an art object qua expression “does something different from leading to an experience. It constitutes one. . . . [A]rt is an immediate realization of intent” (1989a, LW 10:91). Opposed to statements with their external connection between object and meaning, expressions feature an internal relationship between an object and its meaning. Thus, one can be told how to get to a city or how a city is laid out, but this is different in the sort of meaning featured when compared with being a subject experiencing that city firsthand. Similarly, art objects are expressive insofar as they put the auditor through a sort of experience there and then, versus linguistic statements (such as in science) that are removed from any actual, concrete experience. The former are constituted by and connected to experience at that height of unity called “aesthetic” by Dewey.
This reading of expression is closely connected to Dewey’s analysis of means and media in his aesthetic theory. For Dewey, “media” are contrasted to “mere means” as media unify and collate preceding particulars of experience and compose the effect that is desired (1989a, LW 10:201). This is the sort of internal connection between object/material and meaning that one sees in expression. In terms of art objects, paint is the painting in a real way, as opposed to being a mere means of painting. In terms of Dewey’s notion of statement, the analogue here is “mere means,” which feature an external relation to what they mean and thus can be identified by their replaceability and their externality to the effect desired. One can alter car engines such that gasoline can be replaced by ethanol, perhaps motivated by external concerns—pollution, efficiency, availability, and so forth. The nature and meaning (use) of the vehicle are unchanged by the substitution of alternate means (viz., fuel). If one changes the composition, phrasing, and so on of Wordsworth’s “Goody Blake,” however, one has changed the art object. The experience of those words by a subject is the aesthetic experience produced by that art object; thus, in a real way, the material of the art object both causes the aesthetic experience and constitutes it. The medium (or expression) is the end desired and not a mere means to an external, unconnected end. Expressions are objects produced such that they are instances of a medium manipulated. Expressions produce aesthetic experience primarily because their creation and reception can be said to involve this internality of means and ends, the diametrical opposite of the nonaesthetic: “All the cases in which means and ends are external to one another are non-aesthetic. This externality may even be regarded as a definition of the non-aesthetic” (1989a, LW 10:202).

Though Dewey exclaims in his 1925 Experience and Nature that “of all affairs, communication is the most wonderful” (1988a, LW 1:132), it is hard to see it as artful or as connected to the aesthetic in its everyday form, even though this is how he describes communication and discourse in relation to the Great Community. For Dewey ends his discussion of expression in AE by concluding that “in the end, works of art are the only media of complete and unhindered communication between man and man that can occur in a world full of gulfs and walls that limit community of experience” (1989a, LW 10:110). Communication, especially in its mundane and everyday discursive form, seems firmly aligned with statement and not with expression. One can discern at least three general reasons why everyday communication would be classed as statement and thus not expressive or aesthetic.
First, there seems to be an experienced split between means and ends in communication that violates the idea of an integrated medium of expression. In communication, words or concepts are employed to stand for past objects of experience, emotions experienced, actions to undertake, and so on. Thus, Dewey notes that even when word meanings have been internalized (habitually made immediate), they still involve an action-coordinating function among individuals (1988a, LW 1:5). A police officer yelling, “Stop!” begins with an understanding of how the other individual will perceive and react to such a command and ends with the other individual’s actual reaction to such a command being based on the sort of past habituation to that imperative use of language that the officer assumes. Communication here operates at a remove from experience but with a reference to possible and anticipated experience (viz., the action of stopping). This is substantively different from artistic expression, where the utterance of the painting and its experience make up that which the artist hopes to evoke through the manipulation of paint, reflected light, and so forth. Everyday linguistic communication would seem to point to experiences undergone in the past or anticipated/desired for the future but would not seem to hold the same experienced unity between means and ends that constitutes aesthetic, expressive activity.

Second, there appears to be an evaluative split between means and ends in communicative activity that is absent in artistic expression. One needs a particular form from a certain government office to apply for a job at that office; so, one constructs a certain utterance with the explicit goal of getting that form. The value of the utterance, say, “Can I have form 7132?” is conditioned on actually receiving that form, as well as on holding the end of wanting to get the job that form 7132 lets one apply for. If that way of asking for a form was known to be utterly ineffective, it seems that it would be devalued as an action not in line with one’s desired goal of gaining that sort of employment. Crispin Sartwell, writing on Dewey’s aesthetic theory, notes that most individuals so value the ends of activity that the value of the means gets subordinated to such achievements as that represented by the desired end; indeed, he notes the disparity in value between the means and ends in such a way by stating that “if we could achieve the end by sheer force of will, if we could realize it without performing the means, we would” (1995, 97). If the utterance does not get one what one wants, the desire seems to be to scrap the utterance as an action; conversely, the utterance is valued insofar as it can achieve that result—be it anticipated
action, lack of action, transmission of one’s feelings to another, and so on. Unlike artistic expressions, everyday communication seems to hold to a strong separation of means and ends, along with a subordination of the former to the latter in terms of what is of value. This is ontologically and axiologically opposite of what occurs in instances of “media” in Dewey’s integrated sense.

Third, everyday communication seems too intentional to be what Dewey cherishes as artful activity. Discussing the communicative power of art, Dewey seems to discount the artistic value of communication because of the notion of explicit intentionality in the latter: “Because the objects of art are expressive, they communicate. I do not say that communication to others is the intent of an artist. But it is the consequence of his work. . . . If the artist desires to communicate a special message, he thereby tends to limit the expressiveness of his work to others—whether he wishes to communicate a moral lesson or a sense of his own cleverness” (1989a, LW 10:110).

An artist that sets out to communicate something about social policy in eighteenth-century France will be thereby limited in what the audience finds moving about that expression in twentieth-century America. A didactic fable will seem heavy-handed and limited in its artistry because the auditor may consciously try to resist the “manipulation” on the part of the writer. I address such concerns circling around art as communicative in Dewey elsewhere (Stroud 2007a), but for now it is enough to note the tendency of communication to be explicitly tied to “problem solving” and action coordination, as Jürgen Habermas (1996, 223) puts it in his attempt to distinguish art from everyday communication. Such a characteristic of everyday communication would, for Dewey, render it different in kind and value from expressive, artistic objects. Everyday communication, with its mundane subject matter and orientation toward valued ends and outcomes would seem to violate the implied unity of artistic expression and render it just another “mere means” toward the achievement of those outcomes. Like any given conversational utterance, expression that was related to an external (intended) goal could be replaced with another utterance of equivalent use. It is hard to see, given this objection as well as the preceding two dealing with the separation of means and ends in communicative activity, how communication can reach the level of “the art of full and moving communication” Dewey prophesied in his work on political philosophy.
II. REBUILDING A NOTION OF COMMUNICATION AS AESTHETIC

How can one move everyday communicative activity from the realm of statements to the realm connected with aesthetic experience or expression? How can communication, an inherently practical endeavor, be experienced as an integrated whole, as opposed to merely one means toward some desired end or outcome? I believe there is a way to answer the question that others have avoided or fallen short of answering—How can communication be artful or aesthetic? The answer to this question lies not in changing the objective features of the world (what words are said, how one uses ink to write) but, instead, strikes at the heart of what Dewey saw as the essential element to aesthetic experience—a subject’s orientation toward experience, be it of a painted canvas, of painting a canvas, or of the commute to work. This sounds like a wide definition of the aesthetic, but it is truly the project that Dewey undertakes in AE. In other words, part of his rebellion against the “museum concept of art” is to expand the reach of art, along with the highly unified experiences we often correlate with art objects, to more of life. These are truly the high points in subjective experience, and it requires no leap in inference to say that Dewey’s project follows from this valuing of aesthetic experience and consequently aims at making more of life’s activities and objects aesthetic. In terms of the activity of communication, what could make it and its products (viz., verbal and nonverbal messages) expressive in the way that art objects produced by skilled artists are expressive? I suggest that communication can become artful or aesthetic if a subject dons the sort of orientation toward that activity that (1) attends to means and ends as integrally connected and (2) values means and ends in a connected fashion.

Why would one suspect that the key to the aesthetic is in a subject’s orientation toward some object or activity? Would it not have something to do with the objective “medium” of artistic activity? Here is where we can find help from two overlooked examples in Dewey’s AE. In one case, Dewey elaborates on an example from Max Eastman to make his point about the interconnection of means and ends in aesthetic experience. The example focuses on the differences in the experience of different men commuting to work across the Hudson River into New York City by ferryboat. One man experiences this portion of his commute as drudgery and focuses on when it will end. During the boat ride, he observes the buildings as “landmarks by which to judge progress toward his destination.” Another man in the example sees “the scene formed by the buildings . . . as colored and lighted
volumes in relation to one another, to the sky and to the river. He is now seeing esthetically.” The second person perceives an interconnected whole, a “perceptual whole, constituted by related parts. No one single figure, aspect, or quality is picked out as a means to some further external result which is desired, nor as a sign of an inference that may be drawn” (1989a, LW 10:140–41). The latter individual’s experience of the boat ride and the sights to be seen can, according to Dewey, be characterized as aesthetic primarily because it has the unity, interconnection, and pervading, absorptive quality that Dewey places in experiences that reach the height of the aesthetic. The important point to notice here is that the same objective circumstances hold for each commuter—the buildings, boat, and voyage are basically identical. What changes is a subjective detail about how each orients himself toward that experience—how they attend to the situation and what they value in that situation. The former sees the commute as a mere means to get to the workplace, which is in itself a mere means to procure a paycheck. Thus, the former separates the means and ends of travel and work and subordinates the means to some larger goal. This subordination allows the value of the commute, for instance, to be lower than that of the workplace and much lower than that of the valued paycheck at the end of the week. The second commuter’s experience is less fragmented in terms of what is attended to (a remote goal or the activity of the here and now?), as well as what is of value (is the present commute only to be valued insofar as it gets one closer to the paycheck?).

A second example in AE drives a similar point about the role of subjective orientation in making an activity or object experienced aesthetic. In discussing the difference between mechanized, blindly habitual activity and aesthetic, integrated activity, Dewey comments on two students taking a test at school. Though they are assumed by the example to be in the same sort of course, each has a different attitude toward the activity of test taking: “One student studies to pass an examination, to get promotion. To another, the means, the activity of learning, is completely one with what results from it. The consequence, instruction, illumination, is one with the process” (1989a, LW 10:201). Again, Dewey is drawing our attention to a case where identical scenes of objective circumstances can differ in terms of experiential quality because of a difference in the subjective orientation toward the activity. In this case, as in the former, the difference in orientation concerns seeing the process as part of the product or, in other words, seeing the activity as a medium and not as a mere means to some externalized goal. Some commentators have picked up on the connection here between process and
product, but none has emphasized the role that subjective orientation can play in making basically any activity or process something valued in and of itself. These two examples from Dewey's aesthetic theory show that it is the attitude of a subject that can render something aesthetic (with a connection of means/ends) or can render it nonaesthetic. Compare Dewey's definition of the nonaesthetic—“all the cases in which means and ends are external to one another are non-esthetic” (1989a, LW 10:202)—to his description of drudgery and its manipulation of means/ends in terms of value: “Exclusive interest in a result alters work to drudgery. For by drudgery is meant those activities in which the interest in the outcome does not subsume the process of getting the result. Whenever a piece of work becomes drudgery, the process of doing loses all value for the doer; he cares solely for what is to be had at the end of it. The work itself, the putting forth of energy, is hateful; it is just a necessary evil, since without it some important end would be missed” (1989b, LW 8:346–47).

The first commuter and the first test taker share one important subjective trait in common—an overpowering focus on an end or goal that is (1) separate in an important sense from the process that is seen as achieving it and (2) separate and superior in value to the means undertaken to reach it. These two factors deal with how the subject focuses his or her attention and thought, how he or she acts, and how he or she values such activity; consequently, the fragmented and hierarchical way of orienting oneself toward commutes and tests renders those activities non-unified, replaceable, and nonaesthetic insofar as one sees them as subordinated to some end that is truly of value.

An additional factor in the case of communicative activity is that it is a purposive, interactive practice that involves the production and reception of “material” messages. This, on Dewey's account, renders it an “art.” The way that this art can be expressive is through the quality of the process involved in the production of the messages, as well as the quality of the process of message reception. The quality of producing and exchanging messages in communication (say, at the supermarket register) can be habitual and mechanical, or it can be more akin to an integrated, consummatory situation in which each part has value. Dewey is quite adamant in *AE* that the qualities so lauded in art depend on the individual: “For quality is concrete and existential, and hence varies with individuals since it is impregnated with their uniqueness” (1989a, LW 10:219). The meaning and impact of the color in a painting depend on auditors' receptivity to it and compatible meanings and reactions that they have developed over
time; to the wrong audience, a “great” painting can be meaningless and unmoving. The vital point is the subjective factor in the equation—this is what allows the art object to evoke the sort of unified experience that is called “aesthetic experience.” If one’s way of attending to the communicative utterances of others is at a mechanical, goal-driven (and hence external) level, one’s experience will not reach the level of the aesthetic. If one cultivates a way of attending to and valuing the present communicative moves, then that process and activity can be rendered aesthetic, and the produced utterances of self and others will possess a true expressiveness (and not merely an externalized value as pointers to future coordination of action and ends).

Thus, the key to making everyday communication reach the qualitative heights of aesthetic activity—namely, activity that unifies means/ends in the eyes of the subject—lies in changing how one sees and values those activities. If one conceives of an interaction at the register in a market as merely a way to legally procure goods and then leave, that is the sort of replaceable and valueless (in terms of experienced quality) interaction that one will have. If one instead focuses on the act of communication itself as part of the goal desired, then one can experience the exchange of money and goods with the cashier as a unified, qualitative whole. How does one go about uniting activity and outcome in one’s activity? The answer is deceptively simple—one ought to focus one’s attention on the materials of the immediate situation and not on some remote goal or outcome that desire inclines one toward. This is the natural enemy of the sort of “Deweyan mindfulness” to the present activity that I argue is the key to making communication aesthetic or artful—desire focuses one’s attention on a particular object (or state), which “is (or is taken to be) the key to the situation. If we can attain it, lay hold of it, the trick is turned” (1988b, MW 14:172–73). The problem, of course, is not in the mere existence of orientations toward the objects of desire but, instead, lies in the overemphasized value and separateness placed on the “goal” of activity. Dewey notes the harmfulness of such an orientation to activity in general, let alone communication, pointing out that “as things are, men so habitually scamp present action in behalf of future ‘ends.’ . . . But everywhere the good, the fulfillment, the meaning of activity, resides in a present made possible by judging existing conditions in their connections” (1988b, MW 14:184–85). This also applies to the large part of our waking life that is spent talking in interpersonal or organization contexts. Such communicative interactions can be affected either by an orientation toward present communicative activity.
as instrumentally good toward some end separate in location and value or by an orientation toward present communication as enjoyed with its own meaning. This is the sort of reading Dewey gives elsewhere in a long but important passage about communication and its dual status as means and end: “Discourse itself is both instrumental and consummatory. Communication is an exchange which procures something wanted; it involves a claim, appeal, order, direction or request, which realizes want at less cost than personal labor exacts, since it procures the cooperative assistance of others. Communication is also an immediate enhancement of life, enjoyed for its own sake. . . . Language is always a form of action and in its instrumental use is always a means of concerted action for an end, while at the same time it finds in itself all the goods of its possible consequences. For there is no mode of action as fulfilling and as rewarding as is concerted consensus of action. It brings with it the sense of sharing and merging in a whole” (1988a, LW 1:144–45).

Communication is both a means to future states of affairs and an immediately valuable, felt instantiation of harmony and coordination with others. The key is that one’s orientation toward such communicative activity can focus one’s attention in such a way as to foreground its value as a mere means; it is at this point that communicative interaction loses any felt, immediate value and instead gains the promised value only of the end yet to be achieved. In other words, the activity of communication becomes non-expressive insofar as it is seen and experienced as a mere means of attaining remote goals. The more enjoyable and rewarding (aesthetic) quality of communicative experience can come when one conceives of the discursive activity as connected to the desired end in terms of value, as well as in the recognition of ongoing process. As Dewey gestures at in the above analysis of communication as both instrumentally and immediately valuable, community now and in the future exists because of communication in the present, and the quality of communication now will tone the quality of communal interaction (viz., communication) in the future. Elsewhere, Dewey captures this point succinctly by stating that “society not only continues to exist by transmission, by communication, but it may fairly be said to exist in transmission, in communication” (1985, MW 9:7). Instantiating mindful (viz., aesthetic or artful) forms of communication now not only is a way to help create desired forms of enlivened community in the future but is also the creation of the desired goal now. Aesthetic or artful communication is seeing, using, and experiencing utterance not merely as statement, not merely as a means toward coordinated action; it sees the activity of
discourse as the sort of coordinated, valuable action we want to maintain in future states of affairs. In other words, the process of communication is the end of communicating—individuals attentively responding to each other and the situation in such a way as to truly instantiate a community of interacting beings.

In such an account, I believe that I have built on past readings of Dewey that recognize the important connection of art and communication but that fail to fully explicate how communication can be artful or aesthetic in the way that artistic expression is aesthetic. The difference lies in the subjective orientation toward that activity, just as much as it hinges on the audience of a painting attending to that object and its presented qualities instead of how much it would help one’s financial standing if it were possessed by that individual. What one ought to focus on is the present situation; this is a common theme from Dewey’s early work on ethics in the 1890s (Stroud 2006a), and it remains a vital part of the characterization of aesthetic experience as absorptive in his work of the 1930s. Concerning the former theme, Dewey notes as early as 1891 that “if the necessary part played in conduct by artistic cultivation is not so plain, it is largely because ‘Art’ has been made such an unreal Fetich—a sort of superfine and extraneous polish to be acquired only by specially cultivated people. In reality, living is itself the supreme art; it requires fineness of touch; skill and thoroughness of workmanship; susceptible response and delicate adjustment to a situation apart from reflective analysis; instinctive perception of the proper harmonies of act and act, of man and man” (1969b, EW 3:316).

The artful life is one that is finely adapted to the particular demands of the situation, which includes the “inner” needs and drives of the subject, as well as the “outer” demands imposed by one’s station, other individuals, and the social/natural environment itself. Finely attending to the properties of an art object is what makes it expressive and artful, and the fine-tuned and attentive focus on meeting the present situation is what makes our present activity most adapted and immediately valuable, as well as most instrumentally valuable for reaching consequent states of affairs that hinge on how we handle the here and now. Thus, the sort of absorption Dewey describes in his 1934 AE is not far from this line of thinking when he discusses the live animal as “fully present, all there, in all of its actions,” a state that humans can reach when they achieve the “aesthetic ideal.” This latter state is instantiated only “when the past ceases to trouble and anticipations of the future are not perturbing . . . [only then] is a being wholly united with his environment and therefore fully alive” (1989a, LW 10:24).
Of course, one may object and question why all communication is not already experienced as expressive. The reply to this is simple—too many individuals have the wrong orientation toward interaction or bad habits toward interacting and communicating with others. For instance, scholars have noted the tendency to think of argumentative communication as “war” or as always the persuasive changing of others in accord with one’s will (Foss and Foss 2003; Foss and Griffin 1995; Stroud 2005; Tannen 1999). In a Deweyan diagnosis, these problematic ways of approaching communication would all be identified as habits that degrade the value and effectiveness of communicating with other members of a community. Dewey provides a similar answer to the parallel question—Why aren’t more objects “expressive”? The answer he gives in _AE_ is simple; habituated ways of thinking and perceiving render these objects dull and easily glossed over. He remarks: “Yet apathy and torpor conceal this expressiveness by building a shell about objects. Familiarity induces indifference, prejudice blinds us; conceit looks through the wrong end of a telescope and minimizes the significance possessed by objects in favor of the alleged importance of the self” (1989a, LW 10:109–10).

All of these indictments point toward habits of how we attend to objects. In many cases “familiarity” and the “slackness of routine” blind us to the properties and qualities of objects (and, I would add, experiences such as discourse). We can ruin the expressiveness of an object by focusing on what it could mean to us if we could own it, how knowledge of it could impress our friends after the museum visit, and so forth. The focus and value are not in the present in such cases. Habits concerning what is of value (such as a reified notion of self or “conceit”) focus us on what interactions and objects mean to us in future states of affairs and inaccurately minimize the attention we give to the particular details of the concrete situation or object confronting us in the present. This is not a “fineness of touch” evinced by the art of living; instead, it is the following of a habituated orientation that renders the present subservient to a future state of affairs that is conceived as more valuable and worthy of attention than the here and now (ironically, the more “real” of the two situations in an important sense).

III. ORIENTATIONAL MELIORISM AND ARTFUL COMMUNICATION

The answer I have given to the question broached at the beginning of this inquiry—How can we make more of our communicative activities aesthetic or artful?—lends itself to the pragmatic project of meliorism. According to
Dewey in *Reconstruction in Philosophy* from 1920, “Meliorism is the belief that the specific conditions which exist at one moment, be they comparatively bad or comparatively good, in any event may be bettered. It encourages intelligence to study the positive means of good and the obstructions to their realization, and to put forth endeavor for the improvement of conditions” (1982, MW 12:181–82). Thus, meliorism seems to entail at least four things: (1) some sort of goal to be reached (viz., the “good” to be maximized), (2) a positive means of improving present experience (this is what distinguishes meliorism from mere “wishful thinking”), (3) some sort of unit of melioration (what is to be changed—the individual, the community, and so on), and (4) the vector of change (how we achieve this effect—individual efforts, group efforts, somatic means, cognitive therapy, and so forth).

The diagnosis of nonaesthetic activity I have argued for integrally involves a mechanized, habitual, and harmful way of attending to the present practice and value of communicative activity. The converse of this is the goal of the meliorative scheme I am proposing—the end point of one’s activities having the quality of aesthetic experience. I have argued that this quality of experience is closely connected to a certain way of attending to and valuing one’s concrete activities, and I have maintained that aesthetic experience is therefore largely dependant on the subject. Thus, I have referred to the key to aesthetic experience as the orientation of the individual toward the activity or process (including that of creating or receiving expressive objects) he or she is experiencing.

On the whole, if the problem deals more with orientation of the subject than any given existing practice of communication, then meliorative efforts can usefully focus on changing the individual’s orientation toward his or her communicative activities. This is part of the larger pragmatic project I call orientational meliorism, or the improving of the quality of actual, lived experience through the changing of a subject’s orientation (Stroud 2007b). Such a project not only will extract end points for cultivation or meliorative practice (viz., aesthetic experience) but will also attend to the means or ways of achieving such ends. In the case of making more communication have the quality of being aesthetic, the charge is clear—What are some ways that we can instantiate this orientation in subjects such that their experience of the processes of communication are meliorated?

Before I consider specific ways or means of changing one’s orientation toward (and hence experience of) communicative activities, I must consider one important objection to my project of orientational meliorism. This objection can be phrased in a variety of ways, but it essentially boils down
to an objection to my emphasis on the subjective aspects of nonaesthetic experience and its melioration. One may claim that I am making Dewey an “aesthetic attitude” theorist with an inaccurate focus on the power of an individual’s disposition to magically change the quality of his or her lived experience. Instead, it could be claimed that I ought to do justice to the interactive, transformative foci of Dewey’s aesthetic work. Alternatively, one could claim that no amount of subjective change will overcome the obstacles posed by objective conditions, in regard to either economic structures or the actual properties of the art object itself. Such criticisms also accuse me of not taking seriously the “object” or external conditions on Dewey’s account in my putative withdrawal into subjective passivity.9

In responding to such criticisms, I in no way want to leave out or exclude the material aspects to life, activity, and art—indeed, these aspects give our particular experiences their unique qualities and joys. I also do not want to imply that there is a reified division between self and object, subjective and objective, in Dewey. Indeed, Dewey notes that habits integrally incorporate parts of the environment, such as the habit of breathing and the subject’s intimate contact with the air. There is a sense, though, in which the habits or ways of approaching activity can be said to be “of the subject.” For instance, in describing habits and their functioning as “will” in 1922 in Human Nature and Conduct, Dewey notes that “the essence of habit is an acquired predisposition to ways or modes of response, not to particular acts except as, under special conditions, these express a way of behaving” (1988b, MW 14:32). One can see that the conception of orientation that I have been elucidating in this study fits this wide notion of habit as “a predisposition to ways or modes of response”—particularly toward how we attend to and value parts of present activity (such as processes of communication). These are habits that address how we respond to the present situation and its materials, which in turn affects how our habits and dispositions are formed and re-formed in us. There is a way, then, that we can talk of “subjective” habits without hermetically sealing the subject off from the outside world—these are the predispositions to action that are formed in light of past interaction and, most importantly, are the predispositions we bring qua agent into future situations of action.

This merely establishes a working notion of “self,” however, and does not address the objection that material aspects to melioration are left out of my account. What I want to maintain, though, is that the key to creating more activity that has the quality of aesthetic activity lies in the subjective orientation of the individuals involved, artists and audiences, speakers and
hearers. As with any locking mechanism, there is more to the story than just the key (viz., the rest of the lock). Nevertheless, I give a particular level of importance to the subjective habits I call orientations, and this choice must be defended. Why I focus on orientation as the key to meliorism is related to the following three reasons.

First, one cannot explain the two examples of aesthetic experience I gave previously from *AE* without the *sole* variable being the subject. Both of the ferryboat riders and both of the test takers do the same physical activities, but the *process* and *experience* are radically different. Why? The only explanation I can see as defendable is that the individuals differ in how they attend to and value the activities at hand. Of course, this difference may lead to different physical manifestations—increased heart rate, yawning boredom, a gaping mouth, and so on—but the primary difference that starts all the other differences in motion lies in how they approach the activities in the first place. This is also borne out by empirical research in psychology on work satisfaction. The studies of work happiness find that among any type of job, there will be (roughly) a third that rates that occupation as a “calling,” a third that sees it as a “career,” and a third that sees it as a “mere job” (Seligman 2002, 165–84; Wrzesniewski et al. 1997). The latter category of “mere job” seems more akin to Dewey’s notion of drudgery, and the descriptions Wrzesniewski and her colleagues give of the first category strike one as having the integration, meaning, build, and purpose that Dewey packs into *an* experience. The important point here is that regardless of the “objective” activities of the job (CEO, administrative assistant, hospital custodian), one will find individuals who *experience* those same activities differently. One can find individuals who see *any* of these jobs as callings, and one can find individuals who see *any* of these jobs (including high-status and -power jobs) as *mere* jobs to trudge through. Notice that I am not saying that objective conditions (say, of working conditions or of Internet chat rooms) are meaningless; they may, given certain established habits in individuals, be more or less conducive to the realization of certain qualities of experience (such as those of aesthetic experience). The point is that one will *always* find the subjective factor at play, but one will not always find a certain class of objective features at play.

Second, one would be hard-pressed to identify objective features of the situation that are necessary in any generalizable sense. In the case of aesthetic experience and artistic expressivity, one would be at a loss to identify (in a principled fashion) which properties of the physical art objects correlate with a certain quality of experience. Is it a certain way of drawing a
line or a certain color that makes a painting “sad”? Which properties render a three-hour war movie so moving (or so tedious)? Certain aestheticians in the pragmatist tradition have given up attempting to argue that there are determinate aesthetic properties of objects that all could identify; instead, they fall back to the claim that such properties are determinable by subjects but that the specifics of this process rely heavily on enculturation and habit (Margolis 1995, 2001, 2002). This line of thought is not foreign to Dewey either; he bluntly claims that “the fundamental mistake is the confusion of the physical product with the esthetic object, which is that which is perceived. Physically, a statue is a block of marble, nothing more... But to identify the physical lump with the statue that is a work of art and to identify pigments on a canvas with a picture is absurd... For an object is perceived by a cumulative series of interactions” (1989a, LW 10:223).

This “series of interactions,” of course, is the interplay between the subject and whatever objective material there is in the object at hand—be it a statue or a spoken utterance. As detailed earlier, the expressiveness of each sort of “lump” depends on how we attend to and value it. If we see the Pietà as a mere doorstop or a greeting as merely a cue to hand money to the cashier, that will tone our experience of that object and speed it along to the next disjointed activity. If we attend to it now and value it in and of itself, we will better handle the situational demands and not deprive it of the aesthetic unity Dewey finds available in each activity or process. Material or objective features are important in a subject’s interaction with an environment, but one cannot specify the key features in the same way as one can the orientational features of attention and valuing. This, of course, has the meliorative implication of telling us where to start our efforts.

Third, an emphasis on orientation is useful insofar as it can effectively guide individual and social projects of melioration. In the terminology of meliorism, it is useful insofar as it provides both a unit of melioration (the individual and his or her mental habits toward activity) and a vector of change (viz., ways of instilling a new orientation toward activity). One could still maintain that this is not the most important factor in melioration. This alternative emphasis would seem to lack the ease and effectiveness of implementation that the individual level of orientation gives one in my scheme, however. If one maintains that the factor preventing all from enjoying a life of focus on and reveling in the present activity is the economic, material setup of society and its occupations, one may be hard-pressed to change all of this. Such a change would require massive reorganization of people and energies, a change that not only is difficult (indeed, a Deweyan naturalism
would be much better predisposed for gradual reform or change) but may only be warranted by a high level of certainty that this specific, major way of (most likely, coercively) reorganizing society is the way it ought to be.

Alternatively, orientational meliorism as a program is compatible with the further organizing of communities to change objective conditions, but it insists that attention be given to the factor that will continue to affect happiness and the quality of experience no matter what the objective conditions are—that factor of a subject’s orientation. The Buddhists (and many other schools of Indian philosophical thought) see this point clearly in their analysis of desire; no matter what you achieve or fail to achieve in the way of your projects and goals, you will continue to suffer if you do not address how you orient yourself toward desire and its objects. This is borne out in the modern empirical work on jobs—no matter what the material accouterments of a position, one’s approach to it and its value can render it painful drudgery. Thus, an eminently helpful project will be the improvement and optimization of one’s orientation, both for the philosophers of India and for pragmatists such as Dewey. The subjective focus of orientational meliorism provides a workable starting point for such improvement, as individuals can immediately begin examining how they approach activity. Furthermore, interventions can be designed and tested in regard to improving such orientations as those toward communicative activity, in much the same way as has been done in positive psychology and occupational satisfaction research (Seligman et al. 2005). Such an approach also echoes and reinforces Dewey’s point of the interactive or transformative nature of aesthetic experience.

As opposed to the “aesthetic attitude” theorists of the twentieth century who prized a Kantian/Schopenhauerian “disinterested attention” to an art object, Dewey very much prized the engaged, absorptive, and interested attention to art objects, as well as to life.10 The key, yet again, is the focus of attention and how things are valued. One can be practically engaged with a situation and be absorbed in it. Dewey makes this point in saying that he opposes reading of aesthetic attitudes that feature “detachment” or “psychical distance”—in his version of the aesthetic experience, there is a merging or absorbing of self and object in attention such that “there is no severance of self, no holding of it aloof, but fullness of participation” (1989a, LW 10:262). I will return to the theme of absorption of self and object in the final section, but for now it is enough to emphasize that my reading of Dewey on communication as aesthetic would not render it “passive.” Instead, this thoroughgoing engagement with the present situation is related to one’s orientation and its attention-focusing power and results
in the transformation of the materials of the present. This transformative aspect has been part of Dewey’s account all along, of course; the live creature from the early part of *AE*, the artist, and I would add, the communicator are all engaged in confronting some material environment with certain mental habits of action in place. How they shape and transform that material, and how that material and its resistance shape them, is all part of this transformative story. The communicator, through careful attention and valuing of the “means” of communication, transforms a material just as much as the sculptor does, and both do it with thoughts of the reaction of an audience (formal or informal) in mind. The main determinant of whether such an interaction with stone or sound is aesthetic in quality is how those individuals focus their attention and whether their way of valuing means and intermediary steps renders those as mere means, mere routines that must be navigated in order to reach what is truly valuable. Thus, the orientation toward communication that I have been detailing in the present study holds its meliorative promise in that it offers a way of transforming how we communicate and how our communication will be experienced.

IV. MAKING THE ACTIVITY OF COMMUNICATION ARTFUL: THREE PROPOSED MAXIMS

The question now becomes, How can such an orientation be instantiated or cultivated? This is equivalent to our starting question—How exactly can we render everyday communicative activity as artful or aesthetic? Like all arts, fine or technical, artful communication will be a learned and cultivated skill; also, like all acquired skills, it is only perfected by and in present instantiations (i.e., use). Recognizing the role of orientation in communicative activity, as well as the dual value of communication as instrumentally valuable for future states of affairs as well as in being an immediately valuable instantiation of community activity with others, I propose the following three guidelines or maxims as means for how to make one’s communicative activities more aesthetic, more expressive, and more unified in terms of how they are valued and how they relate to remote states of affairs and values. These are meant to be what I call “mental/cognitive” means of orientational meliorism (Stroud 2007b), similar to Seligman’s (2006) cognitive strategies for dealing with “learned pessimism.” Like the latter strategies, these maxims can be used by a subject as a guide to “rethink” or “re-vision” his or her communicative activities, thus leading to the instantiation of new habits that govern how one approaches communication in general.
First, a communicator is well served to avoid focusing on a remote goal. Instead, one ought to develop the orientation of attending to the present by consciously attending to the communicative interaction itself. One way of doing this is by reimagining the present activity as intrinsically valuable. This is the tactic Crispin Sartwell pursues in his reading of the Bhagavad Gita and its general relation to action: “If we could achieve the end by sheer force of will, if we could realize it without performing the means, we would. Krsna asks us, not to renounce all desire and thus all action, but to desire the means as intrinsically valuable as well as valuable in service of the end. The means are not to be absorbed in the end; the time and energy devoted to the means are not wasted. Rather, this time and energy are to be consecrated” (1995, 50).

Thus, using religious motifs, an emphasis on one’s present duty, and so on, one could begin to experience the situation in a different fashion. One could start to see the “means” of interacting with another person as intrinsically valuable, regardless of the ultimate outcome of such a purposeful endeavor. Seeing another individual as intrinsically valuable because of a conceptual overlay, whether it is from Kant, Krishna, or the New Testament, could also be an imaginative way to re-vision what is occurring and what the immediate value of the other participants is. Psychologists have studied the power of imagination and how it can be used to forge new ways of relating to one’s vocation (Seligman 2002; Wrzesniewski and Dutton 2001; Wrzesniewski et al. 1997), thus it is not unwarranted to believe there are more or less effective ways to rethink the value of others and the communicative situation itself.

Second, one ought to consciously cultivate habits of attending to the demands of the present communication situation. In any given situation, there will be the desires, projects, needs, and capabilities of the individual agent, as well as the “external” factors of other participants and the environment. The former elements determine and direct our activities, and the latter are always some sort of consideration in how and why we act in certain ways. Thus, if a woman, for example, desires a higher financial position and finds that she can take a job in a neighboring city, she is drawn to such a course of action. Of course, the present situation holds more resources for and obstacles to action than that; for instance, the demands and needs of her relational partner are a relevant factor, as well as any duties she may have toward her present employer. When she communicates with these other individuals, the outcome and the quality of that communicative experience itself will be radically affected by how she attends or fails to attend to
the situation with its myriad of particular details. If she only attends to her needs, the situation will most likely be mishandled, and the resulting quality of the interaction with others in that situation will not be at the most effective or enjoyable level that could be attained. If she sees the present as a valuable situation that demands certain responses, then she may respond to it in an integrated, holistic, and, most likely, effective manner. To varying extents, she will be artfully and finely responding to the needs and desires of self and other, the forces in the social environment, and so forth in the manner in which they ought to be addressed. This extends Belman’s (1977, 29) analysis of the roles of empathy and foresight in communication, two characteristics of language and its meaning that are vital to the creation and maintenance of community. The important aspect it adds, of course, is that to truly be empathetic and intelligent at the same time is to intently focus one’s attention on the means and process of communication. This is also the vital element in experiencing communicative activity as aesthetic and expressive in the unified, qualitatively alive way that great art is experienced as expressive and absorbing.

Third, one should avoid the easy pitfall, noticed by Buddhist philosophers for millennia, of focusing too much attention on a reified, separate self. Dewey also notes the harms in focusing too much on what is not present, an observation connected with his attacks on “remote” ideals and abstract notions of a transcendent self that have no connection to our concrete activities of the present. One is bound to mishandle the particulars of the present and render one’s experience of it as fragmented and nonaesthetic if one is focusing on a remote ideal of ego, self, or the kingdom of God. Such a remote focus draws attention away from the here and now—the self that one is in that situation, who (exactly) others are, and how the community is actually formed (for both good and bad). No transcendent self breaks through, according to this view of communication as reaching the level of the aesthetic, in one’s interactions with another individual. To use an everyday example—that of a teacher and a student—the self of the speaker is the self qua teacher, and the self of the other participant is that person qua struggling student. Their desires and expectations stem from their social placement in those roles and in that culture, and each person’s reaction is (at least partially) determined by his or her expectations. Focusing on a transcendent self does not help one communicate with that concrete person. Instead, attending to why that student is struggling and why the student thinks he is struggling provides the better way to craft a unified,
valuable response. This in turn will help one experience that interaction not merely as valuable insofar as it leads to some remote end that really possesses value but also as “suffused” by the value of the ends that stem from the contextualized expectations and needs of those in the situation.

v. conclusion

Thus, we reach an answer to the question that perplexed us at the start of this inquiry—How can communication be rendered aesthetic or artful? The answer, as I have argued, stems from the orientation toward communication that one holds. Certain orientations tend to connect means/ends and process/product in the activity of communication, as well as tend to suffuse each part with the value of the other. Orientations that render communication as incomplete, fragmented, and less effective at building community are those orientations that tend to separate means/ends and process/product in communication and that tend to make the value of the means (in this case, interacting with others) depend solely on the value of the end that one desires. One may question, though, if the best way to address this problem is a refocusing of attention on the present activity itself; is this not too vague of an account of the relation between orientation toward communicative activity and how exactly one should behave? Even though such an objection grants that my account answers the starting question of how communication can be aesthetic, it does challenge this account’s practicality. For the pragmatists, as well as for Aristotle, one must only expect the sort of precision that one’s subject of inquiry allows of. Just as one cannot codify how exactly to paint a creative masterpiece, one cannot specify what this attentive, fine-touched, and balanced response to a particular situation will be in all of its detail. For the only thing certain is that the details of one’s communicative response to a situation, if artfully done, will be closely connected to the details of that communicative situation. What can be said is that the present, concrete situation holds the resources for mindful, attentive communication. Desires, ends, duties, lines of response, expectations, and so on are all there in the interaction between, say, a teacher and a struggling student in an American classroom. The agents “merely” have to figure out how to use such resources and in what measure. This comes down to the choices that will render communication as either aesthetic or nonaesthetic and routine. This is why the orientation that is most artful, most aesthetic, most unifying of life and its experiences, will be that orientation that directs
purposeful activity by attending to the actual location of such activity—the present situation confronting one with all its demands and opportunities, risks and promises.

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NOTES

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1. References to Dewey’s works are cited parenthetically in the text, including reference year, the collected works edition (early [EW], middle [MW], and later [LW]), and volume and page number(s).

2. Important studies of communication that incorporate Dewey’s thought have included Carey (1992), Belman (1977), Crick (2004), and Jensen (2002).

3. I focus on everyday communication because there is a tendency in communication scholars to explicitly or implicitly use communication or rhetoric in discussing Dewey’s views on communication as aesthetic in the sense of “finely wrought, thought-out speeches.” Although one may be able to analyze Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech according to traditional artistic and aesthetic standards, I think the Deweyan challenge strikes deeper than this. How can we render everyday communication, such as that experienced in mundane conversations with friends, cashiers, and so on, as aesthetic? This, I believe, is a real challenge and one that fits the Deweyan project of expanding the notion of the aesthetic to cover as much of life as possible.

4. These three characteristics can be found in chapter 3 of AE; they are also discussed by commentators such as Jackson (1998) and Shusterman (2000b).

5. For more on the differences between such ways of defining art, see Shusterman (2000b, 34–61).

6. One must not think I am defining art in terms of aesthetic experience—that was the difficult project that so troubled Beardsley (1981). Instead, I (and Dewey) want to maintain that truly moving and powerful art will be correlated with aesthetic experience. Indeed, that is why we are drawn to say it is powerful—it has such a rapturous and absorptive effect on us. For more on Dewey’s particular use of “aesthetic experience,” see Shusterman (2000a).

7. On the connection between process and product, see, for instance, the analysis of jazz and improvisational drama given by Sawyer (2000).

8. I provide a similar analysis of the orientation involved in “growth” in activities such as vocational pursuits in Stroud (2006b).

9. Interestingly enough, a similar critique of pragmatic meliorism, albeit in the form of William James’s writings, was given as early as 1943 but from a proponent of Deweyan pragmatism. See Otto (1943).

10. For representatives of this way of approaching aesthetic experience, see Stolnitz (1960) and Bullough (1963).
See, for instance, Dewey’s early critique of such remote ideals of conduct (1969a, EW 3).

The empirical literature finds that such inattention not only degrades experience but often causes overt failure in one’s practical task behaviors. See Krieger (2005) and Motley (1992). I would also like to note that religious concepts and narratives can be used in two ways—either to draw attention away from the present situation or to focus attention (and value) on the present situation. The latter use is assumed in the previous point’s discussion of the usefulness of imagination and religious imagery in focusing attention.

WORKS CITED


